

Child abuse inquiry hears shock claims of 'collusion' to hide truth about Home Office and council 'hellholes'

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Child abuse survivors who grew up in 'hellholes' run by the Home Office and other institutions have been 'ignored', their 'complaints and accounts sidelined', the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (IICSA) heard today.

The Home Office, local authorities, their insurance companies, police and social workers who disbelieved abused children, all came under fire.

The inquiry set up by Theresa May as Home Secretary heard how these institutions had all failed shockingly to protect many of Britain's most vulnerable children who were in their care. Testimony was heard of how children reporting and fleeing appalling abuse at children homes, were disbelieved by police officers and social workers. How they were returned to "the hands of their abuser."

The preliminary hearing of the IICSA Inquiry Accountability and Reparations Investigation heard accusations that these institutions failed to keep children safe from sexual abuse. A failure compounded by accusations of "collusion" by institutions to protect themselves when as grown-ups, survivors wanted answers.

"So many people," Sam Stein QC representing victims and survivors told the inquiry, "suffered abuse within an institution and were then failed by the police, the local authorities, the Home Office and then the civil justice system, so that their abuse has been compounded and compounded so many times by what has been a widespread and decades-long failure to recognise both the prevalence of child sexual abuse and a downgrade of its overall and lifelong effect."

Professor Alexis Jay chairing the hearing, heard abuse survivors' concerns about insurance firms and councils limiting their liability for compensation for the ravaged childhoods of those in their care.

The hearing was told how unfair time limitations on compensation were for survivors as generally summoning up the courage to talk about the "hellholes" they had survived only happened after a criminal investigation was long underway.

Last month [we reported](#) how core [participants of the abuse inquiry are now finding records of their childhoods missing](#)- records vital for any chance of reparations.

Today the IICSA heard further testimony of how abuse survivors discovered files that should contain records of the notorious institutions where the child abuse took place were empty in their local authority records office. "It is possible, and indeed perhaps likely, that Devon and Cornwall County Council and its solicitors withdrew documentation that relates to these particular claims, and it is therefore possible that these documents have never been returned to the relevant archives or, indeed, to the National Records Office," said Sam Stein QC.

He read out a statement from his clients:

“We want to see all documentation between Devon County Council, the Home Office, the insurance companies, the police and our former legal representatives.

“We want to understand if there was collusion between these various groups to limit our damages in civil cases, to limit the exposure of how badly we were let down by these organisations when we were children in care...

“We want to know why so little value was put on the harm we suffered and why we were not allowed any effective role in the civil and criminal cases against our abusers. We were never given our day in court...

“This inquiry is the last chance that we and most survivors will have our day in court. As regards the Home Office, we want to know why these institutions... were allowed to operate as they did, why staff were not checked, and why were clearly unqualified staff employed to look after children.”

Sam Stein QC is representing victims and abuse survivors from the Home Office-run Forde Park secure school in South Devon, the privately-run Bryn Alyn community of school and homes for care children in North Wales, Stanhope Castle approved school, St Aidan's and St Vincent's homes at the centre of the “North West child abuse scandal run by the Nugent Care Society and the St Leonard's children's home in Hornchurch, where thousands of children were sent from a variety of London councils.

The barrister recounted how one participant recently told him:

“I'm a very personal person and don't give much away because of the hurt inside. At Stanhope, I was there for six years, and every day I was there I woke up in fear of how to get through the day without a beating and how to get through the night, how to avoid getting abused. I'm so sorry for saying this to you.”

“The effect of child sexual abuse continues remorselessly throughout a survivor's life. Very few survivors say anything different from the survivor I quoted” explained Mr Stein QC. “The hurt is inside and the hurt is felt every day.”

Sam Stein QC urged that “the ongoing, devastating and debilitating effect of abuse” should be central “when considering accountability and reparation,” and urged that the investigation hear survivors' evidence of abuse suffered in “what were, frankly, hellholes.”

Survivors were let down by a “failure by the state to adequately deal with their accounts and what happened to them.”

Mr Stein told the hearing how in the case of one core participant, a survivor of the North Wales child abuse scandal, “the social services and the police were, we suggest, aware of the abuse that he was suffering, but, sadly, the position is that he was still essentially left in the hands of the abuser.”

There were also calls today for the remit of the Inquiry Accountability and Reparations Investigation to be crucially widened.

Lawyers representing abuse victims and survivors called for the roles of the criminal justice system and police to be put under the scope too.

As Imran Khan QC explained: “the purpose of the inquiry is to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions have failed in their duty of care to protect children, and that of course, in terms of scope, state and non-state institutions are government departments, the Cabinet Office, parliament ministers, the police and prosecuting authorities.”

Sam Stein QC explained how insurance companies’ priorities could be in conflict with local authorities. When children in local councils’ care are sexually abused, the authorities should be making sure that lessons are learned so that children in their care will be kept safe in future. However, the inquiry heard, for the companies that insure them and may have to pay out, shareholders’ profits are the main concern.

Stein suggested that this conflict may inform how local authorities deal with local authorities’ liability to abuse survivors as they risked having their premiums hiked up by insurance firms.

The inquiry heard [submissions by lawyers on behalf of Zurich Insurance, MMI and Royal Sun Alliance](#) who called for “additional research” to be carried out after all the evidence is heard before any reforms of the system are suggested.