

# **Inquiry critical of council and two former officers**

**An independent report has criticised The City of Edinburgh Council for their handling of complaints of abuse by a senior manager and recommends an overhaul of the council's investigations system.**

The inquiry [report](#) prepared by Susanne Tanner QC and law firm, Pinsent Masons LLP, is also highly critical of two former members of council staff, Alistair Gaw, former Director of Education and Andy Jeffries, former Senior Manager in the Children and Families Department, while recognising their long careers with the council which had "made a positive difference to numerous families in need of care, help and support".

The council began an internal investigation in summer 2020 when Senior Manager, Sean Bell, was suspended and allegations of abuse against him were reported to the police. Mr Bell was then arrested and charged with historical physical, sexual and verbal abuse. He was arrested for the second time on 21 August 2020 and charged with additional offences. He was then released on an undertaking to appear at Edinburgh Sheriff Court on 18 September 2020. His body was found on 27 August 2020 in what appears to have been suicide.

Just ahead of Mr Bell's death in June 2020 an employee disclosed to the council that he had abused her during the

1990s. The employee also said that this was not the first time she had disclosed the information to various council employees.

## INQUIRY

Following Sean Bell's death the independent inquiry was set up to determine whether the council had acted appropriately in dealing with accusations made against the former council employee (Mr Bell) over a period of years. These related to five separate disclosures.

The main focus of the [investigation](#), which has cost £654,000 in legal fees thus far, was to determine whether Mr Bell was involved in abuse and whether anyone at the council knew or suspected.

Although a further strand of the inquiry examined whether there was any misuse of public funds none was found.

Mr Bell was well known to many in the south west of the city and he worked in the Communities and Families sector of the council. The investigation established that it is probably the case that Mr Bell assaulted a fellow colleague sometime after 2010. This was reported to Andy Jeffries (AJ) who informed Alistair Gaw(AG) and the council failed to take any action such as setting up an internal investigation or making a report to police at that time.

The report reads: "...it is completely unacceptable that such appropriate action was not taken".... It is the Inquiry Team's view that the failure to take appropriate action was a failing of the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) and was in breach of the CEC's own policies that were in force at the time. In respect of the individuals involved in the decision to take no further action – namely AJ and AG – it was a dereliction of duty on their part, compounded by the fact that, as vastly experienced Social Workers themselves, they really should have

known better.”

Mr Gaw stepped down in October 2020. Mr Jeffries was first suspended in October 2020 and then resigned in September when he was shown the inquiry’s preliminary report. The council has written to the survivors who suffered abuse by Mr Bell offering the council’s deepest sympathies. The Chief Executive, Andrew Kerr, has also offered to meet them in person.

The investigating team believe that reports of Mr Bell’s behaviour appear to have been an “open secret” at the council. In addition it appears that Mr Bell became “untouchable” and that when his behaviour was challenged he worked to discredit the source of the information.

The report discloses: “Sean Bell appears to have had enormous influence in the Children and Families Department in particular, and within social work at the CEC more generally. He had worked there for his entire career, he was well-connected, moved in the right circles and, importantly, he got results. It was also suggested that Sean Bell had friends in higher places.”

In March this year the Chief Executive of the council said in answer to questions from the Lord Provost at a council meeting that around 15,000 pages of evidence had been given to the investigation team to sift through, and that there was potential for costs of the investigation rising.

While the report produced for the council is what is known as an Open Report, a fuller unredacted report was made available to group leaders of the various political parties. During last week and next week councillors may read the full report as a hard copy at lawyers Pinsent Masons offices. No electronic copies of the full report will be made available to elected members, presumably so that copies or the contents cannot be leaked.

Some details in the report are deemed too sensitive for further sharing, particularly as some of the survivors require to be protected and this need for confidentiality has apparently been made clear to all councillors.

The report makes several recommendations for improvement in handling such matters in future, including advice that record keeping must be improved where disclosures or concerns are raised by employees with line managers.

A separate inquiry into the council's wider culture continues to take evidence, also under the direction of Ms Tanner. The council has already approved a £1 million budget for both reviews.

Councillors will discuss the report and the next steps to be taken at Thursday's full council [meeting](#).