



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Implementation of Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, HC 616

Tuesday 1 April 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 April 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Mr Paul Kohler; Robbie Moore; Margaret Mullane; Chris Murray; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 1-60

Witnesses

I: Tom Crowther KC, Chair, Independent Inquiry into Telford Child Sexual Exploitation.



Examination of witness

Witness: Tom Crowther.

Q1 Chair: May I welcome our witness today, Tom Crowther KC, who has come to speak to us and take our questions about his work on the Telford inquiry and then further work that he has now been asked to do by the Home Secretary? This has been part of a tightly defined piece of work that we are doing, where we are looking at the recommendations from Professor Alexis Jay's report on the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse and the recommendations that were made, and how those recommendations are being implemented by the Government. We are very grateful to have you here. I do not know if you want to make an opening statement.

Tom Crowther: No, thank you.

Chair: In that case, let me turn to Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Q2 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you for answering our questions today. I want to start by asking what key lessons you learned about the process of conducting an inquiry, from the Telford inquiry particularly?

Tom Crowther: Key lessons from Telford were that the survivors of CSE were part of it from the very start. I would not say that is a lesson for any form of inquiry, particularly statutory inquiries, which have to be constituted according to the Inquiries Act 2005. But because we were not statutory, we had greater freedom to involve survivors from the start.

Q3 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Is there anything you would do differently or caution others against?

Tom Crowther: Telford was not the first of its type. The non-statutory local inquiries probably began, in the modern sense, with Alexis Jay in Rotherham in 2013. But Telford had a formal structure, which was novel. It was sometimes called a double-independent model, in that the council commissioned a law firm to hire another to be the commissioning body, which then hired me.

Looking at that now and having spoken to others involved in what became the commissioning body, which was the law firm Eversheds Sutherland, I am not sure whether it is necessary to have that degree of double independence. It certainly gave credibility to the inquiry's independence, but it may have been a belt and braces approach that was not necessary and was expensive for Telford.

I just do not know how much Telford paid in the first tranche. I know there has been mismatch between what I know to have been the cost of the inquiry with which I was involved and the overall bill to Telford. The figure I recognise is about £5 million; the figure bandied about by Nadine Dorries and others is nearer £8 million. I do not know if the £8 million has justification or comes from that first layer of commissioning another



law firm to do it. Lessons learned: what is vital is having survivor buy-in and approval, but it may not be necessary to do it in that particularly structured way.

I should say, of course, and should have said, that the best person to answer questions about the detail of the commissioning of Telford is your colleague, Shaun Davies, and when you invited me to give an opening statement at the start, I should have declared an interest to the extent that I have met Shaun Davies, particularly during the review of progressive recommendations last year, but it is no more than that.

Chair: Shaun Davies has sent apologies as he cannot be here this afternoon, I am afraid, but he has always declared his interest on that.

Q4 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** You have referenced the freedom of having a non-statutory inquiry, but do you think the ability to compel witnesses would have made a difference and would have been better?

Tom Crowther: I addressed this in the Telford report. The reality is I do not think it would have made a difference in Telford. Where the express power exists to compel witnesses, be it in a statutory inquiry or in a court, it is always worth remembering that there is nothing you can do to compel an answer out of a witness who says that they simply do not remember. You can compel them to come to court—as you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make that horse drink—and even a statutory inquiry cannot compel self-incriminatory evidence to be given without giving an undertaking not to prosecute. It seems to me that the power of compulsion, while much vaunted at the moment and always presented as the huge advantage of a statutory inquiry, did not make a difference in Telford and perhaps is worth less than it is sometimes said to be.

There are other powers: in Telford, we issued notices under section 10 of the Children Act 2004 to the council's relevant partners to co-operate in the inquiry, and there was no pushback at that. We also had the power to name witnesses who were reluctant, who did not co-operate, and I named four witnesses whose non-participation disappointed me, but I do not think the non-participation of those witnesses made a material difference to my conclusions.

Of course, there is one other thing to remember: to put it bluntly, the survivors committee wanted a statutory inquiry from the start and right up until the moment I published my final report when they accepted that nothing more could have been done. But right the way through Telford we had in mind that we could apply under section 15 of the Inquiries Act for a conversion of the inquiry into a statutory form, although the Home Secretary might have needed some persuading. But these days, for example with Oldham, which is in its very early stages and which I also chair, if an inquiry chair—me or someone else—issues an interim report that says, "I cannot answer these questions without statutory powers," I would be very surprised if any Home Secretary were to say, "I am not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

granting you them for those limited purposes.” So, it is not a decision made once and for all, and there is flexibility.

Q5 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: You mentioned Oldham. I was wondering if you could say how you might compare the Telford inquiry with other local or national inquiries into child sexual exploitation, like Rotherham or Rochdale.

Tom Crowther: Alexis Jay’s Rotherham inquiry was admirably quick and has been widely praised, as have all the other local inquiries. I did a little research before I came here; I know Mr Moore has a long-standing interest and has been calling for a Rotherham-style inquiry in his area for years, because it has been so praised. I am happy to say that Telford had praise as well and satisfied the survivors, but I am not going to offer comparisons.

Oldham is in its very earliest stages. I have been appointed, and solicitors to the inquiry are going to be appointed, which is in hand with the local authority—that is their job, not mine. They have made other arrangements to satisfy themselves of the buy-in of survivors rather than adopting the double independent model that I have talked about, and they are not hiring one firm to hire another.

Q6 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Are you aware of specific actions that have been taken to ensure that the lessons from the inquiry have been learned or improved multi-agency co-operation in any way?

Tom Crowther: Are you talking about other local authorities or Telford?

Q7 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Both, actually. What specific actions have been taken there, and has there been any work to make sure that the lessons have been learned by others?

Tom Crowther: Yes, for the Telford inquiry, I gave 47 recommendations, but it was part of the original contract terms with Telford that I would come back after two years and have a review of progress against recommendations. That was long before I even knew what recommendations there would be. Almost exactly this time last year I spent a fortnight in Telford meeting teachers, social workers and police officers—at all levels of seniority—to see what progress had been made. I am delighted to say that Telford has done a really impressive job, not only of implementing the recommendations that I made, but of thinking around them and involving survivors in how they were implemented.

