



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Jay Report into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham, HC 648

Tuesday 10 March 2015

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 March 2015.

Evidence from witnesses:

Panel 1 (Questions 526-631)

[Watch the session](#)

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Simon Danczuk; Mark Pawsey and Chris Williamson.

Panel 1 Questions [526-631]

Witnesses: **Roger Stone OBE**, Former Leader, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.

Chair: Welcome this afternoon to our sixth evidence session in our inquiry on child sexual exploitation following the Jay Report on Rotherham. Before we begin, I am just going to ask all members of the Committee to put on record their interests. I am a Vice-President of the Local Government Association. I also have a close friend, who is Councillor Sioned-Mair Richards, who is currently a councillor in Sheffield but was for a time a part-time scrutiny officer in Rotherham.

Chris Williamson: I have two elected members on Derby City Council who work for me.

Simon Danczuk: My wife is a councillor and some staff within my constituency office are councillors.

Mark Pawsey: Two staff within my office are councillors.

Q526 Chair: Just to say, as I have said at previous sessions, we see the job of this inquiry as to look at the Jay Report and then subsequently the Casey Report with regard to the situation in

Rotherham, to try to find out what happened and why it happened, and to look at what lessons we can learn about taking things forward and improving them in the future. It is not our particular desire to put on trial any individual and certainly not our job to find people guilty or innocent of particular charges, but to explore with them what happened and reasons for it and try to draw wide conclusions for the benefit of local government as a whole.

Mr Stone, thank you very much for coming this afternoon. If you could just for our record say who you are and your former position, that would be helpful; then I think you would like to make a short statement to the Committee as well.

Roger Stone: Thank you, Chairman. I am Roger Stone. I am the ex-leader of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. I need to put on record that it is six and a half months since I was in the council, so in putting together what I have put together today, I have had to rely on friends. I have no back-up like I would have had if I had been the political leader. The statement that I wanted to make, Mr Chairman, is this.

First, can I thank you, Chair, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to give oral and written evidence? I have not spoken publicly since the day I resigned in September—the day the Jay Report was published. This is the first chance I have had to make a formal public statement. It is fitting that I do so to this Committee and not, as has been the pressure, through the media or via the Casey review, for reasons that will become apparent. In this context, I would respectfully ask that the Committee publish my written evidence as part of its report.

Secondly, can I take this opportunity to sincerely apologise to all those who have been affected by the council's failure to deal effectively with child sexual exploitation in Rotherham? I am deeply saddened and hugely disappointed that we did not protect young people better. I apologised when I resigned, and resigned because this happened on my watch. I have taken full responsibility as leader.

Thirdly, I would like to reiterate that I have been the only leader and Rotherham the only council to commission an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation. This was a political initiative. We wanted to learn the full extent of the problem. When the shocking results were revealed by the Jay Report, I felt I had no alternative but to resign and take full responsibility. Many people did not realise the full scale of the issue. Indeed, the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, Keith Vaz, turned down an invitation to a seminar in Rotherham that I think he would have accepted had he realised the extent of the problem.

Fourthly, I would like to express my deep disappointment that when I resigned I had still not had the courtesy of receiving a copy of the Jay Report, yet I learned that a public relations company employed by Alexis Jay had had the report for weeks before the press launch. Thank you.

Q527 Chair: Thank you, Mr Stone, for that. I think the Committee do note your apology made as your first comments there. That was slightly different to one or two witnesses, who we have had a bit of a job getting an apology out of, as you have probably seen. Let us just go on, then. Essentially, therefore, are you saying to the Committee that you accept the findings of the Jay Report?

Roger Stone: The majority of the findings, yes. I do not necessarily accept some of the things that are in it, but I accept the findings. There was no problem with that at all. The only problem with the Jay Report—and I am saying this in the hope that other local authorities will listen to what I am saying—is we did it wrong. The Jay Report came out on the morning when they had a big press conference in the afternoon, and nobody had seen the report. Nobody had time to digest it; nobody had time to talk about it. That is one thing; I want to make sure that other local authorities pick that up and do not get themselves into the same position.

Q528 Chair: You are saying there are some bits you disagree with. You are not in any way disagreeing with the fact that 1,400 children were subjected to sexual exploitation in Rotherham.

Roger Stone: I cannot disagree with that, because all Jay has done is go backwards for 16 years. I must stress, Chair, that I have only been leader for 10 of those 16 years. I did not become leader until 2003, in September. You can count September out, because I was on a learning curve. I am responsible as leader for 10 years, and not 16.

Q529 Chair: What about the Casey Report, which has come subsequently? Do you accept the findings there as well?

Roger Stone: Not necessarily, no. I do not like the Casey Report, purely and simply because I think it was hurried. I believe the decision to put commissioners into Rotherham had already been made in the Secretary of State's own mind, and I believe that Casey was sent in to try to make sure that he got evidence to be able to do that. Therefore, no, I did not trust the people that were doing the interviewing. I was contacted at the very end of the Casey review to ask if I would go for an interview, and I said no. The reason I said no was because I did not trust the people that were doing the

interviewing; I had heard the stories that in some cases they were making the statements fit the stories, and I wanted to make sure that what I put down was got across to people. I sent two reports into the Casey review. There were approximately 12,000 words in each, but very few found their way into the Casey Report. My worry with the Casey Report is that it was a civil servant—it was not an independent that went in; it was a civil servant—who was responsible to the Government and was responsible, in my opinion, to the Secretary of State, so it was never, ever going to be any different than how it came out, in my opinion.

Q530 Chair: Just before we go on to two other points, what in Casey did you not agree with? Casey did not say a lot different to what Jay said, apart from the fact that she did not think people had learned lessons after Jay in the subsequent months.

Roger Stone: The one thing I definitely do not agree with with Casey is the denial. The denial was not a denial on child sexual exploitation. Every one of us knew that there was sexual exploitation that was ongoing, but according to what we were being told—and what inspections that we had were telling us—we were on the right course of action. Jay's report says for the last four or five years we were on the up; we were improving and there was good leadership. That seems to be missed in the Casey Report. There seem to be conflicts of how they put it. At the end of it all, I agree with the Jay Report—there are no arguments about that, at the end of the day—but I am not happy with the Casey Report.

