

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Peter John Ritchie

Support person present: No

1. My name is Peter John Ritchie and my date of birth is the [REDACTED] 1956 . I am 60 years old. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background of witness

2. I currently work as an organic farmer running a farm in the borders of Scotland. I also work with a non-governmental agency called Nourish Scotland.
3. I wish to state at this time that I have difficulty remembering some specific times, dates and names of people I was involved with when I did work for the Scottish Office. I was never a direct employee of the Scottish Office but worked as a consultant on short contracts.
4. The dates I want to talk about, that the Inquiry would be interested in, would be around 1993. In that year I was asked to do an inspection of Rossie Farm Secure Unit on behalf of the social work inspectorate of the Scottish Office.

Qualifications and work experience.

5. In the late 1970s I did a degree in politics, philosophy and economics. I followed this up in 1983 by doing a social work degree. In 1984 I completed the social work course and I obtained a CQSW at Swansea University.

6. In 1984 I was working as a middle manager in South Wales. I was the cultural change manager for West Glamorgan. The role was not specific to social workers or to my CQSW degree. I was with South Wales for about four years. I then moved to Bristol University where I worked part-time for two years as a project manager in a similar role. I was also working part-time as a consultant dealing with quality improvement and care in the community.
7. My contract with Bristol University finished and so I moved to Edinburgh in 1990. My wife was from Dundee and was expecting our second child. We settled down to live in Edinburgh. At that time I was doing some work for Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee universities. All the work I was doing was about cultural change and community care.
8. This is a part of my account when I am slightly confused about the sequence of events. In my role as a consultant I had been asked by the Scottish Office to do a report on Moorhead Old People's Home in Dumfries. I had some previous experience working with the Scottish Office. That inquiry was headed up by Roger Kent who was head of social work in Lothian. There had been difficulties with a previous inspection and they wanted an external inspection. I'm not positive when I was asked to do this but it was around 1992.
9. At the time of the Moorhead report the chief inspector of the social work inspectorate was Angus Skinner.
10. At this time the social work inspectorate formed part of the Scottish Office. Local authorities had their own inspection teams for regular children's homes. It was only the Scottish Office which had authority to inspect the secure units in Scotland as it was a statutory duty.
11. It was a very different culture back in the early 1990s and I was occasionally employed to do some consultancy work with the social services part of the Scottish Office. I assisted with policy for care in the community.

12. I was asked to help with the report called "Another Kind of Home" by Angus Skinner (the Skinner report). It was a report on the condition of child care in Scotland and had been commissioned as a result of various concerns about the level of care.
13. Our main task was to look at what children should expect if they are in the care of the state. It was about how we inspect children's homes, how we set the professional standards, and how to measure these standards against the expectations. I have to say at that time that my expertise was with disability and not childcare.
14. My real experience was defining quality i.e. 'This is where they are and is where they should be'. I assisted writing the eight principles that should be applied to all children in care. That formed a part of the Skinner report. I didn't do any visits I was purely there to think up a framework policy for children in care
15. I think that the Skinner report was well received by the Scottish Office. I think that it is still used this day to measure the quality of care for children and what they have a right to expect. The framework was designed to be simple, uncomplicated and comprehensive without overlapping.
16. At this stage of my career I had some experience of inspecting care services and what was required to measure the quality. In 1993 I set up an organisation called 'Scottish Human Services' which was a not-for-profit company. It was run as charitable trust with a board of trustees. It started to look at independent inspections and held seminars to try to define the role lay inspectors should have. We were keen that the people being inspected were listened to. We wanted lay people who could look at things through normal eyes and to have a different perspective on what was going on..
17. At the same time the principles and the framework was being adopted by the Independent inspection bodies which were being formed by the Scottish Office around this time.

18. On reflection, I think that the Skinner report may have been written in 1992 and the Moorhead report in 1993.

Background to the Rossie Farm Secure Unit inspection

19. I was approached by the Scottish Office. Memory tells me that they informed me that they had a statutory duty to inspect the secure units twice a year. They told me that they were overdue to do an inspection with Rossie and had no staff available to do it. They wanted me to fulfil the statutory duty and do the inspection.
20. My client was Angus Skinner but I may have been briefed by one of his team. I can't recall if my company was set up at this time or I was still freelancing. In my mind I was going to take the framework of the Skinner report to use as a means of doing the inspection.
21. I was also told that there were politics behind the inspection. Michael Forsyth was the Secretary of State for Scotland at the time. He had a difference of opinion with Angus Skinner and felt that there should be more secure units in Scotland. Angus was of the view that there were sufficient units and that the whole system was working well.
22. If the inspection of Rossie got a clean bill of health to prove that there was no requirement for change and to support his point of view
23. There was no specific message given to me to come up with a good report but I was advised of the politics behind the requirements for the report. I would not have taken this job on if I was required to manipulate the inspection or the subsequent report. I was given full authority to do the report.