So far as Oldham is concerned, it is far too soon to say anything, and until solicitors to the inquiry are instructed, I cannot have any public communications or anything of that sort. It is a fact that I have been instructed, but that is really all that has happened so far that I can say publicly. But for an early meeting with the leader and the chief executive, the only contact I have had with them has been through the legal department with my clerk to chambers.



Q8 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Are there any particular skills that a council should be looking for in the people who lead on their own similar inquiry?

Tom Crowther: Modesty forbids. So far as I was concerned, I was recruited through an advert in *Guardian* Jobs for the chair of the Telford inquiry. It required some legal background and interviews with the commissioning body and once they had their short list, with the survivors committee. I was assisted by my background: I had spent not only 20 years as a barrister prosecuting serious sexual offences, but the best part of six years as a full-time circuit judge trying serious sexual offences. I came to the judicial role in 2013, which is just when the sea change in how the judiciary treats vulnerable witnesses—all victims of sexual offending are regarded as vulnerable witnesses—had occurred, which was about seeing that the journey of a witness through the system was as easy as it could possibly be. We would now call it being trauma-informed.

That informed how I wanted to set up the Telford inquiry, which was, to put it bluntly, for it to look nothing like a court—and it did look nothing like a court. That was another advantage of not being in statutory form as we did not have to have counsel to the inquiry or a bank of barristers for key participants asking questions. I once said at a seminar that no one was cross-examined, and some smart Alec said, “Well, of course no one’s cross-examined in an inquiry, it is all examination by different parties.” To which I said, “Yes, but it feels like cross-examination,” and that was the point.

We had people come and talk to us; we would have tea and biscuits and take their witness statements by just letting them talk and recording them. We did not take notes but produced transcripts later so that people could just give their accounts in the way they felt most comfortable. Some people were able to participate in that way; others still could not. We went to people’s houses—a flexibility that would not have been open to us on a statutory basis—and that is why we got the engagement we did, and why it was a success.

Q9 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Do you think that your experiences running the inquiry could be replicated?

Tom Crowther: I am absolutely hoping to replicate that in Oldham, yes.

Q10 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** But I suppose it is different because it is you, so you would definitely replicate them. Do you think it is something that you could impart to others who are leading such inquiries? Do you think it would be appropriate in other places?

Tom Crowther: You can set out a framework, there is no doubt about that, but it is up to individual local authorities to determine who they hire to chair these things.

Q11 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Were there any particular resources that you were given that allowed you to run it in this way? Or was it the standard amount of resources and you simply put it into a framework that made



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the most sense and got the best results?

Tom Crowther: The brief from Telford to Eversheds was to run an independent inquiry. There was a great deal of thought given by the team in Eversheds, who are experts, and me, bringing a different perspective to how we could run an inquiry fairly on a non-traditional basis.

Q12 **Chair:** Forgive my ignorance, but you said it was advertised in *Guardian Jobs*. Was the role advertised anywhere else?

Tom Crowther: That is a good question, but I do not know.

Chair: Okay, but that is where you saw it. Thank you.

Q13 **Robbie Moore:** It is good to see you; thank you for coming in. Just following on with Telford specifically before I go on to my next question, the Telford report contains some absolutely horrific findings. There were multi-agency failings from not only the police, but children's services and those with safeguarding responsibilities as a whole, including the council leadership itself. After all that, and the huge amount of work that had been put into the Telford inquiry, including its outreach with victims, can I ask whether a single person was reprimanded, sacked or held to account as a result of the inquiry?

Tom Crowther: It is not the inquiry's job to attribute liability.

Q14 **Robbie Moore:** Following the inquiry though, are you aware if anyone has been held to account?

Tom Crowther: I am aware that some people are no longer in the roles they were in, yes. But if I might say this, I was dealing with failures in the 1990s and in the 2000s in particular, and, while there were failures in the 2010s, the most egregious failings were 20-plus years ago.

Q15 **Robbie Moore:** Can I just expand on another point about statutory inquiries in the answer you gave to Bell? It is about the way in which the questioning and environment that was created to be able to question and allow those victims, the survivors who had gone through the most horrific of circumstances, to come forward and share their experiences. I just want to get to the bottom of, whether on statutory powers or non-statutory powers, why you feel that you have more flexibility in the mechanisms under which Telford was set up to allow those circumstances of questioning that you adopted on the basis of not having the compulsory statutory powers that were associated with it.

Tom Crowther: Because a statutory inquiry has to be set up along a courtroom model, in effect, that is why.

Q16 **Robbie Moore:** Do you have the flexibility to change the way in which the questioning takes place, even if you are given statutory powers?

Tom Crowther: I have talked about transformation of a non-statutory to a statutory, and I said that if that were to be the case, we would have to have an interim report identifying the issues which would need to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

done on a statutory basis. You would then have to identify who your key participants were in a statutory inquiry and then work out how to make disclosure, as you would have given privacy guarantees to people who had given evidence, and whether those issues could be illuminated sufficiently without causing difficulties for those privacy guarantees given. It is difficult, but it is possible.

My firm view is that it is the difference between whether you are interested in a local or a national problem—and there are differences, if I can deal with that. Are you interested in what is going on in my town, my locale, my constituency, or are you interested in what has gone wrong nationally: what societal, cultural and policy failings there may have been? If it is the latter, then there may well be an argument for a national reflection on just why so many people in so many towns over so long in a developing multicultural Britain felt unable to speak up; why, when people did speak up, some people thought that they were wrong to do so because they were making allegations that a person of a particular race had behaved badly; and why some people thought crime was excusable if viewed through a prism of the perpetrator being somebody who had been subject to prejudice themselves. That is a national issue that cannot be decided on a town-by-town basis.

But equally, if you want to know whether, in your town, decisions were taken not to allocate social services resources in a particular way because girls—and it was mostly girls—were regarded as badly behaved or, to use a word that cropped up in Telford, feral; if you want to know why social services departments took a view of working together that was overly narrow and did not properly encompass exploitation; if you want to know which local police commanders or areas wanted to drop ideas of—I will call it what they called it—child prostitution like a hot potato because it was too difficult, then you need a local inquiry, something like Telford.