Q531 Chair: Can we just come on to two particular issues that Professor Jay highlighted? That was that there were seminars for elected members, particularly senior elected members and senior officers, in 2004-05 that alerted everyone to serious problems of child sexual exploitation, and then there followed a task-and-finish group that you chaired, but no evidence that anything came out of all that.

Roger Stone: Chair, that is not quite correct.

Chair: Okay. You tell us what you think.

Roger Stone: There was a seminar in 2004 and 2005, and it was the first one that I attended. Child sexual exploitation was not on the agenda. It was grooming of young girls in our care homes that was on the agenda. What people have got to realise is that we are now trying to put 2015 situations into 2003, and things have changed. As a result of that, particularly in our care homes—I had just taken over the leadership—I said, "We cannot have this. There is no way we can have this." We created the committee that finished up as a task-and-finish

group, and I chaired the first two meetings. They had got everybody and their grandmother in that dealt with it—the voluntary sector and everything. I chaired it for two meetings and then passed it on to the cabinet member that was responsible for children and young people and the chief executive and the executive director that looked after children. It was not sexual exploitation. At that time, sexual exploitation was never mentioned. It was child prostitution that was coming out at that time.

Q532 Chair: But still a serious issue. You chaired a couple of sessions of the task-and-finish group and then it seems to have disappeared off the radar screen. There are no minutes of what happened; there are no recommendations to the council and no specific requirements to do anything about it. Is that not a failure?

Roger Stone: The only way I can answer that is that I believe that Mike Cuff and the people who were in Risky Business and the police did not want the girls' names mentioned; there were areas that they did not want us to know. There was always an argument that was coming forward from Risky Business and the police that they did not want us, as councillors, to know the names of the girls; they did not want us to say anything in case they were doing their inspections or their seeing where the problems were and we damaged what they were looking at. That is the only reason I can give for that, Chair.

Q533 Chair: I can understand why the police would not want to put into the public domain the names of girls who were being groomed, exploited—whatever word we use—or put into prostitution, but, ultimately, whether the senior members, including yourself, could not have names is one thing; whether you would be expected to have back to you clear reports indicating action that was being taken by your officers to deal with these issues is another. There is no evidence that that happened, is there?

Roger Stone: The reports that came back from the chief executive and the cabinet member who were looking after children came back to different meetings; it came back in different ways. One of the problems with a council like ours is we leak like a sieve, no matter what happens. We had 50-odd councillors. As soon as we had had a group meeting, the local paper knew half of what had gone off in that group meeting. At the end of the day, I believe that they were being over-sensitive. But there were no minutes, and I cannot argue against that. I can only give what I think is the reason for there being no minutes.

Q534 Chair: There is no evidence that officers eventually did anything about these problems raised at the task-and-finish group, is there? Is there evidence anything happened?

Roger Stone: I have not got any evidence, no. The people who would probably have the evidence of all that are the people who have left as a result of the child sexual exploitation.

Q535 Chair: But as leader, would you not expect to have something come across your desk saying, "This was a serious problem. We have had the task-and-finish group. I only chaired the two previous meetings. What have you done since?"

Roger Stone: It would not, because it was the cabinet member that would be reporting into the group about the meetings that were taking place.

Q536 Chair: But you would surely want, as leader, to ensure yourself that the cabinet member was producing those reports, and he clearly did not, did he?

Roger Stone: It is not the cabinet member that does the reports; it is the officers. When you have got the chief executive and the executive director for children and young people and the cabinet member coming to meetings and telling you that things are being done and that they are on top of it, I would not have said, "I have got to have minutes. I need minutes writing down."

Q537 Chair: You are saying you did have reports, then.

Roger Stone: There were reports that came back that said they were on top of it. That has happened all the way through. Every time we have asked—whether it be the police, Risky Business; whoever it is—we were always told that they were on top of the situation. Every group meeting we have, the cabinet member gives a report. The cabinet member would give a report that said, "We are on top of it; we are okay; everything is going fine".

Chair: We may come back to the quality of some of those reports and explore those a little bit further, but we will move on to other issues in the Jay Report and the Casey Report.

Q538 Simon Danczuk: Just to clarify a point that came up in discussion with Clive there, you accept, Roger, that there is no such thing as child prostitution. You accept that.

Roger Stone: I do not accept child prostitution; I do not accept child sexual exploitation, but that was the terminology that was being

used at the time. Bear in mind the police at the time had got targets. Child sexual exploitation was not on their targets, the same as it was not on ours, but they did tend to have more of a wanting to pick up the young girls rather than pick up the perpetrators.

Q539 Simon Danczuk: Why do you think that was, Roger?

Roger Stone: Probably because they did not believe them; probably because they at that time thought that the girls were enticing the men and whatever. There was a sexist attitude at that particular time. We asked the police fairly regularly, "Why are we not arresting somebody?" and we were told, "The Crown Prosecution Service says there is not enough evidence."

Q540 Simon Danczuk: You think there were sexist attitudes within the police. That is what you just said, is it?

Roger Stone: Yes, I think there were.

Q541 Simon Danczuk: Let me ask you, then: were you aware that councillors and officers were afraid of challenging you or sharing bad news because of the macho, bullying culture at Rotherham? Were you aware of that?

Roger Stone: No, I was not. No. I do not believe there was a macho, bullying—

Simon Danczuk: You do not accept it.

Roger Stone: No. That is the Casey Report.

Q542 Simon Danczuk: Let me just give you some examples. You come across as a placid, gentle person here at the Committee—

Roger Stone: Thank you.

Simon Danczuk: But let me just read some of the evidence that has been presented. "The last leader [Roger Stone] was a bully." That is one senior officer. "A lot of women have felt a sense of suppression and macho culture." A councillor said that. "What Stone said, went. Everyone was terrified of Stone," a senior officer said. "It was common knowledge that he wasn't a fan of female councillors," a former senior officer said. I spoke to a national journalist who used to work in South Yorkshire and he said whenever he phoned you up during this period when you were leader it would come up as an undisclosed phone number on your number; you would immediately answer the phone to this journalist—you would not know he was a journalist—saying, "Fuck off." This is what he told me. He said that you would not know who you were

speaking to. That is how you greeted somebody who was ringing you up on the phone.

Roger Stone: I do not accept that.

