

Birmingham City Council hid links between Asian cabbies and child sex victims for 23 years

Nov 19, 2014 | **Jeanette Oldham**

BIRMINGHAM City Council 'buried' a report linking Asian private hire drivers to child sexual exploitation victims 23 YEARS ago, the Mail can reveal today.

Researcher Dr Jill Jesson was asked by the authority to look at the issue of child prostitution involving girls in care back in 1990.

The following year, after six months research, she produced a critical two-part report which showed child protection failings by social workers and other agencies.

Her report also highlighted claims that some Asian private hire drivers were linked to the sexual exploitation of young white girls in care, including some who had been cautioned for prostitution offences.

Yet when Dr Jesson presented her draft findings to a steering group, she was ordered to remove all reference linking ethnicity and the private hire trade.

Incredibly, her full amended final report was never published. A meeting planned to discuss it was cancelled – and all copies were to be destroyed.

The Birmingham Mail has now tracked down Dr Jesson, a respected academic and former Aston University lecturer, who spoke about her research and the missing report for the first time. "I was employed to do the work because I think they thought I would be objective," she said. "I was told to reveal what I saw. I did – and some people didn't like it.

"There was a link between the sexual abuse of the girls and private hire drivers in the city. I thought at the time I did the work that there was an issue with race. Most of the girls were white. I was asked to take this link out, to erase it."

Recent child sexual exploitation scandals in Rotherham and Rochdale revealed how young white girls were abused by gangs of Asian men. An official report into Rotherham, where up to 1,400 victims suffered sickening abuse, said many offenders had been private hire drivers.

Dr Jesson said: "Every time a news item has come on about sexual grooming of young girls and girls in care, and the link, too, between private hire drivers, I have thought 'I told them about that in 1991 but they didn't want to acknowledge it'.

"I think the problem has got worse and worse over time."

Dr Jesson was hired by the council to conduct the Government-funded study into the health issues of child prostitution involving girls in care. She identified 20 girls in care at that time who authorities believed had become involved in child prostitution.

"It wasn't called grooming then, it was called prostitution," Dr Jesson said. "The girls were all aged between 13 and 17 and were all under the care of Birmingham City council social services.

"The city council commissioned me to carry out the piece of research because they knew there was a problem. I was employed to ascertain the scale of the problem. They wanted to quantify it so social services could manage it."

Yet from the beginning Dr Jesson faced difficulty obtaining information, with some social workers misguidedly covering for girls in their care.

She said: "I was not helped by the fact that social services had inadequate recording methods. That was a big problem and my report was also critical of the council's policy around tackling the problem.

"At the time there were three divisions in Birmingham social services – the north and east, the south and west and the central division. There were 32 Birmingham City Council children's homes.

"Everything was recorded manually then. I looked through all the paper referral forms completed when a girl was referred to social services and found that each of the divisions had a different system for keeping all their paperwork.

"I found 20 girls' names, next to which either the word 'prostitution' or some concern about their sexual behaviour had been written.

"I interviewed police officers, officers in charge of the council's children's homes and social workers, and I interviewed five of the 20 young women.

"I also looked at what was then the youth justice system to see where girls had been arrested or cautioned for prostitution.

"You could say that 20 is not a lot – it's not a lot compared to the numbers we've seen in Rotherham, for example – but this was just a six-month snapshot of what was happening at the time. I think there was very much an issue then of social workers protecting the confidentiality of the girls involved by not recording, or not recording properly, information about their involvement in what was then called prostitution."

Dr Jesson said of her research: "Anyone reading my report now would say 'Well, we already know that' but the important point is to see that in 1991 this was ground-breaking insight into the desperate lives of some young women allegedly in the care of social services:

"The story would be the same as it is now, and has been reported in all of these grooming scandals, stories which I've followed.

"The sad part of this story is not the suppression of evidence but that the relevant organisations have failed to address this problem."

The 20 girls identified had all come from troubled homes and most had been sexually abused by family members. Around 15 of them were white, while the rest were mixed race.

Yet once in care the young victims suffered further abuse after being groomed by older 'boyfriends'

"A friendly young man would pick up the girl, say he loved her, buy her presents and before she knew it she was being shared around his mates," said Dr Jesson.

The links between city taxi drivers, believed to be private hire drivers, and the young girls was initially made clear in the report – until the researcher was ordered to take the detail out.

Dr Jesson said: "It was written in the social services' notes of the girls that the girls had told about taxi drivers being one of the features of what was happening to them.

"But it was difficult for me to get a complete picture. Some evidence was written down. I'd look at the forms and sometimes it was there, sometimes it wasn't, and some girls who spoke of it as an issue did not always have it written down in their notes.

"I thought there was a link between Asian taxi drivers – private hire drivers they were – and the girls who were getting the cautions for prostitution. I put that in the report and was asked to remove that, too.

"I was asked to take it out because one of the members of the steering group said I had not got enough evidence of what was happening elsewhere in the city. Therefore my methodology could have been flawed, they said.

"There may well have been much more of it going on but I could only look at what social workers had written down in the notes and what people were willing to tell me.

