

Call for inquiry into boarding school where boys 'preyed on girls and ten pupils were sexually abused'

- **Stanbridge Earls School in Hampshire specialises in helping children with learning difficulties**
- **It is alleged that a 15-year-old autistic girl was groomed and raped**
- **Victim's mother said behaviour was 'like something out of Lord of the Flies'**

By Andrew LEVY



Peter Trythall, headteacher of Stanbridge Earls School in Hampshire

A mixed boarding school is being investigated by police over claims that at least ten girls were sexually abused by other pupils.

The allegations emerged during a tribunal which heard that a 15-year-old autistic girl was groomed and raped at Stanbridge Earls School in Romsey, Hampshire.

The victim's mother claims there was a 'predatory ring' around the rugby team and said behaviour among children was 'like something out of Lord of the Flies'.

It was also alleged that a 12-year-old girl was stripped naked by five pupils and, on another occasion, assaulted in woodland.

The claims of abuse at the school, which specialises in helping children with learning difficulties and where fees are up to £39,000 a year, were revealed at a Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal. It criticised 'systemic failures' and voiced 'grave concerns about safeguarding' of children. It awarded £86,000 to the parents of the 15-year-old, now 17, who cannot be named for legal reasons. The tribunal heard that the girl was assaulted by a boy in June 2011.

She was taken to a GP but her parents were not told.

Two weeks later she said she had been raped.

Texts between the girl and male pupils were obvious attempts to groom her, the tribunal ruled.

She had been persuaded to send naked photos of herself to boys, it was claimed.

However, the messages were dismissed by Stanbridge Earls headmaster Peter Trythall as 'normal texts for children of this age'.

The girl's mother said: 'The fact that our daughter was not the only vulnerable underage girl subject to sexual contact and sexual intercourse was, and is, shocking.'

'It has taken 18 months and £150,000 in legal costs for us to be listened to.' The family's solicitor said tribunal evidence suggested more than ten girls had been abused. The mother of the 12-year-old, now 14, who also cannot be named, said the girl had since been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.



Police are investigating allegations that at least two girls were raped or sexually abused by pupils at Stanbridge Earls school, in Hampshire

The tribunal's findings have been sent to Education Secretary Michael Gove, who is considering the school's future.

Hampshire Police confirmed that officers are investigating the allegations.

Stanbridge Earls, which has 200 pupils aged ten to 19, said the tribunal case was 'in no way illustrative of the way the school normally meets the needs of its pupils'.

It added: 'The school has submitted a detailed action plan concerning how it is remedying issues.' The Department for Education said: 'These allegations are deeply disturbing. We are in close touch with the parents and the school and are working closely with the local authority to make sure children are safe at the school.'

EXCHANGE TRIP BAN FOR PUPILS

PUPILS at hundreds of schools are being banned from staying with families on foreign exchange trips because of child protection fears.

Many are instead being told to stay in hotels or hostels.

Ceredigion County Council in mid-Wales last week became the latest authority to stop exchange students staying with host families while on visits abroad.

Children can still spend time with families as long as they visit in pairs, carry an emergency contact number and return to their accommodation by an agreed time.

Darryl Evans, Ceredigion's head of educational well-being, said: 'This decision was based on safeguarding children and ensuring their safety.'

'It was felt that despite undertaking Criminal Records Bureau checks and utilising family agreements there was still a largely unknown element to such arrangements.'

MP Pat Glass, acting chairman of the Commons Education Select Committee, said: 'It is a case of striking the right balance instead of wrapping pupils in cotton wool.'

Pupils have been banned from staying with families on foreign exchanges