Simon Danczuk: All those senior officers; all those councillors—

Roger Stone: No; I do not accept the last one—the journalist.

Simon Danczuk: The journalist. He is telling lies.

Roger Stone: With the senior officers, of course there are going to be some who are not too happy with me, because at the end of the day I wanted to make change. I wanted to do change. No matter how it is, running a council like Rotherham, you have got to make decisions, and you have got to make some decisions that people are not going to be happy with. I am sure I have made a lot of decisions where people were not happy at the end of the day.

Q543 Simon Danczuk: We are not talking about decisions, Roger; we are talking about the culture and attitude that you encouraged as leader.

Roger Stone: That is not true. I do not accept that.

Q544 Simon Danczuk: Just to be clear, then, the senior officers and the councillors that give this evidence, and the journalist that I spoke to, are all telling lies. That is your argument.

Roger Stone: Whether they are telling lies or not, I do not know. I have never operated like that. I have never been a bully. My concern most of the time is working together. I believe that the only way that you can take things forward is by working together. Yes, I will have argued with some, I will have rowed with some, I will have fallen out with some and I will have accepted at times that I was wrong with some, but I do not accept the way that you have put it.

Q545 Simon Danczuk: There is a conspiracy against you.

Roger Stone: I do not know whether there is a conspiracy.

Chair: We have got a Division now. We are going to have to go and vote. I am going to suspend the session for 10 minutes.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Q546 Simon Danczuk: Where we left it, Roger, is that you are still in denial about the fact that there was a bullying, macho, sexist culture under your leadership at Rotherham council. Is that right?

Roger Stone: To be in denial means that I accept that there was a bullying culture, and I do not accept there was a bullying culture.

Simon Danczuk: You do not accept that.

Roger Stone: And to come back to your earlier question, there is no way that I would have responded to a journalist—

Simon Danczuk: You would not have known he was a journalist.

Roger Stone: I would not have responded to him. If I had known he was a journalist, I would have said “no comment” and put the phone down. I did not know he was a journalist, I would not have responded in any way. I would have tried to find out what he wanted, and he would have had to tell me he was a journalist.

Q547 Simon Danczuk: I am telling you what was told to me and what has been said by others. What Professor Jay concluded is: “The prevailing culture at the most senior level of the council, until 2009, as described by several people, was bullying and ‘macho’, and not an appropriate climate in which to discuss the rape and sexual exploitation of young people”.

Roger Stone: The complaint of bullying and sexism is by a very small number of people. If you look at the people I have dealt with over the number of years, it is a small number of people. No matter what happens, there have to be tough decisions. If you want to call me a bully because I have wanted something doing and something has not been done and it has affected something else, or whatever, then call me a bully. My philosophy was that we wanted to get things done. We did not want to sit down and talk about it and become an Oxford debating society and nothing come out at the end of it.

Q548 Simon Danczuk: Perhaps you were not bullying on the right things. Perhaps you were not bullying about addressing this sexual exploitation. The implication is that you set a culture that made it impossible for senior officers or even councillors to report to you or anybody else senior within the authority about the rape of children.

Roger Stone: Not true.

Simon Danczuk: It is not true.

Roger Stone: No.

Q549 Simon Danczuk: You had an open door; you were happy to hear it.

Roger Stone: I had an open door, and there were people who were taking all that information in. There was the chief executive; there was the executive director; there was the cabinet member. We had a cabinet system that operated the same as the cabinet system operates in London, and we made sure that a cabinet member was responsible with a portfolio for an area. That cabinet member for children and young people would be the one that dealt with children and young people, and that cabinet member would report into either us, as the cabinet, or the council to tell us whether there were problems, whether it was indifferent, and every time we were being told by senior officers and the cabinet member that they were on top of it.

Q550 Simon Danczuk: But your last chief executive did say you were a bully. He told this Committee that you were a bully.

Roger Stone: I find that strange, but I cannot argue with that.

Simon Danczuk: You cannot argue with it.

Roger Stone: No.

Q551 Simon Danczuk: It is strange, because whatever your attitude is towards this, the truth is that hundreds of children were raped whilst you were leader of Rotherham council and the buck stops with you; you effectively did nothing about it.

Roger Stone: I do not agree with that, but at the end of the day—

Simon Danczuk: They were not raped.

Roger Stone: No, that is not what I mean. You are trying to put words into my mouth. I have not said the word “raped”. They were sexually exploited. The 1,400 young people that Jay has gone backwards—

Simon Danczuk: You do not think they were raped.

Roger Stone: I do not know whether they were raped. They were sexually exploited.

Simon Danczuk: Just to be clear for your benefit, children cannot consent to sex.

Roger Stone: I accept that.

Q552 Simon Danczuk: So therefore it is rape. Let me just make another point. Could you remind the Committee and, indeed, the people of Rotherham for what reason you received your OBE in 2009?

Roger Stone: As far as I understand, it was for political services to Rotherham.

Q553 Simon Danczuk: Yes. For your service to Rotherham. Reflecting on that now, knowing what we do know and following the apology that you have given, do you not think it would be right and proper for you to return that honour?

Roger Stone: No.

Q554 Simon Danczuk: You do not think your behaviour has brought the honours system into disrepute.

Roger Stone: No. No, no, no, no. The reason for that is that I do not accept a number of the things you have accused me of, at the end of the day. At the end of it all, it is not just about the politics of Rotherham; it is about all the other things that were done in Europe, nationally, regionally and internationally.

Q555 Simon Danczuk: You think people have to campaign to get the honour removed from you, rather than you just giving it back.

Roger Stone: If that is what they want to do, that is what they will do.

Q556 Chris Williamson: I will just move on to your Deputy Leader, Jahangir Akhtar. I just wonder if you could say whether you had any conversations with him about child exploitation.

Roger Stone: The conversations where he wanted to be a lot stronger in some of the things that were happening with the cabinet member for children and young people, yes.

Q557 Chris Williamson: Were you aware—and this is something in the Casey Report, so you may not be—that some members and officers said that they were frightened of Jahangir Akhtar? Were you aware of that?

Roger Stone: No. I thought Jahangir got on very well with the officers that he worked with. He was responsible for IT prior to him being responsible for finance. I did not get that at all.

Q558 Chris Williamson: Is that the first time you have heard that suggestion made?