"The role of the police seemed to be to find girls who were reported as missing. Their job was to find the girls, bring them back to the homes, but then the staff running the homes would just let them walk out again.

"The officers in charge of the homes would say 'Well, we can't lock them up. We can't stop them'. The homes and social workers knew the girls were coming back with new trainers and new coats, and the girls would just say their boyfriend had got them for them."

But the reaction from council bosses when the final and amended report was presented was not to put its important findings into the public domain.

Dr Jesson said: "When the work was completed and the report was finished, as far as I was concerned my report was going to be discussed by staff in social services in order to do something.

"The report was meant to be presented at a seminar to discuss the council's policy around protecting these girls. It was all about establishing if the policy fitted the problem, so to speak.

"But the report was shelved, buried, it was never made public. I was shocked to be told that copies of the report were to be destroyed and that nothing further was to be said. Clearly, there was something in this report that someone in the department was worried about."

Eventually, it was brought up again in November 1995 at a Birmingham Council social services committee

meeting, when just one part of the two part original report was discussed.

Dr Jesson said: "Part of the report with the evidence about the problem, the numbers of girls involved etc, was attached to the committee report. So it is now in the public domain. I have been told that the evidence part and the committee report were never destroyed – that still exists.

"My report was critical of the council and social services department. It was critical of their policy. It stated that their policy was not robust enough."

The reluctance of council officials to publish the 1991 report still angers Dr Jesson.

"They never told me why but the whole climate around these things was very different back then," she said.

"Twenty girls is not a massive number, but I was only there six months and could only work with the information I could access. I could not get that deeply into it because of the timescale and because of the difficulties with information-keeping.

"But what I found, looked at and reported was not prostitution as in girls working on the streets as prostitutes for money. It was absolutely not that. It was 'You're my girl and I love you and you do as I ask'.

"The girls would go somewhere with a man in a car and there would be several men there, men who wanted to have sex. Prostitution was just the label it was given then. It was the girl's behaviour that was seen to be at fault. Now it is acknowledged that men are the ones with a problem. Sex with under-age girls is abuse.

"But these girls were not working as prostitutes on the streets. They were being groomed, picked up and sleeping with men in cars and elsewhere."

In a statement, Birmingham City Council insisted the FULL report was put into the public domain. In reality, just one part of that report was ever made public.

Peter Hay, Strategic Director for People said: "This is a matter which was discussed in full and in public over twenty years ago.

"In 1991 Jill Jesson was asked to undertake a research report on the prostitution of young people in the care system. This was done using government HIV grant money. At the end of the review a decision was made to not pursue further grant funding. More significantly in 1991 the Department decided not to publish the report for reasons which are not clear.

"In December 1995, the Director published the report in full. (Social Services Committee 13/12/95). Jill has confirmed to me that the report we found in the archived minute is the full report.

"The minutes to that meeting also show a full debate. There was a motion tabled that expressed concern about the suppression of the report, and calling for a full enquiry. A substantial debate was held and the motion was lost. There are comments recorded on the minutes which confirm that the report revealed nothing that was not public knowledge.

"So in 1995, all of the matters were made public, including the report. Numbers of children at risk were also discussed in public.

"All of these papers are on public record and can be readily obtained by anyone who looks in the archives.

"We are now concentrating on looking at new ways of working, along with West Midlands Police, to tackle child sexual exploitation."

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN WEST MIDLANDS TODAY

THE Birmingham Mail revealed in October how an official West Midlands Police report – completed in August 2012 – had shown that 75 per cent of known on-street groomers in the region were Asian, while 82 per cent of girl victims aged 14 to 16 were white.

A separate report by Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board, published in September 2013, said: "The partnership arrangements in Birmingham are currently failing to protect our children from child sexual exploitation.

"Perhaps the clearest indicator of this is reflected in that, at the time of writing this strategy, there are three young people, the victims of child sexual exploitation, who are subject to a Secure Accommodation Order whilst the perpetrators of these horrific crimes remain at liberty and continue to target other children. The absence of the prosecutions of these offenders is startling.

"Partner inaction may indicate that there is sometimes a reluctance to use the statutory powers available to them, and this is unacceptable."

The force has also come in for heavy criticism recently for failing child exploitation victims, and was given six weeks to improve.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) looked at the force's child protection work and concluded that heavy workloads meant staff in child abuse investigation teams were unable

to manage their investigations effectively, while officers did not always understand when to refer child protection issues to other agencies.

Specific failings highlighted by the inspectors included a 13-year-old who frequently went missing from her care home with men, who was considered by police to be making a 'lifestyle choice'.

The HMIC report also told how a 17-year-old girl was failed after she had said she did not want to return home because she was being approached by older men for sex.

"Information gathered from her and sent to the force's intelligence unit indicated that the men may still be having sex with, and sometimes raping, younger girls. No follow-up action took place and she was not spoken to by police because she had turned 18," the report said.

This year West Midlands Police launched a dedicated team to tackle child sexual exploitation, while Birmingham City Council is also making renewed efforts to help vulnerable youngsters, including the use of court injunctions.

<http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/birmingham-city-council-hid-links-8131813>