The Queen’s Speech 2017

Debate on the Queen’s Speech – Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill, victim support and courts

The Children’s Society’s analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales also found that 16 and 17 year olds are at the highest risk of being a victim of a sexual offence. For these young people it is important to recognise the links between situations of domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation.

Strengthening the law around domestic violence and abuse

In recent years, there has been increasing evidence and awareness of the prevalence of abuse within teenage relationships. Data from the Office of National Statistics showed that women, and especially younger women, were more likely to be victims of domestic abuse than other demographic groups, for example, 12% of young women aged 16 to 19 were victims, for the time period year ending March 2014 to year ending March 2016. In comparison, 6% of all adults and 7% of young men aged 16 to 19 were victims of domestic abuse for the same time period. Given the prevalence of domestic abuse within teenage relationships, we support the Government’s previous decision to widen the definition of domestic abuse to include 16-17 year olds. This age group are amongst the most likely to be victims of domestic abuse and are particularly vulnerable.

There is compelling evidence of the serious long-term impact of emotional abuse and neglect on older young people. We welcome that the government has recognised this both through the introduction of a new offence of coercion in domestic abuse in the Serious Crime Act 2015 and through amending Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 in relation to children under 16 who experience emotional neglect. We would urge the Government to review how the introduction of this new offence is being used, in particular the scope of the current offence which does not respond to the fact that 16 and 17 year olds can often face the problem of coercive relationships outside the family home. We also believe that there is a lack of recognition that 16 and 17 year olds can be victims of emotional abuse and domestic violence in the context of family relationships and would urge the government to review the need to extend the child cruelty offence to all children under 18.

We welcome the definition of domestic violence being made statutory through the introduction of a Draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill and a commitment that the Bill will ensure sentencing reflects the life-long impact that abuse can have on a child. 50% of children in need

episodes recorded domestic violence as a factor in the child needing statutory support\(^2\). It is vital that more therapeutic support and pathways to mental health provision are introduced to support children who are both victims of domestic abuse and witness such abuse in the home.

Domestic abuse is also linked to cases of child sexual exploitation. Child sexual exploitation can take place in many forms, and can appear from the outside to be a consensual, intimate relationship between the victim and abuser. In particular, in the ‘boyfriend model’, young victims often believe that they are in a loving relationship, but this is in fact part of the grooming process and will lead onto to abuse and exploitation. It is for this reason The Children’s Society have been calling for greater powers for the police to intervene early. We have been calling for the extension of Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) to cover vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds to protect them from child sexual exploitation which can enable police disrupt grooming relationships before they escalate.

**Supporting victims of crime**
We welcome the Conservative manifesto commitment to enshrine victims’ entitlements in law, and ensuring that child victims of sexual violence are treated fairly and compassionately by the judicial system. The provision of advocates with specialist training to support these children is also welcomed.

Between 1 October 2015 and 31 September 2016 54,000 sexual offences against children under the age of 18 were recorded by the police. Only around 16% of offences reported where the investigation finished resulted in charges, summons, community resolutions or cautions against the perpetrator. For offences that did not result in action against the perpetrator the most common reason was evidential difficulties as a result of the victim not supporting the police. This was the situation in around 27% of cases. The percentage of cases that are closed due to evidential difficulties as a result of the victim not supporting the investigation increases with the victims’ age. This outcome was reported in 1 in 5 cases where the victim is a child under the age of 13, just over 1 in 4 where the victim is aged 13, 14 or 15, and just under 1 in 3 where the victim is 16 or 17. This shows the need for police, witness services and the court system to develop skills working with children as witnesses, particularly adolescents\(^3\).

**Questions for the Minister:**

- Will the Minister confirm that all rights for victims currently included in the Victims’ Code will be enshrined in law?
- Will the Minister commit to ensuring the police have all the tools they need to disrupt violence and exploitation against children, particularly children aged 16 and 17, in the creation of a new domestic abuse civil prevention and protection order regime?

*For more information please contact Lucy Capron, Public Affairs Manager on lucy.capron@childrenssociety.org.uk or 0207 841 4494*

---


\(^3\) This data is obtained from an FOI of police forces done by The Children’s Society in March 2017.