Roger Stone: I cannot say that it is the first time I have heard it, because if you walk about the council and—like we were—have lunch with everybody at lunchtime and talk to them and all that business, there would be some people. But Akhtar was the only cabinet member that was elected by the group. He was not appointed by me; he was elected by the group. The deputy leader was always elected by the group, so that the group had got an input into the cabinet other than us going back and reporting to the group. I cannot understand why people would be saying that they were frightened of him, because if they did not like him they could have de-selected him.

Q559 Chris Williamson: Possibly. In terms of the councillors of Pakistani heritage, it has been suggested that they had a disproportionate influence on issues that affected their community, such as the taxi trade.

Roger Stone: That is not true. If you read the Jay Report, even in the Jay Report, she says that that did not have any influence on decision making in any way, shape or form. They did what I did. I saw everybody as people in Rotherham. They saw everybody as people in Rotherham, whether they were white or whether they were Asian or Pakistani. The problem with that, I believe, is that we always used the terminology of “Asian” rather than “Pakistani”.

Q560 Chris Williamson: Casey is quoted here as saying that: “There was a sense that it was the Pakistani heritage councillors who alone ‘dealt’ with that community... There was a sense that Pakistani heritage members were handed a ‘community leader’ role by white councillors who weren’t sure or didn’t want to deal with the issues around the Pakistani heritage community.” Is that not correct, then?

Roger Stone: I do not believe that is correct. At the end of the day, we had Mahroof Hussain, who had the portfolio for community, whether it be white or whether it be Pakistani. I spent a lot of time going round meeting a lot of the women in Pakistani groups and whatever. I mentored a Pakistani lady who eventually became the first Asian councillor elected in Rotherham. We were all working together. We were all trying to manage the way that we went forward. There were times that if there were police problems or whatever, the police would go to either Akhtar or Mahroof first, for them to help them in their community. At the end of the day, it was a working together.

Q561 Chris Williamson: Were you at all worried or concerned about being potentially called a racist?

Roger Stone: Me being called a racist?

Chris Williamson: Yes.

Roger Stone: I have been called a couple of things this afternoon, but not really. At the end of the day, I am not a racist.

Q562 Chris Williamson: The suggestion is that maybe influence was given to members of Pakistani heritage—perhaps more influence than they were entitled to in that sense—to deal with issues relating to that community. There is perhaps a feeling that maybe that was done to avoid the accusation of racism if that was not allowed to happen.

Roger Stone: No. The most times I heard racism was probably in council meetings when they were accusing the Conservative members of being racist. Whether they were or not, that is for them. I do not think there was racism. I do not think there was a problem with the Pakistani heritage at the end of the day, because we were all working together. No matter how we looked at it, we were working together, because the only way to take it forward was by working together, being open and being transparent. I do know that, no matter what you do, there are anxieties in a group where some people believe that there are more immigrants in the town than there should be. Whether they are unhappy, I cannot change that. I could not do anything about that, even though I accepted that they were their anxieties. We were always trying to ensure that we were working together, and Akhtar, Mahroof, Shaukat and Shabana, who were the four Asian councillors, did everything possible to ensure that we worked together.

Q563 Chris Williamson: Were you aware of any racism amongst councillors—other councillors holding racist views?

Roger Stone: I do not know whether I would call it racism. There may have been some comments made. “Racism” is a word that is used quite often when it should not be used. I would not say that I agree with that.

Q564 Chris Williamson: Again, Louise Casey says that “some councillors held racist or wholly outdated or inappropriate views”. Would you accept that some councillors held inappropriate views?

Roger Stone: Possibly. Who they were I do not know. Possibly. There were one or two, as I have said, who believed there were more immigrants in Rotherham than there should have been. That was for other reasons. Whether they told Casey that, I do not know.

Q565 Chris Williamson: Were those views not challenged, then? If not, why were they not challenged?

Roger Stone: Challenged by whom?

Chris Williamson: By yourself.

Roger Stone: Again, we had a situation where we had got cabinet members that dealt with all those areas. If there were arguments or questions that came on racism, the cabinet member would pick that up. If the cabinet member could not sort that problem out, it would then come to me and to the cabinet.

Q566 Chris Williamson: Which cabinet member would deal with racist views or inappropriate views, then?

Roger Stone: It would have been Mahroof Hussain.

Q567 Chris Williamson: So you would delegate any issues about that to him, and if there was anything that he felt it necessary to report back to you, then—

Roger Stone: Yes.

Q568 Chris Williamson: And did he ever report anything back to you along those lines?

Roger Stone: No.

Q569 Chair: The accusation that has been made is that, for fear of being called racist or the threat of being called racist, people were being told, "You do not raise issues about how Pakistani men deal with the sexual exploitation of young white girls. You do not go near that, because if you do, you will be called racist." That is the key issue that has been raised.

Roger Stone: That is not correct. It is trying to remember. There were quite a few white councillors who used to shout "racist" across the council chamber and wherever; it was not all Pakistani. I can tell you there was no way at all that racism would have interfered with any decisions that we took.

Q570 Chair: It is not particularly people have been accused of being racist, but the idea that people would be accused of being racist if they raised and pushed concerns about what some Pakistani men were doing to sexually exploit white girls in Rotherham.

Roger Stone: Akhtar and Mahroof always said publicly that they ought to be locked up. They were the two Asian people that were

cabinet members, and one thing that they did quite regularly was to put their heads above the parapet and say, "This should not be happening. If it is wrong, they want locking up."

Q571 Chair: What both Jay and Casey are saying—Jay as well as Casey—is that they believe there was such a culture in the council that people felt not able to come forward and push those issues because they always felt there was a sense in which Akhtar in particular would not allow that investigation to happen into men in the Pakistani community.

Roger Stone: I did not find that. I did not find that at all. The one thing I am not is racist.

Q572 Chair: Nobody ever raised those concerns with you.

Roger Stone: No.

Q573 Chair: Never.

Roger Stone: No.

Q574 Chair: No councillor came up to you; no officer.

Roger Stone: Well, if we were having lunch or met in the corridor and somebody said, "He's played up hell with me"—that sort of thing took place, yes, but nobody came and physically complained to me about racism. Nobody came to me and physically complained to me in any way, shape or form about bullying.