24. I did not have any direct dealings with Michael Forsyth and never spoke to him.

Inspection of Rossie Farm Secure Unit

25. Rossie Farm was a place that surprised me. I thought that it was meant to be a place where children were sent when they had committed crimes or were particularly difficult to deal with. I was unaware that children had been sent there for a whole variety of reasons. I should have been more aware of this as I had a lot of experience with disabilities where people were unnecessarily institutionalised through a series of "unfortunate events".
26. The state could prevent children leaving Rossie which was unlike normal children's homes. It was a mixed sex home but predominately boys. I suspect that there were more than 20 residents but less than 50. It was run by a private organisation. It was sited in the middle of nowhere.
27. I remember that they had a very good education programme and they had a high rate of residents receiving qualifications. There were a lot of locked doors and keys but at the same time some residents would get weekend passes to go home. It wasn't a prison but it wasn't like other children's homes.
28. I can't recall the name of the man in charge but I did interview him as part of the report. I am sure that the inspection lasted about three or four days. We stayed in a hotel in Montrose. Our report was submitted within a few weeks of us completing the inspection.
29. My inspection team was made up of the four of us. My assistant was Ian Kennedy and he was a lawyer. He had previously worked as a social worker at St Joseph's Children's Home in Tranent, East Lothian and had good experience. I had worked with him previously. He had a very good analytical mind.

30. Penny was a woman who also had good experience in children's services. She had spent a lot of time working for the children's panel. She was aware how the system worked as far as sending children to secure units.
31. The fourth member of the team was called Dean. He was seconded to the team from 'Who Cares Scotland' which was starting up at the time.
32. I can't recall how the team was selected but I chose Ian Kennedy. I think the others were seconded to me as a result of me approaching their organisations for assistance.
33. In terms of evidence-gathering the team all had different roles. Dean spent most of the time speaking and listening to the young people who were resident. I can really only remember the part that I played. Ian Kennedy and I spent at least two days interviewing and inspecting records. We spent at least a day in the hotel examining the evidence gathered and applying the Skinner principles to our findings.
34. I think that I was selected because I was a safe pair of hands. There was no protocol in place but I had experience of other inspections and also teaching people how inspect places like Rossie.
35. We were not asked to inspect the educational side of things. I think that aspect was covered by HM Inspector of Education and as such did not form part of our remit.

Methodology of the inspection of Rossie

36. We had a schedule of interviewing. We spoke to all the young people as a group. This took place out of the hearing of the staff. We also invited them to see us in a one-to-one situation if they felt that they couldn't speak in the group discussion. I don't think that anyone took that opportunity. I know that Dean gathered a lot more information on his one-to-one interviews.

37. We had previously advised the staff at Rossie by letter that we were coming to conduct the inspection and how we would base the framework on the eight principles of the Skinner report. I went there with the feeling that Rossie was doing a good job. As it happened there was disparity between what we expected to find and what we found. Rossie had been described to us as the best of the secure units in Scotland.
38. We also spoke to the staff in a group discussion. We looked at a number of case files. We were asking the staff questions about what they thought their role was and what they needed to do in their role as staff at a secure unit. We were trying to understand their practices and their rules and what they were trying to achieve.
39. Neither Dean or the rest of the team uncovered any issues with regard to abuse which would need immediate risk assessment and action.
40. I recall the feeling of resentment during the interview with the manager of Rossie. Basically I got the feeling that he was saying "Who are you and what gives you the right to be here?" I did ask him about a complaints log and how it was kept and updated. He simply said that all the children were happy there and there was no need for a complaints log. This immediately rang alarm bells with me and I quickly changed my attitude. These were children who had been 'through the mill'. It implied to me that children were not able to complain through fear or that no-one was listening to them. I felt that the children were no longer in a safe place.
41. I also asked about the governance of the board of trustees which seemed to be non-existent. This also raised concerns that there was no control or supervision over the running of Rossie.
42. We didn't speak to any family members of the inmates at Rossie as this was considered to be a short-term inspection.

