

Rise in whistleblowing complaints at council after formal inquiry

Whistle-blowing complaints received by The City of Edinburgh Council rose significantly at the end of last year as scrutiny of the local authority's workplace culture was thrust into the spotlight.

Safecall, the council's external whistle-blowing service for staff to bring forward allegations of misconduct and malpractice, received 21 new disclosures between October and December, a report to councillors reveals.

It is more than double the number of complaints made in any of the other reporting quarters, with seven made from January to March, eight from July to September and seven from July to September.

The surge in the final quarter could in part be linked to the publication of two independent reports which looked at the council's organisational culture and whistle-blowing procedures, carried out by Susanne Tanner, QC.

The first report, released in October, sought to determine how the behaviour of former senior social worker Sean Bell, who was exposed as a serial abuser prior to his death whilst facing criminal charges in 2020, went unchallenged for so long.

It was revealed that Mr Bell had been protected by an “old boys network” and Ms Tanner urged the council to review its sexual abuse policy and establish a dedicated investigations unit to look into all allegations in relation to employees of a sexual nature, domestic abuse, physical violence, harassment or stalking.

A second inquiry was commissioned off the back of the findings to review the council’s overall workplace culture and support for staff coming forward with allegations.

In total, 48 complaints were made to Safecall last year – the highest annual figure since the service was introduced in 2014.

A quarter (12) of disclosures related to unfair treatment, whilst another quarter were to do with council staff’s ‘general safety’.

Six were allegations of bullying, six flagged a lack of integrity and complaints were also made about fraud, policy, reputation, substance abuse and disinformation.

Almost half (48 per cent) were regarding staff within the council’s Education and Children’s Services department, where Mr Bell worked.

The rest of the disclosures were to do with Health and Social Care (31 per cent) and the Place Directorate (21 per cent).

The council said the recorded increase in disclosures towards the end of 2021 is “encouraging and to be welcomed”, adding “It aligns with the publication of the Tanner Inquiry and Review reports to Council.”

Ms Tanner concluded that there is “not a universally positive, open, safe and supportive whistle-blowing and organisational culture” within The City of Edinburgh Council and made 50 recommendations towards making positive change.

But a group of former council employees who have used the whistle-blowing service in recent years told councillors last month the whole process had been a “whitewash”.

Ex-community programme manager at Castlebrae Community High, Christine Scott, who came forward with allegations against a headteacher in 2014, said the scope of the inquiries were “narrow and restrictive in allowing the truth to surface”.

She added this “allowed the alleged perpetrators of serious malpractice, cover-up and corruption to remain unaccountable”.

The council has agreed to spend £10 million over the next five years implementing Ms Tanner’s recommendations.

However, in a report prepared ahead of the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee on Tuesday, council officers said it will take “some time” for the changes to be “fully implemented”.

They said: “There will be a period during which we transition from the old to the new model of working.”

Officials added the council’s HR team responsible for whistle-blowing is currently “relatively small” and the same department is responsible for delivering the May elections.



Cllr Iain Whyte Conservative Group leader

Conservative group leader Iain White said: “In terms of a new policy around whistle-blowing and the early resolution

aspects, Susanne Tanner actually pretty much wrote the policy for us so it's just a matter of reviewing it, re-writing and putting it before the council for approval I would have thought.

"This is important stuff and it's not as if they haven't known that some recommendations were coming on this, it could have been anticipated."

Asked if he thinks council staff feel more comfortable coming forward with allegations following the two investigations, he replied: "I recall what those whistle-blowers who had come forward submitted in a deputation to the council – that they felt nothing much had changed, and I'm beginning to wonder whether some kind of external whistle-blowing service for all Scottish councils might be the way forward in the future.

"It's imperative that the council takes things seriously and takes all possible action if any wrongdoing is found. Because only by doing that will we keep people's confidence and improve confidence for the future."

A City of Edinburgh Council spokesperson said: "We are taking forward work on the comprehensive implementation plan which was agreed by councillors last month to improve our whistleblowing procedures and wider organisational culture. This incorporates all the recommendations in both the independent review and independent inquiry including the redress scheme to compensate those who suffered abuse by Sean Bell.

"This plan gives us an opportunity to shape our culture and to be as positive, open, safe and supportive as we can be. This will allow staff to feel confident when raising issues and make sure these are properly investigated and responded to. An update on the progress being made will be brought back to Full Council in no later than six months' time."

In the wake of the inquiry report one councillor, John

McLellan, [was referred to the Standards Commission](#) as a result of his behaviour at the offices of Pinsent Masons, the lawyers who were in charge of the inquiry. Cllr McLellan the Conservative representative for Craigentenny/Duddingston has since announced that he will not stand at the upcoming elections.

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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