Q575 Chair: Did anyone come and say, "There is a problem of child sexual exploitation. Look what these men in the Pakistani community are doing. We are not allowed to push to get something done about it."? Did anyone ever come and say that to you?

Roger Stone: No. To be honest with you, coming from me, that is rubbish, because child sexual exploitation was key, but we were being dependent on the executive director, the cabinet member for children and the chief executive, and the police. If you look at the inspections that we have had in Rotherham, most of them will tell you that we have, from 2009 especially, "improved", "improved", "strong leadership" and taken it forward. Child sexual exploitation was at the top of the agenda, but it was being taken in part the same as other areas were being taken in part, whether it was housing, whether it was economic regeneration, or whatever.

Chair: We will come back to the reports in a minute.

Q576 Mark Pawsey: Roger, there is one thing that has bothered me and other members of the Committee as we have gone through, and it is that you became aware that child sexual exploitation and rape of young children was taking place in Rotherham and you had got one part of the council, or somewhere where young people could go to be listened to and to get some support, and where evidence was being gathered about what was going on—that was called Risky Business—yet in 2011, you closed it down. Why?

Roger Stone: No we did not. We did not close Risky Business down. Risky Business was incorporated into looking after children within the council, and the people that were in Risky Business still operated within that context. Risky Business was not closed down. Part of the reason for that was that there was a special case review on Child S, I think it was—the girl who was murdered in Rotherham—and in that report it was stated that Risky Business and the people working in Risky Business needed more management. It was incorporated into the local authority—it was not a political decision; it was a managerial decision, dealing with budgets and everything else—but still to operate within the confines of the authority.

Q577 Mark Pawsey: So, Risky Business was failing.

Roger Stone: I can only go on what was said. Risky Business at that time, it was suggested, needed better management.

Q578 Mark Pawsey: Why did you not give it better management?

Roger Stone: They did. They gave it better management.

Q579 Mark Pawsey: You did not. You closed it down. Its identity disappeared; it got lost within children's services. The one place that young girls in Rotherham could go to where they might get half a chance of being listened to no longer existed.

Roger Stone: It did, because Risky Business was not closed down. Risky Business worked within the council and under the management of the executive director. What people were finding at that time was Risky Business was really still operating as Risky Business, because at the end of the day, the people—

Q580 Mark Pawsey: Are you telling us that if a child who felt that they had been taken advantage of or abused wanted to go somewhere and they were previously able to go to Risky Business up until 2011, there was somewhere that would welcome them with open doors?

Roger Stone: There was. There was someone that could talk to them. But the children may not have been as happy.

Q581 Mark Pawsey: The children may not have been as happy.

Roger Stone: In hindsight—and I have no problems with saying this—probably the incorporation of Risky Business into the council concept was misguided and it could have been done differently.

Q582 Mark Pawsey: So, that was a mistake.

Roger Stone: Yes.

Mark Pawsey: You accept that was a mistake.

Roger Stone: It quite obviously was a mistake if the girls would only talk to people in Risky Business.

Q583 Mark Pawsey: In your view, did it lead to more children being raped and abused sexually than would have otherwise been the case?

Roger Stone: No. Well, how can I answer that? The only way I can answer that is by saying to you that one of the things that happened within Risky Business and the authority was that the people that were running Risky Business before coming into the authority, in a number of meetings with voluntary groups and whatever, were saying that the girls were coming to them; they were not putting it through the process that was laid down because they were saying that the girls only wanted to speak to them. That is why I am saying what we did was misguided and it ought to have been done differently.

Q584 Mark Pawsey: There were a couple of operations that took place: Operation Central and Operation Czar. Operation Central was thought of as having been successful—it led to convictions—and Risky Business were involved in that, but the second operation, Operation Czar, was not successful because Risky Business were not involved. Did that not signpost to you that this closing down of Risky Business was a mistake then?

Roger Stone: No. I go back again. The number of things that take place in a local authority, I cannot keep my finger on everything and I become dependent on the professionals. There were professionals that advised that Risky Business come into the authority. It was not just for child sexual exploitation, which I accept; it was also for budgetary problems, even though through the years I always put more money into Risky Business until it came into the authority. So, I cannot really answer that.

Q585 Bob Blackman: I appreciate that you cannot necessarily know everything that is going on in a local authority at any one time. Could you characterise your relationship was with senior officers—how you got briefed and understood what the services were doing and how it was operating?

Roger Stone: Until this meeting today, I thought it was very good. I have always had a good relationship. I have had a good relationship with the chief executive, who—you have surprised me today—you have told me called me a bully. That does surprise me. I thought I had a good relationship with senior officers.

Q586 Bob Blackman: Forget the relationships. I understand that. How would you get briefed on what was going on in the various different services? Did people come to you and say, “We need to tell you, leader, about this; we need to tell you about that,” or did you say, “I want to have a look at this.”?

Roger Stone: If I explain how we worked, on a Monday the chief executive met the four senior directors. On a Tuesday afternoon, I had what I called the leader’s meeting, where there were no minutes taken—it was the only non-public meeting that we had—where cabinet members could come, sit down and explain if there were problems or whatever and put them on the table, so that we could take it up into cabinet or into group. That is how the information—

Q587 Bob Blackman: For example, did you have a risk register of particular issues affecting the local authority on some sort of traffic-light-signal process?

Roger Stone: We did in the early days, and I am sure that they still do now. It is six—

Q588 Bob Blackman: But you were leader for 11 years.

Roger Stone: No; 10.

Bob Blackman: 10 years, then. Did you have this risk register with a traffic-light system all the way through?

Roger Stone: We had a risk register, and it was based on traffic lights, and it was based on targets that had to be set that we had to sort out and whatever. Yes.

Q589 Bob Blackman: At what stage, then, did you realise that your council was failing children? As Mr Danczuk has said, children were being raped and this was going on for an extended period of time. This is

not something that happened overnight; it was going on over many, many years.

Roger Stone: 16. The reason we are sure it is 16 is because the police had decided that they were going to do three internal inquiries for 16 years. I am sure people who have been on local authorities will know that we are brainwashed to work year on year with budgets, so each year we thought that what we had been doing the year previously had been okay because it was not flagging up in any way, shape or form, and we continued the next year. Jay went back 16 years and multiplied the number, which came to 1,400. I am sure that we are no different to most other councils. If they go back 16 years, they will probably find that, as I am sure you have got in the written evidence that I gave you—we have researched that. At the end of it all, whether it was more or whether it was less, one sexual exploitation is one too many.