One of the first things I said when I did press two years ago when the report came out was, “Do not think this is a problem just of the pariah towns. This will be happening in some form just about everywhere. It may not be happening with the racial paradigm that is currently in the news, but child sexual exploitation will be happening somewhere.” And if you want to know what is happening in your town you need the sort of granular investigation that we had in Telford, and it took two years. I am very sorry, I am rolling on with myself, am I not?

Chair: No, please continue.

Tom Crowther: It took two years, or three, rather. It should have taken two, but we had covid in the middle. As you would imagine, both the police and the council, the core participants, were absolutely in the frontline of covid, so it took us three years. To do the sort of job we did on Telford anywhere else, in ideal circumstances, would take 18 months to two years.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

But if you have the five towns the Home Secretary spoke of, including Oldham, in a national inquiry, then you either need an absolutely massive team to do these concurrently, or you are going to take 10 years to do it. That is why my view is firmly that for local answers, local inquiries are the solution. Of course there are problems—I know this is an interest of yours—with how on earth you persuade a local authority to commission when they do not want to. I have views about that, but I am running on beyond your question, so I will stop.

Q17 Robbie Moore: I will continue that line of thinking, if that is okay. In terms of the framework and the methodology that is going to be rolled out in looking at these, we know Oldham is going to be one of them, but the additional four local inquiries or local audits that are going to be announced by the Home Secretary—

Tom Crowther: Can I just say that Oldham, having been told by the Minister for Safeguarding last October that the Government would not have an inquiry into Oldham, then made a decision to have its own local inquiry, so Oldham's decision was separate from what happened in January of this year—just as Telford's decision was made in the teeth of local council opposition; Mr Davies would tell you that he was not a fan in 2017 or thereabouts, and changed his mind. Telford's inquiry came because of pushing by Geraldine McKelvie of the *Sunday Mirror* in particular, your erstwhile colleague Lucy Allan and, most of all, a cohesive and determined survivors group.

Q18 Robbie Moore: Just continuing that line of thought, you have referenced the local campaigning that I have been doing to have an inquiry within Keighley and across the wider Bradford district. Should the Bradford district be one of those five that the Home Secretary announces before Easter?

Tom Crowther: I am not going to say. I do not even know whether she is going to announce five before Easter, which is why I separated Oldham from the five. They have announced an inquiry, they have hired me and they are doing this inquiry whatever the Home Secretary announces; that is my understanding. As to the others, I do not know enough about towns or districts across the land, including yours, to say which should have an inquiry and which should not. I would answer it in this way: if there is sufficient local concern, then local authorities should be thinking about having an inquiry, whether it be the sort of inquiry I conducted in Telford or something more along the lines of the IICSA Truth Project, which is an earlier stage really, allowing people to tell their stories and thereby gaining an idea of the extent of the problem.

Q19 Robbie Moore: Again, if I may continue, Chair, just take my example. I have been advocating for an inquiry to take place across the Bradford district, as indeed had Ann Cryer, a predecessor of mine.

Tom Crowther: Everyone knows Ann Cryer is an absolute hero of the piece.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q20 Robbie Moore: Absolutely. She was a predecessor of mine representing Keighley. To show the stark reality that we face across the Bradford district, let me just take you through a timeline of events. In July 2021, Bradford safeguarding partnership rejects a full inquiry, arguing that the limited review that they carried out based on the experiences of only five children was sufficient. In September 2021, Alison Lowe, deputy mayor for policing, directly rejects my calls for a full-scale inquiry, arguing that the challenges across the Bradford district are not a Bradford problem, but solely a national problem. In October 2021, we hear the same response from Susan Hinchcliffe, the leader of Bradford Council, rejecting calls for a local inquiry. In December 2023, Bradford Council again rejects my petition—which has been signed by well over 5,000 people—for an inquiry to be held across the Bradford district. At the beginning of this year, we had leading lawyers who had been representing many of those that were involved in the Rotherham cases arguing for an inquiry to take place. Indeed, we had a dually signed letter that went to the Home Secretary early this year, signed by me, by victims, and by a leading lawyer in this field. We have not even had a response to that.

My point is that my scenario is very different from Telford and Oldham—correct me if I am wrong, but those local authorities were keen for an inquiry to take place. Bradford is not. How do you then trigger an inquiry to take place across the Bradford district?

Tom Crowther: Telford was not keen.

Q21 Robbie Moore: But it approved it in the end.

Tom Crowther: In the end it did, and I was going to say that I think you are at Telford in 2017.

Q22 Robbie Moore: How do we fast-track this? This is a problem right now across the Bradford district that many of us have been calling out, and dare I say it, the scale of the issue across the Bradford district would dwarf anywhere else by far—I have not seen anything to disprove that. We are trapped between local representatives blocking it and national Government not being robust enough to have one. How do we get across this roadblock?

Tom Crowther: You keep plugging away. I am very sorry to put it in that way, but I am sure Lucy Allan felt the same in 2017. I do not know the extent to which your district has a coherent survivor voice, because that was essential in Telford, and it is essential in Oldham.

Q23 Robbie Moore: Can I just expand a little as well, just on the framework, because I will absolutely keep plugging away for the Bradford district—

Tom Crowther: Forgive me if that sounded patronising; it absolutely was not.

Q24 Robbie Moore: No, I am not saying that at all; that is absolutely what I will do. It has been reported that there are approximately 50 or so other towns that are experiencing a concern of gang rape and child sexual



HOUSE OF COMMONS

exploitation. The most horrific number of crimes have been taking place. There will be some advocates for those areas who are vocal, potentially, like myself for the Bradford district and particularly Keighley. But where there are concerns being raised of around 50 or so towns, do we end up having 50 or so individual inquiries, or is it better to have a national inquiry specifically focusing on those areas?

Tom Crowther: It depends on what you want. If you want to know what has gone wrong in Bradford district, yes, you have to have a local inquiry commissioned by either one or all the local authorities affected by it. If you want to know about the wider issues there may be, such as Louise Casey is looking at now, then that is a national investigation. That is what I said at the start. If you want to know what has gone wrong in my district, you need the sort of inquiry that I did in Telford and I am going to do in Oldham.

