



**The Scottish Sunday Post, 24th October 2021;  
Inquiry:  
Bosses protected senior social worker accused  
of serial sexual abuse**

Victims condemn council for ignoring repeated reports about alleged abuser  
**BY PETER SWINDON PSWINDON@SUNDAYPOST.COM**

A network of supportive senior managers protected a social worker accused of sexual and physical abuse, an inquiry has found.

Sean Bell's bosses at City of Edinburgh Council's children and families service even arranged a collection when he was signed off from his work with ill health while police investigated allegations.

The 59-year-old was found dead at the foot of Salisbury Crags in Edinburgh in August 2020 while awaiting trial for sexual offences. His victims said the council was to blame for allowing Bell's abuse to continue unchecked.

The investigation, led by QC Susanne Tanner, found Bell's abuse was verbal, physical and sexual.

At least three witnesses were repeatedly sexually assaulted by Bell and the inquiry warned they were unlikely to be the only survivors.

His behaviour was an open secret at the council, according to the report, and Bell exploited his senior position to discredit one victim.

In a joint statement, provided to The Sunday Post, the three victims said: "We welcome the findings of this comprehensive investigation. It is a huge relief to finally be listened to and believed.

Sean Bell was a predatory, controlling, serial abuser – sexually, physically, emotionally and psychologically. His actions devastated the lives of so many – particularly women – over decades. It has been an ongoing nightmare.

“To City of Edinburgh Council, we say this – it is your fault Sean Bell’s repeated abuse was allowed to continue for so long. We urge you to implement every single recommendation in this report. Learn the lessons and never let this happen again.”

Former education director Alastair Gaw, who resigned last year, and Andy Jeffries, a senior manager in the children and families department who quit in August, are both criticised in the report.

Bell’s inappropriate behaviour was reported to his bosses on multiple occasions over many years and police should have been informed, the report said, but Jeffries and Gaw decided to take no further action.

The report said that when Bell was accused of seriously assaulting a colleague in the 2010s, Jeffries and Gaw did nothing.

When a police investigation into historic offences did begin and Bell went off on leave, Jeffries organised a collection and circulated an email among staff that said: “I have passed on to Sean the huge number of warm wishes relayed to me by colleagues and we are all wishing him a good recovery.”

Bell, Jeffries and Gaw were members of a network offering misplaced support, according to the report, which said: “If any of them were in trouble, or subject to investigation, their cases would often be reviewed by other individuals in the network. Thus, objectivity and impartiality were absent.”

It added: “The inquiry team is of the view that Sean Bell’s position within the network may have afforded him a certain level of protection.”

Conservatives local government spokesman Jeremy Balfour said there were many questions still to be answered. He said: “The SNP-Labour council must ensure full transparency is given to survivors who have been left with many unanswered questions.”

The report recommends reform of the council’s system of investigating complaints of sexual and physical abuse.

A parallel investigation led by Tanner into the wider organisational culture of the council is ongoing.

Edinburgh council chief executive Andrew Kerr said: “This report lays bare the extent of his abuse and the terrible and long-lasting impact it had, and continues to have, on their lives.

“Regrettably, it is clear from evidence gathered that senior officers of the council did not act on extremely serious disclosures by survivors, and others.”

Law firm Pinsent Masons, which carried out the inquiry, said: “From the outset, the inquiry team’s approach to the inquiry has been survivor-led.

It has engaged with the survivors throughout the process and they had sight of the closed and open reports prior to publication.”

Edinburgh councillors will discuss the report at a meeting on Thursday.