Q590 Bob Blackman: But this is not one case. This is a series of cases, as you say, going back 16 years, pre-dating your leadership—we are not saying that you were leader for the whole duration. But you are saying to us—and I want to be clear—that you had a risk register or something like that and on that you had a traffic-light warning system.

Roger Stone: Not at the beginning.

Q591 Bob Blackman: Not at the beginning. When was that introduced, roughly?

Roger Stone: At the beginning, child sexual exploitation was not on the targets that we had to achieve.

Bob Blackman: Forget the targets.

Roger Stone: Well, that was the risk.

Q592 Bob Blackman: Yes, but in an answer to an earlier question, you were saying that when you became leader you were concerned about this. The task force was set up, which met a few times and then seemed to disappear. Did you not then think, "This is a serious risk. We are getting reports from all these people that there is a problem, yet it is not something that keeps coming up in meetings."?

Roger Stone: Going back to it, it did not disappear.

Q593 Bob Blackman: We know it did not disappear, but what I am getting to is: what was done about it?

Roger Stone: As far as I was told, the meetings that were taking place were taking place even though they were not keeping minutes. They were supposedly keeping an eye on what the problem was and were telling everyone—all of us.

Q594 Bob Blackman: Let us be clear. You are in the position now, newly elected as leader, many years ago—

Roger Stone: Still learning.

Bob Blackman: Still learning—absolutely—but that is the one time when you can ask naive questions: “What is happening about this? What is happening about that?” Are you saying that despite the fact you were concerned about this, because you set up a task panel, which did some work and then that faded away, you thought, “Everything is okay.”?

Roger Stone: No, because the chief executive, the executive director and the cabinet member, who were running the meetings, and the people from the voluntary sector were still meeting and still discussing child sexual exploitation—at that time I think they were talking about grooming more than child sexual exploitation—and the responses that were coming back when questions were asked were, “We are on top of it.”

Q595 Bob Blackman: “We are on top of it, but it is still going on.”

Roger Stone: Well, even Jay could not stop it in Glasgow when she ran Glasgow.

Q596 Bob Blackman: But the key point is that under your watch, “This is going on, but we’re on top of it, and that’s acceptable.” I just want to be clear what your mood was in trying to resolve this problem. This is a really serious problem, with young children’s lives being affected for the duration of their lives as a result of what happened to them, but for 10 years under your leadership this was going on.

Roger Stone: I do not know what else you would expect me to do. All the inspections—Ofsted and the other inspections; I cannot remember the names of them—which to us are Government-controlled inspections, were coming in and inspecting and saying that it is improving; “You are getting better,” “You are moving up the path towards...” One of the problems that people have got to understand is that nobody will be able to knock out child sexual exploitation, because a lot of it is done by family members in the homes. It is awful. At the end of it all, I could not stop what was happening, but we were trying to make it less and better and moving towards it getting better. Whether people accept it or whether they do not, if you look at the

number of children that are registered for child exploitation today in Rotherham, it is a lot less than what it was.

Q597 Bob Blackman: The fact that one is abused is too many.

Roger Stone: I understand that, but if Jay, who has done the report, could not stop it in Glasgow when she was in Glasgow, how do you think that I am going to do it?

Q598 Bob Blackman: Let us look at what Jay found in terms of her report. Over the period of time, the frequency and pattern of failure is there from the year 2000. I accept you were not in charge in 2000, but clearly, from the time you were leader, there is frequent criticism in every single inspection report over vision, leadership, effective management, the core assessments for children—that is highlighted in no fewer than seven reports. That clearly is not a position you could defend, surely.

Roger Stone: The only ones that I can defend are the ones that have come to us and said that there was improvement, good leadership and strong leadership. A lot of the reports, the same as the one that I have got here, are reports that would not come to me; they would have gone to the cabinet member who had got delegated powers. They had their cabinet meetings—we had a system of delegated powers—where they could make their decisions, and if there was a problem they would then bring it to me into the leader's meeting and then to cabinet.

Q599 Bob Blackman: But you are getting all these reports. We do not have time now, but if we went through all these various different reports, all these inspections that have taken place over an extended period of time during the time when you were leader, they all criticise the council, the council's management, the services being provided and the protection for young children. These are all fiercely critical of what was going on, yet it appears that you were just sitting there saying, "Well, okay. You are telling us we are on top of it. That is okay, then; we will move on to next year." That does not seem to be reasonable to me, and I do not think it would seem to be reasonable to the public.

Roger Stone: The only way that I could operate was by being dependent on professionals. If there was a bad report that came in and I got involved—I remember one, where they got into special measures. We did not have a chief executive at the time; one had retired and we were waiting for one coming in. I organised a meeting and I said to the executive director and her staff, "We need to get out of this as soon as possible, and if you cannot do it, I will get somebody that can." If you want, that is bullying. That is me saying, "We are not happy with that." To be fair to her and her staff, we came out of special measures in 11 months.

Q600 Bob Blackman: Yes, but young children were still being raped during that period. We have already established during our inquiry that despite the fact you came out of special measures the problems were still endemic in the organisation.

Roger Stone: There is no way I can answer that, because I cannot stop it. There is no way I can answer that. I cannot stop it. All I can do is try to make it better and attempt to try to stop it, which is what we did. We had to be dependent on the professionals—that is the professionals that worked for the council and the professionals that were doing the inspections by the Government.

Q601 Bob Blackman: It appears from where I am sitting, and I guess where other people are, that Rotherham produced lots and lots of reports and lots and lots of reviews, but nothing really changed, because this problem existed all the way through this whole period of time. How do you answer that charge?

Roger Stone: I cannot answer it. I cannot answer it, because you are right; all councils have more and more meetings and become debating societies. That is why they appoint people who become strong leaders and have to make decisions, who then get accused of bullying and a culture that does not work.

Q602 Bob Blackman: Despite your strong leadership, nothing changed, from what we are hearing. From the evidence that we have seen, nothing really changed.

Roger Stone: That is not correct. My written evidence highlights inspections that took place.

Q603 Bob Blackman: So, young children are no longer being abused in Rotherham. Is that what your position is?