Q25 **Robbie Moore:** You mentioned that when you did the Telford inquiry, the survivors or the representatives and those who helped with feeding into the inquiry were advocating for those statutory powers to be awarded throughout—even up until the point of the report concluding, I think you mentioned.

Tom Crowther: If I said that, advocating is putting it too strongly. Certainly they wanted a statutory inquiry in 2016 or thereabouts, and we—the commissioning body and I—knew that they had a very careful eye on whether we had not uncovered anything that we could have uncovered by statutory power. While we did not have overt reference by them to statutory powers during the course of the inquiry, we knew it was something we had to bear in mind. I thought long and hard about whether statutory powers would have made any difference to my conclusion and concluded that they would not have.

Q26 **Robbie Moore:** Who knows, whether or not the award of statutory powers makes a difference to your conclusion, because they were not awarded, but the point here is the disenfranchisement of trust by victims and survivors in how open and transparent the inquiry is and how organisations or individuals are held to account as a result of the inquiry that is taking place.

Tom Crowther: I do not understand there to have been any criticism of Telford on the basis of a disenfranchisement of trust in the lack of statutory powers; I just do not recognise that at all. Of course, in the Musk sphere at the moment, statutory powers have become a talisman. What I am saying is there will be circumstances in which statutory powers are necessary and useful, but in my inquiry in Telford, they were not.

If you have an unco-operative local authority, you may need statutory powers in the sense that you may need commissioning by the Home Office, for example. If you had a local inquiry, such as I had, but unwilling participants who plainly had relevant material to give but were



not, you might then have to petition section 15 for a conversion. But an effective local inquiry can be had without statutory powers. I know, because I have done one, and Alexis Jay did one in Rotherham in 2013.

Q27 Robbie Moore: Finally for me, going back to the Bradford district, where concerns have been raised absolutely consistently but—dare I say—ignored or even considered to be not too much of an issue by those in power at a local level, we end up in a scenario where there is an unwillingness for a local inquiry to take place. If we continue in the scenario where the deputy mayor for policing, the leader of Bradford Council and others within the district are unwilling to heed calls that I have consistently made since 2019, should the Home Secretary be considering Bradford district for a local inquiry, with the ability of utilising statutory powers to make sure it happens?

Tom Crowther: I am not going to get involved in saying the Home Secretary should commission statutory inquiries in particular towns. All I would say about a local authority that seems unwilling to commission an inquiry of its own is that was true in Telford. In 2018, 10 people across the political spectrum, including Shaun Davies and John Campion, the police and Crime commissioner, wrote a letter saying an inquiry was unnecessary, largely based on exactly the sort of things that you have talked about. We had a review then—I cannot remember the name of the report, but they had had two rather than the three that you talked about. We have done that, and it is not necessary, but the groundswell was such that it became politically impossible for it to be resisted any longer; that is how Telford had its inquiry in the end.

Robbie Moore: I will continue campaigning.

Q28 Chair: Can I ask you about the framework itself? We had the statement in January that there was going to be a framework. How prescriptive is it going to be, what conversations have you had with the Government about it, and what is it going to look like?

Tom Crowther: As you might imagine, that is a question I was expecting, and I have prepared notes. I am going to read from the notes because I want to be fair to everyone involved and not misrepresent anybody. I can provide the timeline after that, but I would expect you would prefer I give it orally at this stage. I will not be able to resist the occasional comment, but I will try to keep it entirely factual. On 6 January, I had a message over LinkedIn from a Telford survivor asking if she could share Jess Phillips's telephone number with me, and I said she could. Within about an hour, I had a call from the Minister for Safeguarding. This was peak Musk, and after some pleasantries on her part about Telford, and sympathy on my part about how she was being traduced, she asked if I was prepared to work with the Government on some sort of framework, and I said that I was.

Q29 Chair: This was 6 January?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tom Crowther: Yes, 6 January. Later that afternoon, the Home Secretary went into Parliament and announced that I had agreed to work with the Government and with other local councils where stronger engagement with victims or survivors is needed, or where more formal inquiries are required to tackle more persistent problems. That was really the first I knew about the nature of the work I was being asked to do.

Q30 **Chair:** Just to clarify that, sorry, we had a note that it was 16 January that the statement was made.

Tom Crowther: That was the second statement.

Q31 **Chair:** The second statement—so 6 January was the first. On 6 January you get a LinkedIn message, the Minister for Safeguarding calls you very quickly after that, and then the Home Secretary makes a statement that day.

Tom Crowther: Yes. On the telephone call with Jess Phillips, there had been an official called Christian Papaleontiou. He telephoned me on the 10th with a little more detail and told me the instruction would be to create a framework for a local inquiry, it to be essentially basic but intensely practical, on a couple of sides of paper, that a roundtable meeting tentatively scheduled for the following week was envisaged with representatives of the five. The only one I knew about was Oldham.

Q32 **Chair:** Okay, so that was tentatively pencilled in for the week following 10 January.

Tom Crowther: Yes. On the 13th, I had another text from Mr Papaleontiou indicating the roundtable was unlikely to happen as planned that week. He also asked how much Telford had cost. I let him know about the figure I recognised being £5 million. It was north of that after the two-year review, but it certainly was not £6 million. 15 January, a text then a telephone call from Mr Papaleontiou. This was the first mention I had heard of a £5 million fund for five local authorities to include Oldham and an indication that the Home Secretary was to announce that. I texted him the next day to ask about the timing of that statement by the Home Secretary because, to put it bluntly, I wanted to see it. If you are a jobbing barrister from Cardiff, you do not get mentioned on the floor of the House of Commons very often.

Chair: You are going to get mentioned a lot more now.

Tom Crowther: He told me it was that day, and that was the 16th. You know what the Home Secretary said on that day, but I am going to set it out because it is relevant to what I thought my role was likely to be. She said she would back support for local inquiries, including in Oldham. She announced the Casey audit, national backing for local inquiries where needed, and that I had agreed to work with the Government to develop a new framework for victim-centred, locally led inquiries where needed and, as a first step, to work with Oldham Council and four other pilot areas. She said it would also include support for local authorities who



HOUSE OF COMMONS

want to explore other ways to support victims, including local panels drawing on experience of the IICSA Truth Project, and national support for local inquiries backed by £5 million to get further work off the ground.

