

Council's children's services subject to "serious failings"

Vulnerable children under the care of Edinburgh City Council were subject to "serious failings" which compromised their "wellbeing and safety" over a 10-year period, an investigation has found.

The local authority's monitoring officer ruled there has been "illegality, maladministration and injustice" within Edinburgh Secure Services (ESS), which provides care and accommodation for young people aged 10 to 17.

A report outlining "serious and sustained failings" has been shown to councillors. It has not been released to the public due to the "sensitive nature of the content".

However a council source who has read the investigation in full told the Local Democracy Reporting Service it reveals "physical and mental abuse of highly vulnerable and disturbed young people in the council's secure units, going up to 2020".

According to the source, it concluded there has been management failure "at all levels" and a "toxic management culture".

They added: "It also refers to the normalisation of abusive behaviour and inadequate investigation into complaints until the whistle-blower raised the alarm."

In response to the damning revelations, Conservative

councillors have lodged an amendment expressing no confidence in the council's chief executive Andrew Kerr.

Inquiries into the widespread failings were launched in 2020 after a call was made to the council's whistle-blowing hotline alleging "serious malpractice within ESS".

Safecall, which provides the service for council staff to anonymously raise complaints, then managed the investigation into the issues raised by the whistle-blower.

A brief summary of the findings was heard before the full council meeting on Thursday.

Included in the report released ahead of the meeting are 90 recommendations, some of which are associated with previous findings, which outline an "action plan to address the matters identified".

Many relate to procedures around the use of restraint techniques, the handling of allegations of abuse against staff and the vetting process for newly-employed carers.

One of the recommendations stipulates that all staff working within residential care services should "have the appropriate qualifications to practice" and should be "registered with the appropriate professional registration body and have been subject to appropriate checks".

Another states: "ESS should promote a nurturing, supportive home for young people and should work towards becoming a trauma informed environment."

A City of Edinburgh Council spokesperson said: "Following a referral to our independent whistleblowing service, an investigation identified significant failings into practices and activities within Edinburgh Secure Services.

"We want to apologise to the young people affected by this

and praise those who contributed to the investigation.

“Their testimonies helped to inform the findings and recommendations, which are now being taken forward as part of a robust and detailed action plan. Significant changes are already in place and we are confident children and young people are now safer and better supported.

“Susanne Tanner QC and her review team were satisfied that this matter, once raised, was progressed appropriately through the relevant processes and both Safecall and Police Scotland were involved, providing independent oversight and demonstrating the importance and effectiveness of the whistleblowing process.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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