

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

STATEMENT ON VICTORIA CLIMBIÉ INQUIRY

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the Victoria Climbié Inquiry.

The report of the Inquiry is being published today. It is now available in the Vote Office. I am grateful, Mr Speaker, for your agreement that Victoria's parents should have had advance access to a copy of the report.

My Right Honourable Friend the Home Secretary and I established the Inquiry in April 2001 under the chairmanship of Lord Laming, formerly the Chief Inspector of Social Services. We are both extremely grateful to Lord Laming and his advisers, for producing a searching and detailed report and recommendations.

Words in a report can never be enough for a family whose child has died in such terrible circumstances. I am grateful to Mr and Mrs Climbié for seeing me last week and allowing me to express, on behalf of the House and the country, the sorrow we all feel at the death of their beloved daughter, Victoria. Anyone who has had the privilege to meet Mr and Mrs Climbié cannot fail to be struck by their quiet dignity in the face of what happened to Victoria.

I hope the report provides them with some comfort as it seeks to answer the questions any parent would ask: what exactly happened? what went so wrong? what needs now to change to prevent services which are supposed to keep children from harm, failing in the way they failed Victoria so badly and so repeatedly?

Lord Laming's inquiry lasted more than a year. His report runs to some 400 pages. We will study its 108 recommendations, with care. Today, I will outline the Inquiry's findings and the Government's initial views. We will make our substantive response to the report as part of the Green Paper on Children at Risk which we intend to publish this Spring.

Victoria Climbié was part of a large, loving family living in the Ivory Coast. Her parents had agreed she could come to Europe in order to be educated. This was not about giving Victoria away; it was about giving Victoria an opportunity. All they wanted – as any parent would – was for their daughter to have the best education. Instead, she suffered the worst cruelty.

Victoria arrived in Britain with her great-aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao, in April 1999. Within a year she was dead – murdered by the people who had taken the principal responsibility for caring for her: Kouao, and her boyfriend, Carl John Manning. Both are now serving life imprisonment.

The cruelty experienced by Victoria before her death is the stuff of nightmares. Manning told the trial Kouao would strike Victoria daily with a

shoe, a coat hanger and a wooden spoon. She would hit her toes with a hammer. Victoria's blood was found on Manning's football boots. He admitted hitting her with a bicycle chain.

Victoria's final days – in the depths of winter - were spent living and sleeping in a bath in an unheated bathroom, in her own urine and faeces, bound hand and foot in a bin bag.

Despite valiant efforts on the part of NHS staff, Victoria died of hypothermia, after months of abuse, on February 25th 2000 at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington. She had 128 separate injuries to her body. She was just 8 years old.

Mr Speaker, it is a shocking but sad truth that around 80 children a year die from abuse or neglect. While a civilised society must do everything it can to protect children, sadly a few adults will always manage to perpetrate abuse, not least because those who do are, by definition, secretive and manipulative.

What makes Victoria's case so appalling, however, is that while the unspeakable abuse she suffered took place in secret, behind closed doors, Victoria herself was never hidden from the authorities and the agencies empowered by Parliament to protect children.

Victoria was known to three housing authorities and involved with four social services departments in Brent, Ealing, Enfield and Haringey. Despite receiving allegations she had been abused none of the councils even managed to undertake a proper assessment of her needs. Social services did nothing to help her.

Victoria was known to two separate child protection teams of the Metropolitan Police. Despite being told she had probably been deliberately harmed, they failed to investigate the alleged crime. The police services did nothing to help her.

Victoria was referred to the specialist Tottenham Child and Family Centre managed by the NSPCC. Despite marking her case as urgent they failed to take any action to see Victoria. The NSPCC centre did nothing to help her.

Victoria was admitted to two different NHS hospitals – the Central Middlesex and North Middlesex. Despite suffering scalding to her head and face and other evidence that staff saw of beatings and abuse she was discharged and returned to her abusers. The NHS did nothing to help her.

Between April 1999 and February 2000, on more than one dozen occasions the relevant services had the opportunity to intervene to protect Victoria Climbié. More than twelve times in ten months they failed to do so. This was not a failing on the part of any one service. It was a failing on the part of every service.

As Lord Laming says and I quote: “The extent of the failure to protect Victoria was lamentable. Tragically it required nothing more than basic good practice being put into operation.....doing the basic things well saves lives.... Victoria died because those responsible for her care adopted poor practice standards.”

Lord Laming considers that the current statutory framework for child protection set out in the Children Act 1989 is basically sound. I take little comfort from that. Sound legislative policy and guidance is frankly useless unless we can be sure that it is implemented effectively and consistently.

Those who take on the work of protecting children at risk of deliberate harm, of course, face a difficult and challenging task. As Neil Garnham QC told the inquiry, “Hundreds of children benefit every year from efficient and timely intervention by social workers, police officers and hospital staff. We would do children like Victoria no favours if we demonise entire professions as we seek to understand and remedy the weaknesses and deficiencies highlighted by a single case.”

But whilst public servants should enjoy our support they should not expect our excuses. There were failures at every level and by every organisation which came into contact with Victoria Climbié. There were problems with staffing and with resources. In Haringey the council was spending substantially less than the SSA it had been allocated for children and families. In Brent the council was spending just half of what it had been allocated.

Lord Laming rightly describes as breathtaking the unwillingness of some of the most senior people in these agencies to accept that they were in any way accountable for these failures.