She went on to say, "Wherever there are serious problems or failings and it is believed that local inquiries are needed, we want those areas to be able to conduct the kind of effective local inquiry that Telford was able to conduct, rather than having to start from scratch. Tom Crowther will work with five areas so that he can draw up conclusions about how we can most effectively learn the lessons of what happened in Telford". She went on to say that I, who did the Telford inquiry, "will work with five areas on the kinds of inquiry that they may want to take forward, involving victims and survivors—it is crucial to involve victims and survivors in the design", and that it was important "for Tom Crowther to work with the first local areas that want to take forward local inquiries in order to develop a model and a programme that can be used in other areas, wherever it is needed."

Whether or not I thought that meant I was going to be involved with Oldham, Oldham certainly did, because after that announcement they put out a press release welcoming my involvement in the local inquiry. By this stage, I had had no involvement with Oldham at all. I heard nothing, and so, on 28 January, I texted Mr Papaleontiou and told him I was trying to reconcile my diary, having had a few weeks that were free, and now coming across landmarks that I needed to see to. I asked if there was any news of when I might be needed. He replied with an apology that the Home Office had been consumed by other matters. This was when the Southport sentencing was happening, and one might imagine that that took a lot of effort.

On 5 February, I received an invitation from Nerys Davies to appear before this Committee. It is right that I say that, having received that and said, "Yes" because one does not say, "No" to a Committee of this sort, I texted Mr Papaleontiou and told him that I appreciated an awful lot was going on and that I had just had an invitation to give evidence to the Home Affairs Committee. I said, "It is rather difficult to refuse, or at least to refuse other than on the basis that nothing has happened yet. Is anything likely to happen between now and the date they propose? You understand my concern, I am sure."

I did not have a text reply to that, and on 8 February, a Saturday, I was concerned and used my private friendship with Robert Buckland, who I have known since we were both barristers in Cardiff together in the middle 1990s, to ask him how he thought I should proceed. He gave me Jess Phillips's number, so I texted her. I told her I had an invite in the middle of last week to give evidence to this Committee, and said that I had been in touch with Christian by text but had received no reply, and asked if she would be able to follow up the next week on what I was likely to be asked to do and when, and she said she would look into it. And I left it at that because I thought it was—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q33 **Chair:** That was last week? Sorry to interrupt.

Tom Crowther: That was 8 February.

Chair: 8 February, okay, we are now 1 April.

Tom Crowther: The Minister said that she would get on to it, and I have no reason to think that she did not. On 12 February, having had an update from Nerys Davies as to the date, I texted Mr Papaleontiou and said that this Committee hearing was now fixed for 1 April and that I would appreciate an update.

On the next day, 13 February, painfully aware that my name was associated with Oldham formally in the sense of a press release, but on Twitter to a great extent as well, I emailed Arooj Shah, the leader of Oldham, whose email address is publicly available. "Please forgive a direct email, I thought I should introduce myself. As you know, the Government announced in early January that I would work with Oldham and other councils to set up a framework for council-commissioned local inquiries similar to the work I did in Telford. I was very pleased to be asked to do this work and look forward to it. I was told the intention was for an initial roundtable meeting with representatives from Oldham and the other councils, but this has not yet been scheduled. So, in the meantime, I am very happy to have an initial conversation with you and your chief executive or whoever you deem appropriate. If you would prefer this to be in person," and I said I was in Manchester and could accommodate an in-person meeting. I had a reply by text message because I had left my phone number, proposing that a meeting to be arranged with her and her chief executive.

On the same day I had a text from Christian Papaleontiou proposing a call the next day, and on the 14th I did have a call with Mr Papaleontiou, and said, in terms, "Do you still want me?" He said that the draft framework was now to be ministerial and adviser-drafted but that my comments would be welcome on any draft, which he told me was expected the following week. I told him, because I thought it right to do so, that I had been in touch with Arooj Shah and expected a meeting with her, and I concluded by asking if we could continue via email rather than by text messaging. I was assured I would have a follow-up email that day. On 21 February, I texted Mr Papaleontiou, "Christian, a week ago you told me you would send me an email so we would not have to conduct this through texts. Would still welcome that, Tom."

On 24 February, I had a meeting at Oldham with Arooj Shah and Shelley Kipling, the then acting chief executive of Oldham, who I think has since been confirmed in post. We talked in very general terms about the sort of thing I have talked about today: the merits or otherwise of the double-independent model, what is necessary for a local inquiry, survivor confidence—that sort of thing. We left it at that. I had an email on 3 March from Shelley Kipling confirming that the council had satisfied itself through survivor inquiries that I was a proper person to conduct their



HOUSE OF COMMONS

inquiry and indicating that they would confirm instruction subject to, of course, negotiation with my business manager. On 12 March, an Oldham press release announced my instruction, and there was formal instruction, I think, the same day.

On 20 March, I had an email from Christian Papaleontiou. I had spoken to him after I had spoken to Shelley originally. It is not clear to me when that was because that was a phone call—none of us have paper bills anymore, and frankly, I do not know if an incoming number is somebody trying to say, “Do you own this diesel car?” or is Christian Papaleontiou. So there was a call in the meantime, when I told him I was instructed by Oldham.

The email on 20 March said, “As discussed when we last spoke, we have been considering how we can support local independent inquiries in a way that optimises effective local action, including looking at a competed fund which could support different ladders of intervention to support local inquiries, from full inquiries, as in the case of Oldham (where I know you already engaged!!) to supporting options short of a full inquiry, which could include victim survivor engagement, effective accountability, scrutiny, and follow-up, etc. As we also discussed, developing a framework for local inquiries will still be crucial to inform any decisions on the provision of supportive funding to local areas. I mentioned we were moving to a model where the development of that framework would be Home Office led and multi-stakeholder, to a) ensure we are capturing all relevant learning from local areas which have conducted local inquiries, so the framework was as rigorous as it could be, and b) to try to do this in a way that brought different stakeholders with us so they felt they were part of a process rather than being done unto. We obviously want to draw heavily on Telford’s experience, with input from yourself, victim and survivor reps and the local authority, and, as per your suggestion, Eversheds.” My suggestion had been that they talk to Eversheds because, bluntly, Eversheds have done a lot of work for Telford that is now amortised on data sharing, privacy policies and the like. “My team is reaching out to arrange a session and to capture and build on what Telford had produced, and we will ensure you are linked into that. I hope you would still be able to find time to contribute to capturing key learning from Telford from your perspective, and hope that there are some times in the next fortnight that you would be able to make.”