Findings from the inspection of Rossie Farm

43. It was felt by all the inspection team that some of the staff had the wrong attitude to dealing with children in care. There was a particular individual who was very prominent during the interview session with the staff. His attitude was that he had to let the children know who was boss. He was a male, aged about late 30's, who had the look of being ex-services. He had a doberman dog. He was a very big man and very vocal and dominant in the staff group. He was jarring. Anyone who was around at that time would know who he was. It should have been about keeping children safe.
44. The part of the inspection that I remember most about was the room known as the "single secure accommodation". The issues were about how this room was used. There was already a lot of guidance about how this should be done and how it was there to prevent children from harming themselves. It was not to be used as a means of punishment. It was clear that this room was being used to punish the children.
45. I think that I saw the single secure accommodation during our visit. My recollection is that It had a green door. It was a small room with nothing in it. It smelled of urine. There were no toilet facilities in the room. I recall that the children who spent time there had to clean up their own mess.
46. I can remember that there was a ten or eleven year old boy put into the single secure accommodation. He had thrown some food at another child and because he wouldn't apologise he was put there till he did. I think from his case notes he was there for two days. This became a punishment room and all the staff and children knew that. It was well-documented by the staff as a means of punishment and there were many of examples of it being used to punish the children.
47. The last interview was with the manager of Rossie Farm. I was very concerned about his attitude and the fact that there was no complaints book available for the

children to express their complaints. It became more apparent to me that we needed to get the report in as soon as possible so that action could be taken. There were no effective management policies in place and there was little or no governance from the board of governors.

48. I also remember flagging up the fire risk from locking children into their rooms at night. There were bars on the windows and no means of escape. I highlighted this to the staff but they didn't appear to take any guidance. I couldn't believe that they were doing this or how the fire inspections hadn't identified this issue. There was a no smoking policy but this would be very hard to enforce.
49. There was a feeling from my team and from the children that some staff were harsh in their treatment of the children. Rossie was not a good example of looking after vulnerable children and keeping them safe. The punishment of the children in the single secure accommodation was a breach of the statutory guidance and there was nothing in place to stop it happening.
50. We now had major concerns, I felt we had to flag these up to the government. I can recall that on completing the inspection I phoned Angus Skinner and highlighted our concerns about child safety. I recommended at the time that they immediately suspend the current manager at Rossie.
51. I think that the age range of the children was between nine and sixteen. They were all there for very different reasons. The management structure in place to look after these children was amateurish. A lot of these children were there because they were at risk. It should have been a place of safety. If children didn't tick the boxes for other homes, Rossie would become the next move for them as it was a secure unit.
52. There was a lot of good things going on particularly in the education field. There were children there with for very diverse reasons. There was one child who was detained at Her Majesty's pleasure for committing a murder while there were others

with learning difficulties whose only crime was running away from a children's home. Some of the children were allowed home at weekends.

Submission of the inspection report for Rossie

53. We spent a whole day in our hotel in Montrose and collected all the evidence together on pieces of paper. We applied the principles of the Skinner report. I wanted the team to provide a broad view of the content of the inspection. I wrote our report and was responsible for its submission. I recall phoning Angus Skinner and requesting a meeting with him as I felt we had identified problems. I can't exactly recall the correct sequence of events as they unfolded.
54. I do recall that my first recommendation to Angus was to suspend the manager as he was not able to perform his duties. We felt that the current manager was unable to turn around the problems we had identified.
55. I realised that the submission of my report could blow up and cause major problems for the Scottish Office. The Rossie Unit was a real amateur set-up and the manager was not up to the job. He was putting the children at risk.
56. I felt that there was a sense of urgency. When I called Angus from a mobile phone I tried to stress the urgency of a meeting to discuss the issues that I would raise in my report. I can't recall what the outcome of the call was. I suspect that he told me to come and see him on my return to Edinburgh. I got on collecting all the fragments of the inspection and completing my report. The findings were basically (a) questionable quality of care and (b) the failure of management.
57. I felt a sense of urgency that the Scottish Office should implement the recommendations as soon as possible as there were children at risk.