Roger Stone: No, it is not my position. Of course they are. They are working towards it. I am not there now; I have not been there for six and a half months.

Bob Blackman: I accept that you are no longer the leader.

Roger Stone: I am not there now. Seeing as Mr Pickles has taken away the democracy of Rotherham, maybe the commissioners will give you a better service than you think we did.

Q604 Bob Blackman: We will wait and see. I think we would all want to see democracy restored to Rotherham as fast as possible, but also confidence that services are being delivered to protect vulnerable

children. The one thing I just want to finish on is how the decision was reached to hold the Jay Review. Did you take that decision?

Roger Stone: I know what was said in this Committee by Paul, who was my deputy, which was not quite right. Bear in mind I am not supposed to be listening to anybody or coming up with any decisions. The discussion that Paul had with myself and Akhtar was on a suggestion from the chief executive that we probably ought to do a—

Q605 Bob Blackman: So, the chief executive recommended and then, as you quite rightly say your deputy said, you resisted the idea.

Roger Stone: I did initially.

Q606 Bob Blackman: You did not think it was a good idea to do that.

Roger Stone: I had initial issues because the worry that I had got was that it was just going to be a back-tapping, because everybody thought that we were doing okay. Before Jay, I got £25,000 out of the LGYH to hold a conference in Rotherham for all Yorkshire and the Humber authorities to attend to talk about sexual exploitation. That was the conference that I invited Keith Vaz to.

Q607 Bob Blackman: Just so we are clear, did you resist the Jay Review, or did you finally decide, “Okay, yes, we are going to do this.”? How did that decision come about?

Roger Stone: Paul said that he thought it would be better if we did an inquiry. I went down into the cabinet room and there were five cabinet members in the cabinet room. I asked each one of them individually, “Do you think we should do an inquiry?” and all five of them said yes, so at the next cabinet meeting we moved that we would hold an independent inquiry. The difference is that it would be totally independent. As I said, Jay used a PR and a marketing company that got the report. None of us got it; we did not see it beforehand. That is one of the things that annoy me about the denial situation, where people are saying that they are in denial. Of course they are in denial. They are in denial of the number. We were all stunned with the number, at the end of the day, over 16 years. But they never got a copy of the Jay Report, so the councillors could not look at it, assess it and then come back and make any suggestions. That same afternoon that it came out, Jay had organised—I am sure with Martin—the press conferences to talk about it. Then, straight after that, Casey was shoved in and as a result of that three or four senior officers left, which meant you were taking the experience out, so it was inevitable what the response was going to be.

Q608 Bob Blackman: The very final thing. Have you ever met any of these young children—who are now probably adults—who were raped, and personally apologised to them or sought to find out any evidence from them as to what went on?

Roger Stone: No. I do know that Paul, after I had resigned and stepped down, asked for their names and addresses, so that he could write to each one and apologise, but the names and addresses were never forthcoming.

Q609 Bob Blackman: So, in terms of, for example, young children that potentially were in the care of Rotherham council, did you ever take any evidence from those young children at all about their experiences whilst in care?

Roger Stone: I did not, but they did.

Q610 Bob Blackman: You did not think as leader you should involve yourself in that.

Roger Stone: We did an exercise where we had children from the care homes that followed councillors around for a day. I had a young girl following me round. But no, I did not—

Q611 Bob Blackman: About the experiences of care and maybe what things they would like to see improved or what things could be done to assist them.

Roger Stone: It was Shaun previously, and Paul following Shaun, that visited the care homes on a regular basis, talked to the staff and talked to the people.

Q612 Bob Blackman: Did you ever visit care homes?

Roger Stone: I have been a couple of times, yes, but not in the context of talking to people about that. It was when they wanted me to visit, the same as I visited the schools when they wanted me to visit different schools. It was Paul who was wanting to do that.

Q613 Bob Blackman: So, even though, over the duration of your leadership, this was a serious problem, you did not think you should go and see any of these care homes, any of the schools or any of the people affected.

Roger Stone: No, because I was dependent on the professionals and the cabinet member, who were doing that regularly.

Q614 Simon Danczuk: We have spoken about your smart, strong political leadership of Rotherham council. We have talked about the senior management team in Rotherham. We have talked about the cabinet system and how it worked in Rotherham. We have not yet spoken about the scrutiny committees that existed in Rotherham. Why did they fail to help identify the problems in relation to protecting children in Rotherham?

Roger Stone: I do not know that answer. I cannot answer that, purely and simply because, when we first started scrutiny Rotherham, was an exemplar. Cath Saltis ran scrutiny in Rotherham, and Yorkshire and the Humber used them to set up scrutinys all over Yorkshire and the Humber, then health. They were doing no different at the end. They were criticised for not talking about child sexual exploitation. I know that a number of the councillors that were in there were complaining that they had had meetings about child sexual exploitation; they had discussed it. I cannot answer your question.

Q615 Simon Danczuk: As leader of the council you would have responsibility for ensuring that scrutiny was well-resourced, was officer-led and had a strong support system in place.

Roger Stone: It was well-resourced. It had senior officers that worked with it. The councillor who was overseeing scrutiny—that was where the chairs of the scrutiny bodies met—was always extremely keen on things going to scrutiny. Before we had cabinet, it mixed and matched a little. In the early days, the overseeing scrutiny chair attended cabinet meetings, but we had a meeting beforehand if there was anything that was serious. Then the overseeing scrutiny chair changed and it came to another overseeing scrutiny chair, who did not want to attend cabinet but wanted to sit down with me and go through cabinet papers, and then eventually attended cabinet. The overseeing scrutiny chair, who was accompanied by the officer that was in charge of scrutiny, attended the meetings and discussed the issues, and so I am really surprised at what comes out about scrutiny.

Q616 Simon Danczuk: Let me surprise you some more, then. Louise Casey said that scrutiny “was under-resourced”. That is her words. Casey was “told that [Roger Stone] decided what went to the council’s cabinet, and that issues came to the Labour group only afterwards and then finally to a scrutiny committee”. It is also worth noting that “at one stage there was an instruction...that no information could be given to scrutiny without the agreement of the Lead Member”—that is the cabinet member. That is a very different picture to what you paint, is it not, Roger?

Roger Stone: I do not know whether that is right.

