



From Dr A Majid Katme

## Thousands of vulnerable children 'dumped' into care are at risk from sex gangs



Dumping ground: Children in private care homes are at risk of falling victim to sex gangs says Children's Minister Tim Loughton

Thousands of vulnerable youngsters have been sent to children's homes in crime hotspots where they can fall prey to paedophiles, sex rings and criminal gangs.

These privately-owned homes have become dumping grounds for unwanted children where they are 'out of sight, out of mind', Children's Minister Tim Loughton warned yesterday.

They are then at risk of being targeted and exploited by local child sex gangs.

Mr Loughton revealed that thousands of children have gone missing from hundreds of homes which have too often been given a clean bill of health by Ofsted even though the teenage residents have been exposed to sexual abuse.

The violence, sadism and exploitation these youngsters are subjected to was described as 'chilling' and 'truly horrific'.

Mr Loughton promised a series of reforms to better protect those sent into state care by social workers.

His pledges come in the wake of the Rochdale scandal earlier this year when a gang of mostly Pakistani

men were jailed for sexual offences against vulnerable girls in the town. Mr Loughton revealed Rochdale was one of four hotspots where teenagers are most at risk.

The others are the Fylde district in Lancashire, which includes the town of Lytham Saint Annes and parts of Blackpool; Worthing in West Sussex; and Margate in Kent.

Mr Loughton lifted the lid on a number of failings within children's homes which have been hidden for too long.

He said official reports from homes claim just over 900 of their children go missing each year, yet police figures point to 10,000 incidents of children going missing.

He said these youngsters are often likely to be victims of exploitation and insisted that accurate figures must be produced.

State care watchdog Ofsted has claimed that children's homes have been improving rapidly and that only one in 50 are failing to protect and nurture the damaged youngsters sent into their care. But emergency checks carried out since the Rochdale scandal broke three months ago have shown that at least five times that many homes are disastrously run and dangerous for the children who live in them, ministers said.

Mr Loughton said of the assessment provided by Ofsted, which declared just 2 per cent of children's homes to be inadequate: 'I do not believe that figure.'

The minister's reforms will require children's homes to co-operate with police in future. Under current care regulations police are not allowed to know where children's homes are, and the attitude of home staff and managers to police is often unco-operative or hostile, Mr Loughton's officials said.



Jailed: Shabir Ahmed was at the centre of a sex gang that raped and abused up to 47 girls

The dumping grounds for children were revealed in reports published by Mr Loughton which were drawn up in the wake of the Rochdale scandal.

Two thousand children and teenagers at any one time are living in 'hotspot' areas with high concentrations of children's homes, often set up in districts which Mr Loughton said are 'unsafe'.

He said social workers must stop sending children to dumping grounds where they are 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Mr Loughton added: 'I think it would prove quite difficult for any council children's services director to look me in the eye and say a child is getting suitable care hundreds of miles from home.' He said that the sexual exploitation of children who live in state homes was 'a phenomenon that has been going on for years under the radar'.

'These reports lift the lid on very serious weaknesses in the system. There are good children's homes and excellent care workers but it is clear that far too many of the most vulnerable children in society are being exposed to harm and danger.'

According to Mr Loughton's figures, at least 200 children's homes are inadequate despite the endorsement of inspectors.

Deputy children's commissioner Sue Berelowitz, whose report into sexual exploitation of children in care by gangs was also published by Mr Loughton yesterday, said: 'I have never come across the level of violence and sadism that we find now.'

'The casual nature of the exploitation is quite chilling. The stories that children and young people tell us are truly horrific.' Labour MP Ann Coffey, head of a parliamentary inquiry into children who go missing from care, said: 'A staggering 46 per cent of children living in children's homes are placed in homes miles from their hometowns, often in private children's homes in rundown areas, and sometimes in the same streets as ex-prisoners and paedophiles.'

'Failure to take action will lead to more horrific Rochdale cases.'

### **Towns where danger awaits the vulnerable**

Where Children's Minister Tim Loughton says youngsters are most at risk:

BLACKPOOL: Away from the bright lights of its historic pier, dozens of young girls have been lured like 'a moth to a flame' towards the town's takeaways and fast-food outlets.

Among the impressionable teenagers sucked into its seedy underbelly where gangs of men groom teenagers for sex was 14-year-old Charlene Downes.

She vanished one night in November 2003 after saying goodbye to her sister and heading off towards the town centre. Her body has never been found but detectives are convinced she was murdered.

Officers suspect Charlene fell victim to Blackpool's sex ring of older men who plied young girls with cigarettes, drugs and alcohol in return for sexual favours.

A shocking police report into Charlene's disappearance last year detailed endemic child sexual abuse and prostitution in the town.



Charlene Downes: The 14-year-old vanished in 2003 and her body has never been found

ROCHDALE: The horrifying abuse of young white girls by Asian men in Rochdale prompted a wave of national revulsion.

Nine Asian men were jailed in May for raping and abusing up to 47 girls, some as young as 13, after plying them with alcohol and luring them to takeaways. The 59-year-old ringleader, Shabir Ahmed, was jailed for 19 years.

The girls had been raped 'callously, viciously and violently' after being attracted by 'flattery, free food and alcohol'.

Police said the girls – mostly from broken or 'chaotic' homes – were targeted because they were vulnerable, not because they were white.

MARGATE: High levels of unemployment, crime and social deprivation have turned the Kent resort into a dumping ground for former criminals.

Bail hostels house registered paedophiles and sex attackers while the streets outside are used by drug dealers and prostitutes. And nestled right in the middle of this dangerous social setting are privately-owned children's homes looking after some of the country's most vulnerable youngsters.

Many of them are not from Margate or the surrounding area. It is believed that up to 1,200 of the children being looked after in Kent have been placed there by other local authorities.

WORTHING: It may not suffer from the same levels of deprivation as Blackpool, Rochdale or Margate but Worthing and the surrounding areas are facing the same ticking time-bomb. Girls, some as young as 12, are being targeted by child sex gangs.

They, like the others, are lured away from shopping centres and plied with drink and drugs before being encouraged to perform sex acts at 'party houses' in Brighton and Hove.

Others are being picked up off the streets, groomed by older men and then driven in cars to sex parties in London. There is growing anecdotal evidence of a problem that is steadily getting worse.