

Council needs a “culture change”

A change in culture is needed at The City of Edinburgh Council to ensure assaults and abuse committed by a senior social worker “could never happen again” after failures dating back 25 years.

Sean Bell, 58, was facing criminal charges when he was found dead near Salisbury Crags last August.

Edinburgh council’s Chief Executive, Andrew Kerr, admitted current policies in place should have stopped senior official Bell’s behaviour a long time before then.

Mr Kerr told a full council meeting today: “I’m at a loss why that didn’t happen.

“We have to make sure that our policies are better, but also that our practices are better.”

The survivors of abusive behaviour and sexual assaults by Bell were thanked for their courage at the meeting.

Councillors heard from Susanne Tanner QC, who led an independent inquiry into the behaviour of Bell, who had been the subject of a police investigation.

They heard that there was no evidence that the abuse had been connected to Bell’s work as a social worker, but they did concede that more victims may come forward in the future.

In interviews with nearly 100 people, Bell was described as a 'bully' and labelled as a 'sleaze' and a 'dirty creep' by several women.

Before the meeting, councillors had also been given private access to a fuller version of the report, which included accounts from others who did not want to go public with their complaints.

At the online meeting Mr Kerr apologised formally to the women who had tried to speak out against Bell but had not been listened to.

The meeting heard there was strong evidence that an "old boys' network" had protected him and that chance after chance to stop his behaviour was missed.

In a rare show of cross-party unity, councillors agreed to take forward all of the recommendations made in the report.

Council leader Adam McVey said: "Our job when presented with circumstances like this is to take actions which give us the maximum level assurance we can get that this can never happen again.

"The failures go back 25 years in dealing with this and its incumbent on us all now not to dwell simply on recent actions but to look at that entire timeline of failure of action, making sure we can respond proactively and address these issues."

Cllr Alison Dickie said one of those taking part in the enquiry had been in touch to say she hoped the meeting "would be the start of something, rather than a full stop."

Ms Dickie added: "The consequences for the survivors are long-term and far-reaching and this is not the end for them.

"I think the survivors need a sense of hope from us today – they have relived their trauma to show us what needs to

change.

“Old boys’ network, untouchable, protecting each other, victims not believed, intimidated, discredited ... these are all familiar words because they have been shared by individuals who have come to us desperate for any help.”

She, and many others, thanked Ms Tanner and her team for ensuring that the voices of victims were being heard at last.

But many members were concerned that new policies would not be enough to ensure that a situation like this could not happen again.

Ms Tanner said the recommendations for change had to be taken as a package and that together they would make a difference.

The report’s recommendations say that investigations relating to sexual allegations, domestic abuse, physical violence, stalking or harassment must be independent and impartial – and if internal investigators are used they should be audited by an outside body.

There should also be mandatory training on domestic abuse, coercive control and how to deal with complaints of a potentially criminal nature.

The report’s author was shocked at how poor the records of meetings had been and said this was an area that needed urgent improvement.

The report also recommends that an appropriate redress system is established for victims, without admission of liability, to compensate those who have been abused by Bell.

Councillors also accepted that family relationships of employees within the council should be disclosed and logged on HR files. Three of the complainers were related to Mr Bell.

Mr Kerr will bring a report to next month's council, looking at how the recommendations can be implemented quickly.

by Kirsty Paterson Local Democracy Reporter

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