On 25 March, I had an email from Ana Carvallo-Phillips at the Home Office asking to arrange a joint meeting to discuss the framework. The same day I emailed Ms Carvallo-Phillips back and said, “Christian identified three areas of work: funding for support for local intervention including inquiries, development of a framework for local intervention including inquiries, and Telford learning.” I went on to say, “These seem to be distinct, in the reverse of their natural order and in increasing relevance to my experience. That is, I can say nothing at all about funding, plenty about Telford, and will have to reserve whether I can comment on a framework someone else has drafted, particularly if it runs



HOUSE OF COMMONS

contrary to the structure of the Oldham inquiry, as it would be invidious for me to accept instructions on one basis and then endorse another as best practice. It would be very helpful to have an agenda in advance of the meeting, but am I right at least to assume that the proposed framework is a Telford learning meeting rather than a framework meeting?”

The next day, the 26th, I had an email from Ms Carvallo-Phillips which said, “To reassure you we are not planning to discuss the fund in any detail. We would like to speak to you about learnings and insights from Telford’s approach. The framework will aim to assimilate learnings and best practice from successful inquiries, including but not limited to Telford, as well as feedback from local areas on what they would find most instructive to include. The aim is for it to cover core themes and related activities that local areas should consider when planning and delivering a local inquiry. However, we will be clear that while it provides a guide rail, it is not binding, and local areas should adapt their approach according to local context and need. We would not be asking you to endorse the framework; rather, we would be interested in understanding if the themes we have identified from Telford’s approach are the right ones and whether there are any omissions that we should explore further. I can circulate an agenda to you in the coming days.” I received one last night; it is a discussion document for a meeting that is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, so I think it would be wrong to share the contents with the Committee.

I have taken quite some time to deal with that, but ultimately, in answer to the question of how a national framework is being developed, I would say that at this stage, I do not know.

Chair: Okay. I have a lot of questions about what the framework might look like, but I do not suspect there is a lot of point in putting them. Can I turn to Paul Kohler?

Q34 **Mr Kohler:** Thank you for appearing; it has been very interesting. Would it not be more logical for you to draft the framework and for the Home Office to comment on that?

Tom Crowther: Can I say this in here? You may think that; I could not possibly comment.

Q35 **Mr Kohler:** Point taken. I know you have said you cannot comment on funding generally, but you have mentioned that Telford cost at least £5 million, probably more. What is £5 million going to buy for five inquiries? What are they going to have to lose out on?

Tom Crowther: I do not know now whether the £5 million is for five local authorities or if it has turned into a competed fund—such as, dare I mention, levelling up, where certain people thought you could direct funding to the north of England and then—to pick Saffron Walden out of the top of my head; I do not know if anyone has any link to it—Saffron



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Walden decided it needed something too. I just don't know about procurement; I suspect it has run into procurement problems, but I fall back on saying, "I just don't know."

Q36 **Mr Kohler:** Excuse the naivety of this question. I assumed the framework would be a generic framework, but do they envisage you discussing it with local authorities?

Tom Crowther: I do not think that is envisaged anymore if we look at that most recent email. I am painfully aware that I read it out at speed, but my penultimate email on the 26th said, "We would not be asking you to endorse the framework."

Q37 **Mr Kohler:** Do you not think you will even discuss it with local authorities? Will it just be you giving them private comments on their framework?

Tom Crowther: I do not know who the attendees at tomorrow's meeting will be beyond me and a representative of Eversheds Sutherland, who effectively ran the inquiry from the commissioning body's side. My understanding of tomorrow is that it is about Telford detail.

Q38 **Mr Kohler:** Should issues such as cultural sensitivity be covered in the framework? If you were writing it, would they be?

Tom Crowther: The answer is no, because the framework would, in my view, leave terms of reference up to the chairs of individual inquiries. There may be areas in which cultural sensitivities were of acute concern and others where that issue was less important.

Q39 **Margaret Mullane:** You have alluded to it in the previous question with the competed fund, but what incentives do you think the Government should put in place for the local authorities to access it to help fund the inquiries?

Tom Crowther: Given that I am chairing another inquiry and may be called on to advise on others, it is not for me to say what the Government should do, if you will forgive me.

Q40 **Margaret Mullane:** No problem. Again, I do not know if you could answer this now, but who should be responsible at a national level for common themes from the local-led inquiries and doing a wider action on them?

Tom Crowther: At the moment, it is Baroness Casey who seems to be responsible for all difficult issues—and a very good choice for difficult issues, as far as I can see.

Chair: We are hoping to get her in front of the Committee at some point, but we know she is very busy with lots and lots of competing issues.

Q41 **Margaret Mullane:** Another question from me: how confident are you that the work of the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce will have an impact on identifying child



sexual exploitation?

Tom Crowther: The taskforce seems to be a success in terms of the figures; it was something like 25% up on arrests last year. Child sexual exploitation is a pan-jurisdictional offence. Girls from Telford were trafficked to Rotherham, Birmingham, and across force areas. Anything that leads to a national police response is to be welcomed. The taskforce seems to be a success.

Q42 **Margaret Mullane:** I am very interested in this, because we have heard from different things that the Committee has covered. How effective do you think regular publication of good, high-quality data in combating misinformation on group-based offending is?

Tom Crowther: It is vital. The irony is that I have spent hundreds of pages railing against pointless committees that have been set up, and my primary recommendation was that another committee be set up, but this involved all key stakeholders. They called it the Joint CSE Review Group, and I said it should publish data once a year about prevalence, including ethnicity. They have done it; it is on Telford's website, and the next one is due in the summer. It means that people can actually get an impression of what is going on in the town where they live, which is vital.

