

I beg to speak to the amendments in my name in this part of the Bill, which in effect will channel the proposed powers in this Bill to positively address bullying behaviour.

I don't intend to detain the Committee for too long as others may wish to contribute and indeed others wish to move their own amendments, but I want to start by first stating a few simple statistics.

One in 3 children has experienced bullying.

One million children are bullied every week, inside and outside of school.

Bullying is the biggest concern for children, and their parents, as they grow up. As constituency MPs I find it highly unlikely that no-one in this Committee room has not had casework relating to the issue of bullying.

It is not a victimless crime. It is harmful to the victims and not only often has long term effects but can in some cases lead to tragic circumstances.

When I was at school we used to say "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me". Sadly for some that is simply not the case.

At least 20 children every year commit suicide because they are being bullied.

Research from the BeatBullying campaign group found that 44% of suicides among 10-14 year olds were explicitly linked to bullying.

I cannot imagine how bad it must be for a 10 year old to take their own life because of the actions of others. I cannot imagine the pain of their parents to discover that the death of their child was not because of sticks or stones, but words, words so painful and persistent but ultimately preventable if someone had intervened earlier.

I left school 20 years ago. It was before the internet was invented, when mobile phones were the size of a brick and still the preserve of the well off, and when a tweet was something birds did. I went to an all girls school and to bully someone was in many ways more difficult. That is not to say it didn't happen but it was perhaps less persistent. If you fell out with a friend and bad mouthed them to others you did so via notes being passed around class or you'd give them a "look" that said "I don't like you right now". Anyone who has a wife, girlfriend, daughters, sisters, nieces will know that "look". It is mastered and delivered with effect. And once administered, never forgotten...well until a new note was passed along the desks to your old friend asking for forgiveness and to make friends again.

Communication in those days was less instant. By the time you'd written a note in your best hand writing you had probably changed your mind. If you were unlucky the teacher would see the note come around, confiscate it and have you both in front of her at the end of class to work it all out.

Today's school children face an entirely different challenge. The advent of social media, text messages and other forms of electronic communication mean that not only does a vast amount of bullying take place outside of school but it is immediate, can go viral, be anonymous on occasion and can be sustained over a long period of time.

Research shows that one in 3 young people has been a victim of cyber-bullying and one in 13 experience persistent and intentional cyber-bullying which in almost a quarter of cases lasts for a year or more.

Sadly one in 20 resorted to self-harm and 3% reported a suicide attempt as a direct result of cyber-bullying.

Whatever the method, bullying is having a detrimental effect on our youngsters and something needs to be done not just to protect the victim but also to help change the ways of the perpetrator.

That is in part why I think this Bill is the perfect vehicle for including specific measures relating to bullying.

Previous objections to tackling bullying were directed at not criminalising youngsters. There is something odd about a society that will criminalise a kid for spraying paint all over a wall or knocking over a bin or kicking a ball against a wall for hours on end but not for malicious and persistent harm against another child.

The beauty of this legislation is that any perpetrator of anti-social behaviour be it an adult or a child will not be criminalised under the reform of ASBOs and instead subject to civil procedures. That does make sense and allows those who commit low level harm to not only be punished for their offences but also to be subject to positive requirements that allow them to change their behaviours before it is too late.

This is why including bullying in the legislation or at the very least the guidance to the legislation would help in both the short and long term. Research from the world expert on bullying Professor Olweus found that bullies are typically law breaking students and by the time they are 24, 60% are likely to have committed a more serious crime. An early intervention would not only help the victim but could also help change a bully's overall behaviour, saving the criminal justice system money in the long term.

Another recent objection to my amendment has come from the Government itself stating that there is already legislation that covers bullying. Well in theory that is true. With help from the Library it has been identified that, in theory, ten Acts of Parliament include possible criminal offences applicable to bullying. These are the:

Protection from Harassment Act,
the Communications Act,
the Malicious Communications Act,
the Public Order Act,
the Obscene Publications Act,
the Computer Misuse Act,
the Telecommunications Act,
the 1988 Criminal Justice Act,
Offences against the Person Act and surprisingly the Theft Act.

Colleagues might have added the Crime & Disorder Act that introduced ASBOs into that mix but there is some confusion over this. The 1999 guidance did in fact mention bullying as to what constitutes ASB, the 2002 review of ASBOs also included persistent bullying, but the 2006 guidance, which is the current Home Office guidance, does not mention bullying in its list of what sort of

behaviour can be tackled by ASBOs. That in itself is a reason why I think my amendment should be considered and included in what kind of behaviour an IPNA could be applied to.

Furthermore there is something slight contradictory in the statements that we don't want to criminalise children for bullying but then advising that there is already legislation available in which criminal offences are applicable to bullying. But then there is something even more bizarre when none of the legislation listed above is age specific and could in theory have been applied to workplace bullying, and yet it was clearly not seen as adequate protection for working adult victims of bullying so a new piece of legislation was introduced specifically to deal with that offence.

It is hard to understand why the Government are against this amendment when not only does it address the issue of not wanting to criminalise children by instead relying on the positive outcomes of the IPNA but that previously governments have done all it can to protect workplace victims of this same offence.

It is also worth stressing that these amendments would do no more than bring the UK laws to the same standard as other countries. In America 49 states have tough anti-bullying legislation. Earlier this year, South Africa and New Zealand introduced its own legislation and the Committee will be unsurprised to hear that like on so many other things Sweden has led the way and has strong legislation in place to tackle this harmful and hurtful behaviour.

Finally Sir Roger my amendments would help give extra support to the teaching profession who are at the moment mainly responsible for dealing with bullying. Given the extent of bullying that takes place outside of school I have some sympathy with schools tasked with tackling it. There are many complications for them doing so.

If you take an example; my constituency has at least 6 secondary schools within a 3 mile radius of each other and many children from different schools are likely to use the same bus to travel to and from school. If one child is bullied by another from a different school it is very difficult for the victim's school to deal with the behavioural issues of a pupil from another. Technology yet again hampers and exacerbates the situation.

Each school has an anti-bullying policy in place but while their intentions are good, their application is sometimes patchy. Furthermore they are often dismissed as pointless. The ultimate sanction for a school is to exclude a bully, probably on a temporary basis to start off with. When discussing this with youngsters recently they shrugged their shoulders and said "it is just a day off". The kids themselves don't see it as punishment so don't feel there is any deterrent for bullying behaviour. In addition teachers I have spoken to said there is no mandatory requirement to record exclusions on a pupil's record, so while an employer or FE College may learn of a child's attendance record or results there is no specific reference to being excluded.

No wonder many feel it is ok to bully others and that the victims feel powerless. That is because in many respects both are right.

Including bullying into the IPNA, ensuring prohibitions and positive requirements are applied; giving headteachers and principles of FE colleges the power to apply for the injunction under clause 4; and allowing for the community trigger and community remedy to be used for this offence, would I believe help change behaviour of those who wish to cause harm.

I shall conclude Sir Roger by saying;

“This Bill aims to diminish the extent to which honest and hardworking people are preyed on by criminals and bullies who show no regard for the basic rules of civilised living”.

They are not my words but that of the Home Secretary in the Chamber on the 9th May this year.

This Bill is an opportunity to protect the million children bullied every year, hopefully prevent future tragedies like the suicides of Ayden Olson, Thomas Mullaney, Ben Vodden and the many others who have taken their lives because of bullying.

I hope the Government has listened to my reasons for tabling this amendment, will consider it very carefully and positively and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply.

But let me respectfully say to him, warm words are no longer enough. It is time for action.