

Investigation into Criminal Justice Social Work Service after public safety fears

A whistleblower has claimed alleged mismanagement in a council department could lead to dangerous prisoners being released without being properly vetted.

But the council says an investigation found no evidence to support the claims and has dismissed fears the public may be at risk.

Members of the council's scrutiny committee are understood to have been made aware of concerns regarding the city's Criminal Justice Social Work Service (CJSWS).

The issues highlighted include claims of a culture of bullying and lack of transparency, which is alleged to have resulted in a 'lowering of standards' in the council-run service.

And there were also claims that some of the most serious cases involving murderers, rapists and child sex offenders had been mismanaged, posing a risk to the public.

This was strenuously denied by the council however, who confirmed that an investigation had been carried out into the allegations by Safecall, an independent service for council employees to anonymously report any problems in the workplace.

They said there is "no risk to the public", adding that "no evidence was found to support these allegations" and that the

report did not uphold any of the concerns or make any recommendations.

However, documents shared with councillors and seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service have raised concerns over the Safecall investigation, with claims that not all the relevant evidence presented to the whistleblowing service had been considered.

It comes after a recent report found that the council's current whistleblowing process is 'inadequate and/or not operating effectively'.

The CJSWS functions as a key part of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and works with the police, NHS and prison officers to compile reports which then assist the parole board to manage the risk of offenders being released from prison back into the community.

The service's work can involve making checks such as the distance of an offender's address to previous victims, if convicts will have any contact with children on release and assessing the mental state and rehabilitation of a prisoner.

Crucially, the CJSWS's purpose is to identify any 'gaps' in cases where there are potential issues – and reduce the risk of re-offending to the greatest extent possible.

It is understood two senior members of staff in the department raised the alarm with the council's whistleblowing hotline over alleged 'systematic' failures in the department.

Councillors and Safecall were alerted to multiple cases where the CJSWS allegedly didn't properly vet dangerous prisoners when considering their release.

Alleged failures include:

- A failure by a CJSW worker to be aware of suspected collusion between a perpetrator and a victim's relative

- before recommending early release of the offender
- The failure of another employee to enforce a court order in relation to a child sex offender
 - A case worker ignoring risk assessments and supporting the release of a rapist with ongoing psychopath and rape fantasies
 - The release of a serial rapist being advocated on the basis of 'fairness' and without regard to risk assessments
 - An inadequate level of investigation into whether a prisoner would have contacts with children in their family on release

Among the significant issues raised about the department is a 'mass exodus' in the quality of the reports that are sent to the parole board, with claims some work is 'copy and pasted' from previous cases to save time.

And while weaknesses are said to have been eventually identified 'most of the time', it is feared public protection has been repeatedly compromised by a 'tick box approach' adopted by bosses.

The concerns are also understood to have been raised with the Tanner Inquiry, which investigated concerns about the management culture within the City Council.

A source close to the investigation said: "Managers are being protected and serious failings of the council's responsibility to protect the public are being covered up.

"This secretiveness is dangerous. Serious Case Reviews have consistently demonstrated that failure to gather, share,

analyse, and properly assesses information and manage risk – can lead to increased risk to the public, re-offending, serious harm caused to children, vulnerable adults, woman, all members of the public and damage to the council's reputation and that of partner agencies.”

Police Scotland, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), Scottish Social Services Council and the Care Inspectorate reportedly expressed concern at the claims, but all considered the matters raised to be outwith their remit of investigation.

When contacted by the Local Democracy Reporting Service however, a Police Scotland spokesperson said: “We have no concerns about the management of cases by our partners at the council and continue to work closely with them.”

The SPSO said it “cannot confirm or deny if we have received or are investigating a particular complaint.”

The SSSC said the questions raised were for the Care Inspectorate to address, while a spokesperson for the Care Inspectorate said: “We have not been notified of any concerns about this service. We always take concerns raised with us seriously, consider all information given to us very carefully and respond appropriately.”

A City of Edinburgh Council spokesperson said: “These claims have been robustly investigated and also reviewed by our independent whistleblowing service, Safecall.

“No evidence was found to support these allegations and both concluded that there was no risk to the public and that no actions were required to be taken forward by managers.

“The management of offenders, and associated risks, comes under strict multi-agency public protection arrangements, involving various partners including the police and health authorities.”

The council's whistleblowing process has come under fire recently after a report said it was 'inadequate and/or not operating effectively'.

The audit, which went before the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee (GRBV) earlier this month, highlighted a range of issues including a lack of oversight over the implementation of whistleblowing recommendations, instructions not fully being followed and failure to retain evidence of changes being made.

Last year an independent inquiry concluded the council lacked a "safe and supportive" culture for supporting whistleblowers. Its author, QC Susanne Tanner, made 50 recommendations for improvement – which the local authority is still in the process of implementing.

However, a group of former council employees who have come forward with claims in the past labelled the probe a "whitewash" and "narrow and restrictive in allowing the truth to surface".

Since then, Edinburgh Council whistleblowers have led calls for a public inquiry into the mishandling of allegations of child abuse and safeguarding by local authorities, with a Scottish Parliament petition set up this month.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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Cllr Joanna Mowat Conservative councillor for the City Centre
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Cllr Jo Mowat, who sits on the scrutiny committee (GRBV), admitted the council is “not the finished article when it comes to how we deal with whistleblowing”.

“You can see that with the petition that’s going to parliament, we still have more to do on how we respond to this but it is a good thing that people come forward and I would say this is still a work in progress,” she said.

“If you don’t admit you’ve got problems, you cannot fix problems – and that is really what the whistleblowing service is there for. If we do have problems we need to face into them and improve.

“I think the council finds it very difficult – like many organisations – to get the balance of how you support staff and say it is okay to get things wrong, but you have to accept accountability.”