The one thing that I was not persuaded out of—they took a different view from me—is that I said the locality data should be granular. Of course, the police made the very good point that, particularly in the areas with low instances, if you got too granular about locality, the wrong people might be suspected. For example, if there is an instance of an offence in X Avenue, Tommy Robinson might be outside Mo the taxi driver's house with flaming torches, whereas in fact it is Graham, who lives with his mother and is grooming people on the internet. That is about the police doing a really sensible job.

I invite the Committee to look at Telford's Joint CSE Review Group reports. I would love every town to be doing those, because then you would have a resource from which national data could be drawn and national trends could be derived.

Q43 **Robbie Moore:** Can I just take you back to the timeline that you kindly went through? Thank you for your ability to keep going back to try to get answers and some clarity from the Home Office. It seems to me that the Home Secretary was almost pushed into a position of making some announcements in January to illustrate that the Government were actually doing something with the public pressure that was being put on them at that point in time.

From the timeframe that you were outlining, it seems to me that this is just no further forward—I am inviting you to comment on this—in understanding how the framework is being developed. Indeed it seems, if we are just communicating via text messages and not proper established chains of communication, that this would be administrative incompetence at the Home Office's end when this is something that quite rightly has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

such huge public attention on it. But where are we with going forward from the Home Office's point of view?

Tom Crowther: We are no longer communicating via text message and have not been for a month. It would be wrong to say that I have no better idea of how the framework is being developed; I do have a better idea about how the framework is being developed. It would be right to say that I have had no involvement in the development of the framework, but that might be different by the end of tomorrow.

Q44 **Robbie Moore:** Up until today's point, then, given that your name has been referenced not only on the floor of the House but in other communication that has been put out by the Government, do you feel used as part of this process so far?

Tom Crowther: No, because I understand that wheels turn slowly.

Q45 **Robbie Moore:** Do you have faith that there will be a local audit or inquiry into the other four areas where it has been indicated there will be?

Tom Crowther: I don't know what those four areas are, so I cannot say. I just do not know.

Q46 **Robbie Moore:** Based on the process since January when that statement was given in the House, do you have confidence that the other inquiries will actually come into existence?

Tom Crowther: Other local authorities may choose to do what Oldham has done and commission those inquiries. They may commission them before the framework comes out; they may choose to wait for the framework. I just do not know.

Q47 **Chris Murray:** Thanks for coming. The evidence you are giving us is very good and interesting. When the Home Secretary announced your involvement, she also announced that Baroness Casey would be doing this audit of existing national issues.

Tom Crowther: Yes; that was 10 days after she first announced it. That was the 16th when she spoke about the Casey audit.

Q48 **Chris Murray:** Near the announcement of your involvement, then. I wonder, have you had any engagement with Baroness Casey about how your two pieces of work will engage with each other?

Tom Crowther: No. I did not include it in my timeline, but in my most recent communication with Mr Papaleontiou, when he spoke about people reaching out to me to arrange a date for the framework meeting, he said by way of postscript that he thought that Baroness Casey's team wanted to speak to me and he thought they would be likely to be in touch. That was 20 March. Given their punishing timeline, I would imagine that Baroness Casey's team has plenty to be getting on with in the meantime.

Q49 **Chris Murray:** Yes, and it was less than a fortnight ago, so even I would



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not be too critical on that front. Let's think about that conversation, when it happens. What kind of points will you want to be raising? In your opinion, how should local inquiries, a framework and a national audit be liaising and working in synergy with each other?

Tom Crowther: I understand the national audit to be a data analysis exercise, so, if there was an overlap with Telford, it would be looking at the annual reports that I have spoken about to get the best picture of what has been going on on the ground in Telford in the last two years or so.

Q50 **Chris Murray:** Are there any considerations that you think the audit should cover?

Tom Crowther: No. If a conversation happens, I will wait to see what I am asked, rather than guess what it might be, if you will forgive me.

Q51 **Chris Murray:** What would you ask? What if they say to you, "We're interested in your opinion about how we should take this forward."?

Tom Crowther: I am convinced of the importance of data, and it will be interesting to know whether Baroness Casey's review finds there is sufficient data or that different data needs to be collected or routinely collected. I will be interested to know her conclusions on that. I would obviously hope that somebody says that the idea of the Telford-style CSE review group is a good idea across the piece.

Q52 **Chris Murray:** Thank you. Looking forward rather than retrospectively, there have been a few announcements by the Government in recent months. For example, grooming is going to be made an aggravating factor in the sentencing of child sexual offenders—

Tom Crowther: Sorry for interrupting you. I should point out that the much-maligned Sentencing Council already includes grooming as an aggravating culpability feature on all child sex offences. They are talking about making it a statutory aggravating feature. Whether that will make much difference, when the culpability feature actually has the greater ability to move—

Q53 **Chris Murray:** You are pre-empting my question there a little. Let me get to the end of it. There is an announcement of making it a statutory aggravating factor. There is also a statutory duty to report child abuse. Obviously, reporting of child abuse is already encouraged. There are a whole host of measures around reducing violence against women and girls. My question is—as you correctly anticipated—what impact do you think that will have going forward on spotting and tackling incidents of child sexual exploitation?

Chair: And can I ask what difference it might have made in Telford if we had had those measures in place at the time?

Chris Murray: That was going to be my follow-up question, so well done. I am being obvious today.



Chair: Sorry. I second-guessed you.

Tom Crowther: Duty to report. The devil is in the detail with a duty to report, obviously, and I looked at the clause in the Crime and Policing Bill. "A person...must make a notification under this section if...they are given reason to suspect that a child sex offence may have been committed (at any time)." I am a little concerned that reasonable cause to suspect is probably not satisfied by indicators that, as a country and as a people, we see these things that we did not in 1996 or 1997. For example, most teachers would see persistent absences as an indicator that something might be wrong, and most doctors would see multiple pregnancies in very young girls as an indicator that something might be wrong and might do something about it. Police officers are absolutely on to missing episodes.

