

Council approves recommendations made by the Tanner inquiry

The council today approved the recommendations in a report from an independent inquiry which is led by Susanne Tanner QC.

Ms Tanner and a team from lawyers Pinsent Masons investigated the way the council handled complaints from several its employees about abuse by a member of council staff.

The allegations were made against a senior manager in the Children and Families department of the council, Sean Bell who was charged with historic serious sexual offences against members of council staff to whom he was also related. Bell committed suicide in August 2020 as the date for a court appearance had been set in September.

Ms Tanner's report includes a number of points on which the council is advised to take action, and she was highly critical of the way two council officers, Alistair Gaw and Andy Jeffries dealt with the allegations. Both men have now resigned their positions.

The Chief Executive Andrew Kerr will report to the next council meeting with an action plan.

During her attendance at the council meeting to brief councillors, Ms Tanner referred to the behaviour of one Edinburgh councillor as "unprofessional".

No electronic copies of the full report were shared with councillors due to the sensitive nature of some of the contents. Arrangements were made for the councillors to attend Pinsent Masons' office where they could read a paper copy in the building. One councillor is said to have shouted at a junior member of Pinsent Masons staff. Behaviour such as this can be reported to the Standards Commission. The Code of Conduct includes a requirement for councillors "to respect your colleagues and members of the public and treat them with courtesy at all times when acting as a councillor".

Ms Tanner also mentioned that it had not been all plain sailing dealing with councillors who, when offered the facilities to read the report had offered excuses such as half-term, or council recess, and the law firm had to offer some evening appointments to accommodate their requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations include reforming the Council's system of investigation relating to sexual allegations, domestic abuse, physical violence, stalking or harassment, to make sure that it is independent and impartial and mandatory training for all managers on domestic abuse, coercive control and dealing with individuals making complaints of a potentially criminal nature.

They also cover improving policies and procedures relating to staff relationships and record keeping and the setting up of an appropriate redress scheme, without admission of liability, to compensate those who were abused by Sean Bell.

Chief Executive Andrew Kerr said: "Once again I want to offer my deepest sympathies to all the survivors of Sean Bell who suffered abuse at his hands over so many years, including those who came forward to speak to the independent inquiry and those who may not have felt able to do so.

“The report lays bare the extent of his abuse and the terrible and long-lasting impact it had, and continues to have, on their lives. I want to apologise to them on behalf of the Council – this should never have happened.

“The Council has now publicly discussed the report’s findings at length and accepted all the recommendations. It’s important we move quickly to put in place a plan setting out how we will implement these recommendations and I will bring this back to the Council next month.

“I want to reiterate my sincere thanks to the survivors and other participants for their courage in coming forward to give evidence to the inquiry team. I can only imagine how traumatic that must have been for them.

“We are grateful to Ms Tanner and the Pinsent Masons team who supported her inquiry for their sensitive and thorough approach to their investigation and we will do everything in our power to ensure this can never happen again.”

Council Leader Adam McVey said: “I want to thank the survivors for the courage, sincerity and perseverance in sharing their horrific experiences. I also want to apologise to them on behalf of all Councillors in light of their appalling experiences, which the independent inquiry has highlighted.

“The detailed work carried out by Susanne Tanner and the Pinsent Masons team for this report has ensured the investigation, conclusions and recommendations were survivor-led and now gives us a clear way forward to strengthen the Council’s processes, policies and practice.

“I’m pleased that, as councillors, we were able to reach a unified position to endorse the inquiry’s recommendations in full. It’s vital that we continue to work together to ensure the failures of the past cannot be repeated in the future.”

Depute Leader Cammy Day said: “The bravery the survivors have

shown in coming forward with their shocking testimonies of the abuse they experienced has been heartbreaking. No one should have to suffer as they have done and it's due to their courage, honesty and openness in coming forward that we can make changes for the future so I want to say sorry.

"Thanks must go to Susanne Tanner and her team for their thorough work and Council officers who co-operated fully with their requests for information. We have asked the Chief Executive to report back to Council next month, detailing how the inquiry recommendations will be implemented in full to ensure this cannot and will not happen again."