

CHILD PROTECTION RADIO INTERVIEW

JENNY: It's 7.42, you're listening to me, Jenny Maythorpe. Just how much faith should we place in police ability to protect the most vulnerable in society? Grandton Police has been hauled over the coals in a recent report by her Majesty's Inspectorate over child protection failings. In the studio with me: Graham Phelps, Deputy Assistant Commissioner from Grandton Police, and Andrea Bottomley, the Children's Commissioner. Good morning to you both.

ANDREA: Good morning.

GRAHAM: Morning.

JENNY: Let's start with you, Graham. The Grandton Police approach to sexual exploitation cases, and to missing and absent children has been strongly criticised in this report. What do you make of the fact you now face emergency measures?

GRAHAM: Hello Jenny. We do recognise that we have significant improvements to make, and it's certainly not where we'd like to be.

JENNY: I'd say not, with three quarters of child protection cases found to be substandard.

GRAHAM: Three quarters of child protection cases from a sample taken by HMIC.

ANDREA: A sample of almost 400, and the report also mentioned the shockingly high numbers of children held in police cells.

JENNY: That's your solution? Lock up the children?

GRAHAM: Now you're being flippant, Jenny.
If I could take that very point...

JENNY: Isn't it also true you failed in the case of a 10 year old girl who witnessed a horrific attack on her mother by her own father, and was at risk herself. What's your response to that?

GRAHAM: Obviously I can't comment on specific cases under review, but we did re-examine those sample cases, and we did not identify further harm to children in

any of them.

(AS ANDREA TRIES TO INTERJECT)

Returning to the children held in custody, those were all cases where the child had been charged, and HMIC chief Inspector himself did acknowledge the lack of suitable accommodation available.

JENNY: I should say that the chief Inspector Phil Plowright was invited on this programme but was unable to join us. However he did send this statement. 'We found serious errors of judgement, inconsistency, unacceptable delays and a lack of leadership which meant that children are not being protected properly. Far too many of the cases we looked at fell well short of expected standards and meant that victims weren't protected, evidence was lost and offenders continued to pose a risk to children.' A pretty incompetent and distressing picture overall, isn't it?

GRAHAM: Incompetence is a bit strong, but I understand the concerns, and certainly for the families of the children involved...

ANDREA: If I could come in here. There seems a lack of commitment, even arrogance from senior officers, and I think Graham's response is a clear indication of that. If offenders continue to pose a risk, you are failing children.

GRAHAM: There is no lack of commitment, Andrea - our new Commissioner, Eugene Scott-King, is making this issue one of his priorities. We are already working hard to establish relationships...

JENNY: 'They've really dropped the ball on child protection,' the Chief Inspector is quoted as saying. A pretty humiliating rebuke, wouldn't you agree?

GRAHAM: If you'd let me finish, we are working extremely hard in the wake of the report to collaborate and share information with other relevant bodies, such as health and social services.

ANDREA: Look, I do recognise that Grandton Police is serious about actively improving relationships with other public sector organisations, and I commend them for that, but I do have concerns about the depth of understanding of the problem on behalf of senior officers.

JENNY: For instance, when warned about an adult uploading indecent images of

children to the internet, police took 96 days to act. Do you think that's acceptable?

GRAHAM: No, and we have taken steps to ensure that situation doesn't occur again.

JENNY: You had to be told by the Inspectors to seize the offender's computer!

GRAHAM: Nevertheless we did take action...

ANDREA: Three months later. Does that sound like commitment to you?
These errors of judgment and unacceptable delays fundamentally result in children not being protected properly.

GRAHAM: As I said before, we fully acknowledge it's not where we'd like to be, but unfortunately resourcing issues have impacted on our response times...

A SNORT FROM ANDREA.

GRAHAM: However the Mayor's Policing Priority draft plan clearly sets out the steps we are taking to improve.

ANDREA: I for one welcome the fact that Geraldine Baker is ensuring -

JENNY: That's Grandton's mayor, for those unaware.

ANDREA: - yes, the Mayor is ensuring that child protection is prioritised during the handover to the new Commissioner. I do think it's telling that she's deemed it necessary to parachute in a panel of national experts, and is planning to discuss their findings with the Home Secretary. That's how serious the situation is.

GRAHAM: And we welcome the opportunity to work with the panel.

JENNY: The report also cites an example of a detective protecting children who wasn't actually trained to do so. Aren't you kidding yourselves about how well you're doing with regards to this?

GRAHAM: No, I don't think we are.

JENNY: I've got some figures here - in 76 case studies where the force believed it

was doing a good job, the real figure was in fact 22.

GRAHAM: Look, we have apologised for where we've fallen short...

JENNY: Didn't you rate yourselves as 'good' after taking 17 days to act in a case where a 30 year old male groomed a schoolgirl and then sexually assaulted her?

GRAHAM: I've been very clear that I can't comment on individual cases...

ANDREA: This is exactly what I'm talking about. We've heard the excuses about resources but it's a question of priorities, and at present children are right at the bottom.

JENNY: Isn't it true that your force are more focussed on the 'high end' crimes, your kidnap and your murder?

ANDREA: And complacent about tackling what matters most to the Grandton communities.

GRAHAM: I don't believe we are complacent.

ANDREA (laughing):

I think you've demonstrated your complacency perfectly, Graham. Evidence of failure to follow basic child protection procedures, leaving children at immediate risk of significant harm - I would certainly couch that as complacency. Some parts of the force even seem clueless about convicted sex offenders living in their areas!

GRAHAM: It's not true that officers are unaware, although information sharing could and should improve...

ANDREA: The truth is that children in our city have been let down when they were most at need.

JENNY: On that note, I'm afraid we're out of time, I'd like to thank Graham Phelps and Andrea Bottomly for their time. And now we move on to the thorny topic of garden waste. Just how much is properly disposed of?