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Inquiry hears approved schools were not good environments for rehabilitation

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Lady Smith, chairwoman of the Abuse Inquiry

Networks of criminals were created around Scotland as a result of people's experiences in approved schools and the Borstal system, an inquiry has been told.

Residential childcare expert Professor Andrew Kendrick suggested that the institutions were not good environments for rehabilitation.

Prof Kendrick, emeritus professor of social work at the University of Strathclyde, made the statement as he gave evidence at the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (SCAI) on the care of children in Scotland between 1948 to 1968.

He referenced the experiences of reformed gang member Jimmy Boyle, whose memories of the system are set out in his book *A Sense of Freedom*.

The book describes his former experiences in approved schools as involving a rigid regime, where corporal punishment and violence involving young people or staff was routine, the inquiry heard.

Prof Kendrick told the hearing: "I think the other thing that comes out of his description is the way in which networks of criminals across Scotland were created because of their experience in the approved schools and the Borstal system.

"His attitude was he grinned and bore it. Those institutions weren't particularly rehabilitative environments."

Prof Kendrick, emeritus professor of social work at the University of Strathclyde, has compiled a report for the SCAI looking at various aspects surrounding the care of children in Scotland dating back more than a century.

The report drew evidence from a number of written publications.

He told the hearing how variations in practice meant it was down to chance as to whether a child had a positive or negative experience in care in the first half of the 20th century.

He also spoke of large care institutions, such as voluntary homes or orphanages, from 1900 to 1948 as “sterile” and impersonal environments.

Prof Kendrick told the hearing in Edinburgh: “There is no recognition of the need for children to have, say, personal belongings, private space.

“One thing that struck me is the extent to which cleanliness was almost seen as the absolute priority.

“Children scrubbing floors or cleaning woodwork or polishing brass, in voluntary homes and approved schools, it was a constant theme – that these institutions might gleam and sparkle but they were so, in a sense, sterile as well because of this.”

He added: “If you have large numbers of children and a relatively small number of staff then everything becomes rigid and routine, everything has to be done by the bell and everything was done by the bell.

“Children would get up, they would be marched to the shower or washed, they would be marched to breakfast, they would eat in large canteens ... in this sort of wholesale way, they would have relatively little opportunity for play and recreation.”

The witness told senior counsel to the inquiry Colin MacAulay QC the recruitment of foster carers and residential staff was done on a “very ad hoc basis”.

He told the inquiry: “One of the major systemic weaknesses is around simply the variability of practice.

“Sometimes it is almost by chance whether a child has a positive experience of care, either foster care or residential care, or they have a very negative experience.”

The inquiry, before Lady Smith, continues on Thursday.