I am a little concerned that the lower-level indicators may not be reported where it is that formal. I do not think it will do any harm, but a great deal of work has been done in the meantime on educating people about the importance of indicators, so that maybe you do not have to get to the level of reasonable suspicion. Teachers seeing somebody who is coming in unkempt every day is an indicator too, for example, but you would not report that to the police. The police would not be equipped to handle indicator reports. If they are not equipped to handle it, but there is a mandatory report and it goes to the police, is that going to create a response by the police? Probably not. They should be reporting it in a multi-agency group, of course; the police should be taking it through. Are people then going to say, "Well, I reported indicators and not what I wanted to happen?"

I am not against mandatory reporting; everybody says it is a good idea. The figures internationally make it clear that the number of children identified as at risk increases in jurisdictions with mandatory reporting. I am just concerned that those professionals with day-to-day contact with children will not wait until a reasonable suspicion threshold is there, but will report indicators. That is my feeling about it.

Q54 **Chris Murray:** One criticism that has come out is that it does not carry a criminal sanction if you fail in your duty, but it will show up on your DBS checks for future jobs around children and vulnerable people. Do you think that is the right level to set the sanction for failure because it would take those people out of the system of dealing with vulnerable children?

Tom Crowther: Is criminal sanction really going to worry the sort of person who would not report child sexual abuse? That is a rhetorical question, and I do not know the answer, but I can completely understand why there is no criminal sanction there. This is about encouraging people to do the right thing, isn't it? It is a carrot-stick balance that has been made by others and seems to me to be a perfectly reasonable conclusion that has been come to.

Q55 **Chris Murray:** And to the Chair's question: retrospectively, do you think



these things would have made a difference in Telford had they been in place at the time?

Tom Crowther: Put it this way: if mandatory duty to report had been in place in Telford, the people who were told, “You can’t make that allegation; it’s racist,” would have been emboldened to take it further. What is more, the people who accused them of racism for making those allegations would probably have thought twice about it. So yes, as I say, I cannot argue with the data; it is there in the conclusions in IICSA: where mandatory reporting exists, greater numbers of children are found to be at risk. I do not see how that can be said to be a false statistic—and would we not rather over-report than under-report?

Q56 **Mr Kohler:** On that point about over-reporting, is there any danger of tree loss in the forest if there is a statutory duty to report, or is that not really a concern?

Tom Crowther: It does not seem to have been in other jurisdictions.

Q57 **Chris Murray:** One other proposal that has come out that the Government are planning to legislate on is a duty of candour. This is obviously from Hillsborough, so it is from a different kind of background, but it will have huge implications here. We know from all the evidence in recent years on child sexual exploitation that institutions are secretive and defensive, and they close ranks. We have seen that across the piece. Do you think a statutory duty of candour will have an impact on that dynamic that we have seen in so many abusive institutions?

Tom Crowther: I will answer your question—which means I am not going to do so straight away. You have said institutions are secretive. I should say, in Telford, the CSE response came from individual youth workers and police officers—if I can put it this way without disrespect, the bottom of the food chain—who just would not stand for it any more. You had youth workers going to Birmingham in the middle of the night and in the early hours of the morning putting themselves at physical risk to collect children from houses where they should not be because they were in trouble. While there is criticism to be made of institutions, the only reason we know about any of this is because good people in those institutions would not take it any more, as well as the parents who pushed and pushed and pushed.

I promised I would say something about the duty of candour. There are two potential relevances. The first is in prevention and detection, and the second is in attitude to an inquiry, which goes to the compulsion point as well. As to the first, prevention and detection, duty of candour in the UK was the baby of Robert Francis’s Mid Staffs hospital report and has been in place in the NHS.

I would not dream of talking for Sir Robert, but I have seen an IFG talk in which he suggested that the duty of candour in the NHS has in fact put in place a layer of bureaucracy that means people are less likely to offer meaningful apology, which is what it was all about, because there is that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

duty in place. Apology is the ultimate form of candour, isn't it? There is also the risk that those further down—I am going to use the phrase again; let me say down the hierarchy—are the ones who get blamed in circumstances where there is a duty of candour.

As to the attitude of witnesses to inquiries, I am not sure what a duty of candour adds, because the duty of candour is subject to protection against self-incrimination. While a duty of candour may operate on conscience where unsworn evidence is taken, I am sceptical about whether the sort of people who would not be candid in their answers have much of a conscience to be operated on anyway.

Q58 Chris Murray: Looking again back at Telford, beyond the compulsion of witnesses to give evidence, do you see any value that a duty of candour could have brought in, bearing in mind that a duty of candour is not just a duty to report, but a duty to act?

Tom Crowther: Absolutely. In terms of the witnesses my inquiry saw, it again comes back to the compulsion point. I did not see a witness or read an account that seemed to me to be deliberately elusive. Those witnesses who say, "I can't remember," would not be improved by a duty of candour. I do not think it would have helped, frankly.

Q59 Chris Murray: What you have said is really interesting. I have one final question. You say that one of the learnings was that it was people not particularly high in the hierarchy who just refused to tolerate the levels of abuse that they were seeing, and acted. We want to empower them. Do you think imposing a duty to report and a duty of candour on them is not necessarily making them say something that they would not say already, but lets them argue further up the hierarchy, "I am legally obliged to do this; you have to support me as I say we need to intervene here?" Does it empower them to make the hierarchy respond to what they are seeing and will not tolerate?

Tom Crowther: Let me preface the answer by saying nothing would have changed about the sort of things we are talking about, which was youth workers and the like complaining about things and they were just told either, "It is racist to raise it," or, "You are seeing phantoms here and patterns that do not exist."

What would be different now is the societal change that we all accept that these problems do exist and these crimes are being committed. Plainly, I cannot argue against a duty of candour; it is like arguing against love, motherhood, or something else that is utterly beneficial. Of course I do not argue against it, save to reiterate the Francis point that duties do tend to become hidebound by bureaucracy, don't they?

Q60 Chair: Thank you very much and thank you for giving such expansive answers to our questions. You have made it much easier for us, because you actually answered most of our questions without us needing to ask. I do have one final question for you: is there anything this Committee can



HOUSE OF COMMONS

do to help you?

Tom Crowther: Not now, Dame Karen, but if that changes, I will get back to you.

Chair: You know where we are. Thank you very much for coming in, and as I say, for being so expansive and frank in your answers.