

Three new major incidents reported by council whistleblowers

Three major incidents of alleged misconduct and malpractice within The City of Edinburgh Council were reported by staff between January and April this year.

Safecall, the council's external whistleblowing hotline, received 19 new complaints in the first quarter of this year, according to a report going before councillors next week. Three were labelled "major/significant", 13 were "minor/operational" and the remaining three are still to be assigned a category.

Members of the [Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee](#) (GRBV) will also be presented with outcome reports on two major investigations carried out following earlier calls to the service. It is expected, however, that these will be debated in private.

A group of whistleblowers, made up of former and current council employees, said concerns remain over the culture of the local authority despite an independent review last year – and repeated calls for a public inquiry to be held.

They said the recent calls to Safecall regarding serious cases of misconduct in the council are likely to be "historical incidents that people have been afraid to report in the past or incidents that have previously been insufficiently

investigated”.

But they also suggested the disclosures could be recent incidents because “nothing has changed in the council’s culture of abuse and cover-ups” since the publication of two reports by Susanne Tanner QC last year.

The first was released in October and sought to determine how the behaviour of a former senior social worker, Sean Bell, went unchallenged for the 20 years he worked for the council.

Ms Tanner concluded that Bell, who was exposed as a serial abuser prior to his death whilst facing criminal charges in 2020, had been protected by an “old boys network”. She 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 and stalking.

A second inquiry, commissioned after the investigation into Bell’s conduct and how it was enabled, reviewed the overall workplace culture of the local authority – and the extent to which staff are supported when bringing forward allegations.

Released in December, it found there was “not a universally positive, open, safe and supportive whistleblowing and organisational culture”. Whilst noting improvements in the culture since the introduction of a whistleblowing policy in 2014, Ms Tanner made [50 recommendations](#) towards making positive change.

A council whistleblowers’ group formed in the wake of the Tanner inquiries branded the process a “whitewash” and said the scope of the QC’s investigations were “narrow and restrictive in allowing the truth to surface”.

A spokesperson for the group added this week: “It is of little surprise that there are a continued number of very serious

allegations of abuse in the last few months. In our view this is either because these are historical incidents that people have been afraid to report in the past or incidents that have previously been insufficiently investigated. Or, despite the statements to the contrary by the Chief Executive, these are recent incidents and it's because clearly nothing has changed in the Councils culture of abuse and cover-ups that was exposed by the recent Tanner inquiries.

"Our specific message to the City of Edinburgh Council and the people of Edinburgh is that we won't stop our campaign for justice for the victims until there is a full Public Enquiry.

"It should be remembered that the vast amount of victims of such abuses are individuals that are vulnerable members of our community the council had a duty to protect."

Surge in whistleblowing

Around the time of the publication of the two reports, calls to Safecall surged with 21 new disclosures reported in the fourth quarter of last year, compared with eight in Q2 and seven in Q3. The council said the increase was "encouraging and to be welcomed".

But questions around the conduct of employees resurfaced in March when it was revealed a whistleblower's complaint sparked an investigation which uncovered "serious failings" in the council's children's services which compromised the "wellbeing and safety" of youngsters in secure units over the ten-year period to 2020.

A parent subsequently said the council's care services are "an absolute disgrace" and called on councillors to "implement real change with genuine transparency".

However, the council has said it could still be "some time" before change is "fully implemented", adding there will need

to be “a period of transition from the old to the new model of working”.

It added: “This may not match the expectations of those using or involved with the service however, who will not see wholesale change immediately.

“The Governance team continues to work with HR, Legal Services and Safecall to process and progress whistleblowing matters in the most effective way possible, however this small team also has a significant role in delivering the elected member related programme of work for the May 2022 elections.”

Update

Next week councillors will be updated on progress made acting on the 50 recommendations set out by Ms Tanner last year, which include providing whistleblowing training for all councillors, creating a system for staff to provide anonymous feedback on the conduct and behaviours of managers and establishing a new committee to scrutinise disclosures and reports.

A report published ahead of the [GRBV](#) Committee on Tuesday said: “The Monitoring Officer has put in place dedicated resource to commence work on a revised whistleblowing policy, incorporating the recommendations of the review.

“The recruitment of additional resource for the Governance Team commenced.

“Interim triage arrangements commenced, with fortnightly meetings between Governance, Human Resources and Legal Services.

“At present the existing policies, systems and processes remain in place, pending the design and implementation of new systems and processes and onboarding and training of new staff to deal with triage and investigations.”

Former Conservative councillor [John McLellan](#), who was involved in supporting and liaising with council whistleblowers throughout his time in office before stepping down at the election last month, said: “The admission that the implementation of the Tanner recommendations slipped down the priority list is quite extraordinary and will shock the whistleblowers.

“To confess that the reform process may not match expectations suggests a lack of urgency at best, and at worst complacency, and it is not acceptable to use the election as an excuse. The questions about the council’s management culture which became so rancorous at the end of the last council have clearly not gone away.

“Three new major or significant disclosures shows continued vigilance is essential, but what matters is how the complaints are handled and what they reveal. Unfortunately, all that remains confidential and will only be discussed behind closed doors, so I can’t see how the public – and the council’s staff – can be assured that everything is under control.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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