And it is his concern with this lack of accountability that leads Lord Laming to recommend change through the creation of new national and local structures for services for children and families. Lord Laming rejects proposals to separate child protection services but calls for better co-ordination from top to bottom.

Mr Deputy Speaker it is an all too familiar cry. In the past few decades there have been dozens of inquiries into awful cases of child abuse and neglect. Each has called on us to learn the lesson of what went wrong. Indeed there is a remarkable consistency both in what went wrong and what is advocated to put it right. Lord Laming’s report goes further. It recognises that the search for a simple solution or a quick fix will not do. It is not just national standards, or proper training, or adequate resourcing or local leadership or new structures that are needed. It is all of these things.

In recent years there has been a renewed effort to improve safeguards for children: the Protection of Children Act 1999; the Care Standards Act 2000; programmes like Quality Protects and Sure Start; new work on systems for identifying, referring and tracking children at risk.

Alongside the fuller response we will include with the Green Paper in the Spring, I can tell the House there are important steps I intend to take immediately.

First, the Inquiry is highly critical of the local services that failed Victoria. Since her death each has been subject to review. Some have been restructured. Some staff have been disciplined, others dismissed. In the light of the Laming report it will be for each employer to determine if further action is necessary against individuals including those in senior managerial positions. In the meantime the Home Secretary and I are asking the inspectorates responsible for health, police and social services to undertake further joint monitoring of these local services in North London to provide independent assurances that standards are improving.

Second, the Inquiry concludes that in all agencies there was a low priority given to the task of protecting children. The Home Secretary has made Child Protection a priority through the national Policing Plan. He has asked Chief Constables to review force child protection units and consider how to action the recommendations of the report and reflect them in their local policing plans.

Additionally, I am today writing to all chief executives in local health services and local authorities emphasising their duties towards vulnerable children and the need to reflect them in their budget decisions. Social services budgets will rise by an average of 6% in real terms in each of the next three years. NHS budgets will rise by nearly 7%. Extra resources should help employ more staff, including an extra 5000 social workers, at a time when applications for social work courses, which fell for almost a decade, are now rising.

Third, the report highlights inadequacies in the training of frontline professionals. Training for police officers is already being reviewed and we will ensure that Lord Laming's recommendations are fully taken on board. Social work training is also being fundamentally overhauled. From September, a new three year social work degree will be introduced to raise the standards and status of the profession. It will focus on assessment, communication and working with other professionals – the areas where Victoria was so badly let down. The Home Secretary and I also intend to ask the professional bodies responsible for training police, social services and NHS staff in child protection to oversee a review of training needs including a better focus on inter-agency training.

Fourth, the report highlights the failure of agencies to adhere to common standards in the care of children. I believe the Laming report re-emphasises the need for new national standards to which all local health and social services can work. I can tell the House today that I intend to publish the first part of those standards – covering the care of children in hospital – next month and the remaining standards by the end of the year.

Fifth, the report says there was confusion about guidance on aspects of child protection. Within the next three months I intend to secure the replacement of

all the existing local guidance with new, shorter, clearer guidance which will reach every one of the 1 million professional staff dealing with the safeguarding of children. I also intend to simplify the wider range of Children Act guidance. It currently runs to over 1,500 pages. It covers 15 volumes. Some of it is out of date. Our intention is to reduce it by 90%. To make it available in a single volume. And to update it on a regular basis.

Sixth, over half of Lord Laming's recommendations are aimed at correcting repeated failures in basic professional practice. We are today issuing a checklist of these recommendations. Police, health and social services are being asked to guarantee that, within the 3 month deadline demanded by Lord Laming, these basic elements of good professional practice are in place.

Seventh, the report says there was a fundamental failure to translate good intentions into good practice. The Home Secretary and I have, therefore, asked the relevant inspectorates to supplement their planned joint inspections with a new programme of further visits to verify that these elements of basic good practice good are being implemented particularly where there are concerns about local services. We will also consider whether further powers are needed to intervene earlier and more effectively.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, Victoria needed services that worked together. Instead the report says there was confusion and conflict. Down the years inquiry after inquiry has called for better communication and better co-ordination. Neither exhortation or legislation has proven adequate. The only sure-fire way to break down the barriers between these services is to remove the barriers altogether.

Fundamental reform is now needed to pool knowledge, skills and resources to provide more seamless local services for children. I am, therefore, today inviting health and social services and other local services, like education, to become the first generation Children's Trusts. These pilot Children's Trusts will mean local services for children are run through a single local organisation. We will explore a range of models including Children's Trusts that could be led by local authorities and others that could be established as new public interest organisations drawing in the expertise of the community, private and voluntary sectors. In future, services for children must be centred not around the interests of any organisation but around the interests of the child. Nothing – no existing organisation, no existing structures - should be allowed to stand in the way.

We will consider Lord Laming's recommendations for further structural changes in the Green Paper.

Mr Deputy Speaker these reforms cannot be the end of the matter. If some good is to come out of this tragedy lasting change must come out of it too. Lord Laming is determined that is what should happen. The whole Government shares that determination.

Victoria's parents asked for nothing more for their daughter than the opportunity of a better life in our country. I am deeply sorry that she did not get that simple chance.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we can not undo the wrongs done to Victoria Climbié. We can though, seek to put right for others what so fundamentally failed for her. That is what Lord Laming's Report demands. It is what the Government is determined to do. I commend the Laming Report to the House.