58. A few days later I submitted my report to the Scottish Office. I don't think that the report was what they wanted to hear. I attended a meeting at the Scottish Office with Ian Kennedy who was my assistant. At this meeting we basically got a bit of a doing. We were told that things were not quite as bad as I had reported. I think that the persons present were Angus Skinner, along with his assistants in social work - David Pia and Ian Robertson. I can't be sure that Angus was at the meeting but I am sure that he would have been aware of it.
59. The meeting took place in a Scottish Office building at the rear of Registrar House at the east end of Princes Street in Edinburgh. We argued about the findings of my report. Ian Kennedy and I suggested that the Scottish Office needed to send in their own people as the children were not safe. They felt that they were doing the right thing and we definitely received a verbal put-down. It was a robust meeting with disagreement on both sides. They felt that Rossie was the best of all the secure units.
60. After our report was submitted we received correspondence to the effect that we had exceeded our role and we were only sent there to do some fact-finding. We disputed that as we were in no doubt that we were doing a statutory inspection.
61. We managed to hold our ground and told Angus Skinner and his team that we had applied the Skinner principles and that the inspection had come up short. We again highlighted the management failures and the danger from fire risk. I recall them telling us that there was a no-smoking policy at Rossie. We tried to tell them that cigarettes were a type of currency in a lot of institutions but I can't remember their response.
62. I do remember telling them that if nothing else was done they needed to get a proper fire inspection in order to prevent a possible tragedy. The meetings and correspondence went on for a while but it was left that they would take it from there. I don't know if any of my recommendations were implemented.

63. When this happened I found it very difficult to deal with. I knew that my report was being rubbished but I felt that the Social Work Services Inspectorate team were sweeping the issues under the carpet. I felt I had a duty to the children. I had to tell someone in authority.
64. I spoke to a journalist with the Guardian newspaper and made him aware. I don't think that the Guardian showed any interest as there was no obvious headline. I had written to the Secretary of State who was Michael Forsyth. I also wrote to Donald Dewar sometime after the 1997 election again raising the same issues. I did receive a response to one of these letters which was basically a brush-off letter. I would sum up my response from the people in charge as being "Not just now".

Expectations after the inspection report

65. I thought that the Scottish Office and in particular the social work department would immediately suspend the manager of Rossie Farm. I hoped that the responses to the report would be timely and rigorous. I suspect that I was naïve in my thinking but I thought this would be done quickly.
66. When I submitted my report I think that some of the notes were also submitted to the Scottish Office. I certainly kept all the rest of my team's notes along with the draft copies of the report. I can't remember the responses to the specific points raised. There was a real tussle going on with Michael Forsyth and I didn't hear anything else about what was addressed or changed as a result of my report.
67. On reflecting about the meetings I attended I realised it was a case of shooting the messenger. They didn't like what they were hearing. They didn't believe our report. I didn't expect them to tell me that it was not an inspection of the institution but a fact-finding mission. I have no idea what happened to my report as there was no requirement to publish it in those days.

68. I felt that prior to the inspection the Scottish Office felt that we would have found nothing and that Rossie would get another clean bill of health. We felt things that we considered serious were not being taken seriously - "By our silence we were contributing to the noise".
69. I was not inconvenienced as far as my company was concerned and I did do further pieces of work for the Scottish Office. We weren't put on any list barring us from doing more pieces of work. My self-image before Rossie was that I was good at my job and any piece of work I did was done professionally. There was no tendering process at this time it was very much a case of being well-known in the field and being requested to perform these tasks.
70. All of this bothered me for several years after I wrote the report. I regularly checked what was happening at Rossie Farm Secure Unit from a distance.
71. It is possible that there is a legitimate other side to this. Unbeknown to me or the inspection team the Scottish Office may have acted on the report and without our knowledge implemented the changes at Rossie and made a difference. I knew what my remit was and to me there was no misunderstanding between what we were asked to do and what we did.

Personal Impact

72. I am probably over-sensitive to these things. It caused me a lot of grief over a long period of time. Coming from a sheltered life the people that I thought were the good guys turned out not to be so good. I found it difficult to reconcile my personal positive view of the world with what I had seen. I felt that if you sent state inspectors to look at the most vulnerable people in our society the process should be made of stainless steel and not newspapers and staples.

73. For several years I had a feeling of impotence as I was sure that I had done a good job and there was nothing more I could have done to make the changes happen.
74. I knew that if you brush something under the carpet someone will come along and find it. The Scottish Office personnel were professional people.. There was a great risk that it could come back to bite them if nothing was done. I wanted to believe that something would be done to make the children safe.


Records of the inspection

75. In 2003 I moved to a farmhouse to pursue my new career in organic farming. At that time there was a small fire in the loft of the house and it was considered safer to remove the papers I had kept there because of the potential fire risk. I also felt that I had done all I could with the report and it was time to move on. As a result I destroyed all the documents including my notes.

Other information

76. The reason that I am giving evidence to this Inquiry is not just to highlight the specific care issues at Rossie Farm Secure Unit, but also to provide a perspective on the system of inspection and governance for children's services at the time.
77. I still know and have nodding acquaintances with a lot of people that I have mentioned in this statement. I have no issues with anonymity and would be quite prepared to provide oral evidence to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

78. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed..........

Dated.....31 July 2017.....