

# Chief social worker: Child abuse was underestimated

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- By Graham Grant Home Affairs Editor



Testimony: Professor Skinner

SCOTLAND'S former top social worker yesterday admitted he 'vastly underestimated' the scale of abuse in children's homes.

Professor Angus Skinner, who was also chief social work adviser to the previous Scottish Executive, said he had failed to appreciate the 'duplicitous cover-up' of abuse by 'evil' molesters.

He said he would 'need to live with' the fact that he and others did not do enough to look out for abuse, or to encourage victims to come forward – and claimed that most social workers had lacked key childcare skills.

Professor Skinner, Scotland's former Chief Social Work Inspector until 2005, also claimed 'manipulative' abusers can switch jobs too easily, with employers failing to blow the whistle.

His testimony came at a hearing of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (SCAI) in Edinburgh, the £10million statutory probe studying evidence of institutional abuse in living memory.

He said he knew there had been abuse in children's homes, but social work chiefs had not been 'consistent' in encouraging children to come forward with claims of being molested, and ensuring staff were trained to recognise abuse.

Professor Skinner said too many staff left children feeling 'abandoned' by spending most of their time in staff rooms rather than being with the children, and in the 'majority of cases' employees lacked the 'skills, training and energy'.

In his damning evidence, Professor Skinner said he was aware of physical, sexual and emotional abuse going on.

But he added: 'I vastly underestimated how much there was. I don't know how much I underestimated it, but not a day goes by when... some other revelation comes forward, and that concerns me.'

'I don't think I was alone in underestimating the extent of abuse and in particular underestimating the evil intent and the duplicitous cover-up.'

Professor Skinner, 67, also admitted: 'We were not consistent in

'Didn't do as much as I should have'

bringing this matter out, or helping it become disclosed – by "disclosed", I mean getting children to feel empowered to speak about it and say, "This is unacceptable".'

He added: 'While I do think I did try to address quality of care issues and the question of abuse, I didn't do as much as I could and should have done. I need to live with that.'

He also claimed 'it is too easy for manipulative abusers to move from one employer to another; moreover there is an impression that some employers are prepared to let them move on – shift the problem – and that there is sometimes little rigour in taking references'. Professor Skinner also said there were about 750 staff working in childcare inspection, many of whom, he added, would be better placed on the front line, helping vulnerable children.

He said the present system whereby social workers were expected to be experts 'in all areas' was 'not fit for the future'.

The professor said he tried to bring about changes but felt others were reluctant to back him, while former Labour Education Minister Peter Peacock had disagreed with some of his ideas for reforms.

Professor Skinner said he believed the approach of some 'faith-based' care organisations had been 'faithcentred' and not 'child-centred'.

The SCAI continues today and will break later this week, resuming later this month.

