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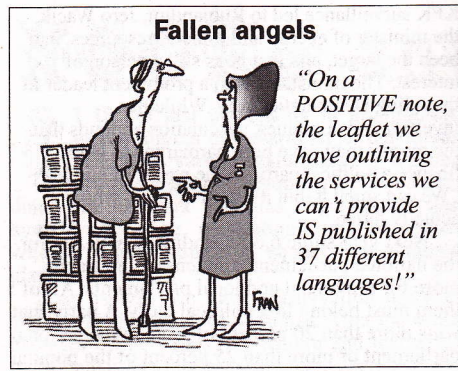
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ROTTEN BOROUGHS

AT THE SHARP END

AT LAST Rotherham council is to launch an external investigation into its failure to protect children from sexual abuse. It follows the announcement by South Yorkshire's police and crime commissioner (PCC) of an independent inquiry into how the force and Crown Prosecution Service did – or did not – deal with abuse allegations.

No doubt the investigator will make an appointment to interview the PCC himself, Shaun Wright, who from 2005 to 2010 was Rotherham council's cabinet member for children and young people's services – so he should have been aware of what his department was dealing with.

The investigator might also fly to Australia to interview someone whose name has been overlooked in connection with the scandal: Dr Sonia Sharp. She was "strategic director of children and young children's services" at a time when girls were being groomed and sexually abused by gangs of Asian men.

In 2008 Rotherham won an award from the *Local Government Chronicle* for the performance of its children's services. Dr Sharp, bathing in the success, was headhunted by Sheffield city council to fill a similar post at £140,000 a year. She said at the time: "I feel we have achieved a huge amount to ensure [Rotherham's] children and young people achieve their potential and get the best possible start in life."

In the same year, Razwan Razaq, then 28, was having sex with two 13-year-old girls. He was one of five Rotherham men jailed in 2010 after being convicted of sexually abusing three girls.

Social workers had been aware for years that groups of Pakistani-origin men were grooming girls. They knew for six years that a teenage mother, 17-year-old Laura Wilson, murdered in 2010 for bringing "shame" on the families of two men who had used her for sex, was at clear risk from gangs. It was revealed at the trial of her killer that social services had received information about adults suspected of targeting her from the age of 11.

So from 2004 to 2010 it was acknowledged that here was a youngster at risk. Dr Sharp was in post at Rotherham from 2005 until the summer of 2008, when she moved to Sheffield. In March 2012 she left for Australia to take on a similar role in the state of Victoria. Six months later the news was full of horror stories of long-term child sex abuse in Rotherham. What excellent timing.

MONEY TO BURN

COUNCILLORS in Norfolk who want to ditch a £600m incinerator project are finding it difficult to get straight answers from senior officers, who were the driving force behind the unpopular plan. A Tory administration was ousted by a Labour / Lib-Dem coalition in May, but opposition to the burner cuts across party lines.

Councillors who want to see the contract scrapped fear officers will go behind their backs and adopt a revised plan from incinerator giant Cory Wheelabrator. At a recent meeting they pushed for a motion making it clear that councillors now call the shots on the deal, not officers. But the

meeting was told by head of law Victoria McNeill that that "could expose the authority to challenge" – which councillors took to mean Cory could hammer it for even more compensation if the project was cancelled. The meeting voted not to proceed with the motion.

Three councillors were unhappy with the lack of detail McNeill had offered and arranged a meeting with her. They claim that when she realised they were all anti-incinerator she cancelled it and booked herself a month-long holiday!

Officers at Norfolk have form when it comes to the clarity of advice to councillors. Earlier this year chief executive David White was offered redundancy when the council decided to alter its management structure. Officers had reported that it would only cost £35,000 to let him go, so councillors OK'd that. But when accounts were published it was revealed that the full cost of redundancy, pension contributions, holidays and pay in lieu of notice was three times that – more than £106,000. Ain't life grand!

● PEOPLE who turned up to enjoy some cultural fun in Chester last week in the form of Sir Peter Blake's Art Bus – his "flamboyant and groovy" travelling gallery – were bemused to see a traffic warden step up and slap a parking ticket on it. Cheshire West and Chester council (CWaC) had known about, and approved, the visit since April. Coming next, an installation: "Arses and Elbows".

THE HEI WEI INN

THE landscapes that inspired John Constable are no longer enough to encourage visitors to the Stour Valley in Essex. What this lovely part of the world needs, according to a senior official at the county council, is a Chinese-themed "visitor centre" to entice coach parties of Chinese tourists.

A public inquiry begins next month into developer Stephen Bunting's plan, in cahoots with a "major Chinese corporation", to build a £12.6m "tourist centre" at Horkesley Park, next to the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty.

In evidence to the planning inspector, Mr Bunting says the Chinese have offered to throw in a £1.5m garden and year-round programmes of Chinese entertainers and "cultural events", all to obtain a "platform" for future business in Essex – with no apparent thought of financial gain!

Locals have been fighting the scheme since 2001. It has twice been rejected by Colchester borough council on planning grounds and because of the harm the traffic generated by 300,000-plus additional visitors would do the countryside. But Mr Bunting appends supporting letters from County Hall. Peter Manning, "head of international trade" at Essex CC, is very keen. He suggests that coach-loads of Chinese tourists, who currently speed through Essex, might be enticed to pause as they travel between better-known destinations

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