Q617 Simon Danczuk: It is another example of where it is all wrong, is it, and you are right?

Roger Stone: No; I do not know whether that is right. I did not stop anything going to scrutiny. What I stopped was where scrutiny was making the decision that cabinet should have made. There is a difference.

Q618 Simon Danczuk: Let me say this. Mr Blackman identified a number of reports from Ofsted and others that were carried out during the course of your time as leader; we have had the Jay Report; we have had the Casey review—hundreds of pages of evidence from hundreds of different people, all pointing and suggesting that you were part of the problem in terms of Rotherham. That is quite clear. There is lots of evidence suggesting that you were part of the problem, but you do not accept any of it. It is as though you were operating in a parallel universe in relation to everybody else at Rotherham.

Roger Stone: You are telling me things today that I have not heard—I have read, but I have not heard. I had an extremely good relationship with all the people that I was working with. That is why I am worried about what you are saying and stating.

Q619 Simon Danczuk: On reflection, Roger, do you not now accept that you were not really fit to be a council leader?

Roger Stone: No.

Q620 Simon Danczuk: You think you were fit to be a council leader.

Roger Stone: It all depends on how you look at it. If you want to be a council leader that does not get criticised, then you do not do anything. If you want to be a council leader that wants to get things moving and do things differently—which is what I did in a lot of other areas—then you are going to get criticised.

Q621 Simon Danczuk: Let me finish on your attitude towards the articles by the award-winning journalist Andrew Norfolk that appeared in *The Times* from 2010. It is fair to say it appeared on the front page of *The Times* six separate times between 2012 and 2013. These are alarm bells going off, are they not?

Roger Stone: On what?

Simon Danczuk: Andrew Norfolk wrote extensively about child rape in Rotherham from 2010 onwards whilst you were leader. What did you make of that?

Roger Stone: At the end of the day, that is a paper that is writing. I cannot make anything of it. I talked to the people that were dealing with that at that particular time and depended on the professional advice that was being given to me by all the people at the top of the authority.

Q622 Simon Danczuk: They were all saying there was not a problem; "Andrew Norfolk is making it up."

Roger Stone: No, they were not saying there was not a problem. What they were saying was that, "Andrew Norfolk is highlighting this, but we know about this and we have got it in hand. We are on top of it. The police are doing their inquiries; we are doing ours." That is what was coming out at that particular time.

Q623 Chair: Did you never ask them why people were not being taken to court and prosecuted?

Roger Stone: We have asked many a time why people were not being prosecuted, and what we were told all the time was that the Crown Prosecution Service did not believe that they had got enough evidence. If I go back to when I was a ward councillor, I can remember a discussion I had with an inspector on drugs. I asked him why the druggies were not being arrested, because the people in my ward were complaining about this, and he said to me, "We have to make sure that it is a done case, because the worst thing that could happen is that we take a drug dealer to court and he gets off and goes back into the area." My question, which I asked, was: were the police passing on the information to the Crown Prosecution Service or were they not, or were the Crown Prosecution Service saying they did not have enough evidence? I think you will find that the police in South Yorkshire are now going to re-open 80 cases in Rotherham to look at those cases again that were turned down. That says to me that the cases were being put by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service and they did not think there was enough evidence.

Q624 Chair: Did you never ask, then, why, having had the success of Operation Central, nothing more had happened? Did you never seek to explore why evidence was available to be used in that operation but then completely failed with Operation Czar, which came a bit later?

Roger Stone: The second one.

Chair: Yes.

Roger Stone: I did not understand. If you look at the numbers that were sexually abused, there must be a lot of people that could be criminally charged even now. I do not know whether that is happening—I would not do, six and a half months out of it—but we asked on many occasions about the—

Q625 Chair: Did you ever get proper answers? Some of the reports we got from Joyce Thacker when we questioned her about whether she properly reported to councillors were so general and non-specific about what was being done you would not want to rely on them to reassure you of anything.

Roger Stone: I spoke to the senior police officers concerned, and they were telling me that at that time they could not get enough evidence together.

Q626 Chair: Yes, but one of the problems with Operation Czar was the way evidence was undertaken, because Risky Business then was not operating as an independent entity that young people could trust. If someone had really pushed why Operation Czar had failed and Operation Central had succeeded, would a trail not eventually have gone back to a failure in the way that Risky Business was established and then changed?

Roger Stone: I would not have assumed that at that particular time.

Q627 Chair: No, but it seems to me that no one is coming forward with any clear information. Everyone is assuming something is being done and yet there are no reports indicating what is being done at any stage in this.

Roger Stone: According to the information that I got, they were doing certain things. They were not prosecuting people, but they were looking at taxi drivers, looking at hotels and trying to put prevention in at particular times. But every time it was asked, there was not enough evidence.

Q628 Chair: Do you think you were let down, then, by your professional officers and, indeed, by your cabinet members in this area for not properly advising you of what they were not doing as opposed to what they said they were doing?

Roger Stone: I do not think they were doing nothing. They were doing the same as I was doing; they were being dependent on the

professional officers that worked with them and also the professional people that came from the police.

Q629 Chair: Do you think, in essence, what you are saying to us then is this was a collective failure of an organisation and you as leader therefore accept responsibility for that collective failure?

Roger Stone: I have accepted responsibility for everything else, so I will accept responsibility for that.

Q630 Chair: Just looking back over your time as leader, do you think in this regard you could have done anything different, or you would have wanted to do anything different if you could have started again?

Roger Stone: Probably, yes. We would have probably strengthened Risky Business. We would have probably put Risky Business out there to do the job that they had been doing, rather than assume that we could do it within the particular authority, because they were a good unit in the early days; there is no argument about that. As to doing things differently, if I had a magic wand, I would send all this away; nothing would have happened. Probably one of the things I would do differently, knowing what it is like today, is not be a councillor.

Q631 Chair: But maybe what you might think about doing differently is, when you had the task-and-finish group and those early seminars, to have wanted more very specific reports from your cabinet member and from your officers about exactly what they had done to deal with this appalling situation, which in the end they did not deal with properly. Would that be fair?

Roger Stone: At the end of the day, the chief executive at the time was a good chief executive, and I trusted and depended on him.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us this afternoon.

Roger Stone: Thank you, gentlemen.