

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Kirsten ADAMSON

Support person present: No

1. My name is Kirsten Adamson. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1970. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Qualifications / Training / Background

2. I gained my qualifications at university. I have a degree in communication studies, a master's degree in business, a post graduate diploma and two postgraduate qualifications in business type courses.
3. Prior to my employment at City of Edinburgh Council, I worked for Places for People in their care and support arm. I ran the East Craigs Project which delivered support to adults in that area. I started working for City of Edinburgh Council around October 2010. I was there for approximately nine years, until 2019. Then, I went to Orkney Islands Council for around four and a half years. Now, I work for Circle in Edinburgh which is a third sector organisation that provides emotional and practical support for children and families in poverty.

Experiences at The City of Edinburgh Council

My role

4. Social work was always an interest of mine. I never ever wanted to be a social worker, but I wanted to design and deliver services that would improve the lives of children and that was my role at City of Edinburgh Council.
5. I don't have any social work qualifications as they weren't required for my role. It was more the business aspect that I was involved in. That's not to say I didn't have some experience of social work as I was constantly around social workers and immersed in that side of things.
6. I would primarily run contracts on behalf of the Children and Families Team but latterly, once I had experience within the service, I was given projects to do. I did the redesign of domestic abuse services within Edinburgh and then I redesigned the pathway for carers when the Carers Act came into force. My job was to get the right professionals sitting round about me to work as part of a team. There was enough expertise within the council to pull people into the team to perform specific functions and roles. I would do the business part of negotiating all the contracts, getting all of the systems in place and managing the team.

Internal Review St Katharine's Report

My appointment as Investigation Officer

7. In 2013, I was a Commissioner within Children and Families at City of Edinburgh Council. There were three of us within the team and a manager. We had a portfolio of services and grants that we looked after and, as a team, we had a relationship with service providers across the city of Edinburgh.

8. In 2013, I was asked to review St Katharine's by my line manager, Ricky Dover and Scott Dunbar, a senior service manager. The conversation was more about the general culture within St Katharine's, but there had also been an investigation into a previous 'single separation' incident involving a young person. Single separation is the term used when a young person is removed from the general residential population and confined to their room for a designated period. The service manager wasn't satisfied with the outcome of the investigation, so they were looking for an independent person to go into St Katharine's to carry out a further review.
9. It was very unusual that I would be asked to do this as it was not a normal part of my day-to-day work. I was actually pulled off of the work that I did day-to-day, for around three weeks, to carry out the review. I had no previous investigation experience and I was not given any guidance on how to approach or carry out the investigation. The impression I got was that senior managers knew the culture in St Katharine's was toxic, but they couldn't prove it.
10. I knew a little bit about St Katharine's as I had done some work with Youth Justice. St Katharine's and Howdenhall were part of the Young Justice Pathway. It was also a Care Inspectorate registered service. I had a tour around St Katharine's and met some of the staff before I was ever asked to do the review.

The process of my investigation

11. Frank Phelan, a team manager in residential care, was named as the lead investigation officer (IO) in the initial investigation of the single separation incident. I don't know if he actually carried out the investigation, but the assumption I made, given he was lead IO, was that he was heavily involved in it. It appeared that Frank had not produced any final report and there was no paper trail of his investigation.
12. When I was tasked with reviewing St Katharine's, I went to speak to Frank to try to get a sense of what he'd done, why he'd done it and why there was no record of it. He just said words to the effect of, "I did what I had to do", that was it. I was given nothing. I

didn't see any papers. I even asked for transcripts, but there weren't any. There was nothing to go on from the previous investigation.

13. St Katharine's was not very forthcoming with documentation. I used to manage services that were care inspectorate registered and when I went in, they would have a documentation folder ready for me with all the policies and procedures, as well as any key documents that they thought I would need. That was the minimum expectation. Given St Katharine's had notice that I was coming in to carry out an investigation, I would have expected a documentation folder, but that was not provided.
14. I did review St Katharine's policies and procedures but I had to locate these on the council computer system. I found it difficult to get records directly from St Katharine's as their record keeping wasn't great. I asked directly for their complaints logs, but they either didn't keep any or they simply weren't made available to me.
15. I was eventually given, what I think is called a 'green slip' relating to the single separation incident. It is an internal document where staff should record details of the separation, such as duration. It is mentioned in my report, and I took a photograph of it which was submitted with my report to City of Edinburgh Council. Prior to me getting the 'green slip', it had coffee spilt on it, so it was difficult to make out. From what I could make out, it appeared to me that the handwritten notes relating to the duration of the young person's separation had been manually doctored. It was very clear that somebody had overwritten that document to change the time which was very significant in terms of the status of the single separation.
16. Other than reviewing the limited documentation made available, the majority of my time was spent going to St Katharine's to interview the relevant staff members over the course of approximately three weeks.
17. The interviewing of staff was incredibly difficult. You would think it would be as simple as going in and looking at the rota to identify which staff members could be interviewed and when. As soon as I got in, I realised there was a culture of staff members coming

in and out from other units over the course of their shifts. They wouldn't necessarily sign in, they would just appear. There was also a huge sickness within the team and a lot of that was long-term sick. Trying to get permission, depending on the sickness, to interview those people was difficult.

18. Staff interviews were one-on-one and carried out in St Katharine's. They weren't recorded, but I took handwritten notes. I would go in with a series of preprepared questions to ask. I couldn't tell you now what the questions were and, as I'm no longer employed by the council, I don't have any of my records. I didn't ask each individual the same questions. I just started with the first interview and tried to build a picture and follow the story through the interviews. Then, I retested some of the information by going back and checking my understanding of things.
19. It was an incredibly chaotic and confusing environment to try to pin down who did what and when. Within St Katharine's there are different units with staff assigned to each. You also had staff assigned to specific young people in a keyworker role, but in my experience, that wasn't apparent at all. You had this constant movement of people coming through from other units that you wouldn't necessarily expect to be there. There was no log of that movement. It was almost like a drop in. People could just come in as they wanted to. There was also so much sickness that people were constantly having to fill in. It made it very confusing, and I don't know how a young person was supposed to know who they were to go to if they had a problem.
20. The young person concerned in the single separation complaint had left St Katharine's by the time I carried out my investigation, so I didn't meet with him. He was from a family well known within the system. During the time he was in St Katharine's, his mother was seen as an absolute burden by the staff. She phoned them constantly because she was worried about her son. She was dismissed by these staff. I heard it in the language of the staff when I spoke to them. She was a mum who was worried about her son enough that she was constantly phoning. They saw this as harassment rather than worry and there was no warmth towards a mum who actually cared about her child.

21. I didn't interview any of the young people at St Katharine's. Usually, when I'm in an environment like that, I would see young people around. I was in and out of St Katharine's for three weeks, but there was not a young person to be found. I don't know if the young people were diverted from me.

Cooperation of staff at St Katharine's / Culture

22. During the review, I wouldn't say all staff and external managers cooperated fully. Some staff did and had a huge amount to say but were incredibly nervous saying it. Some avoided meeting with me for as long as possible until it got to the point where they were explicitly told they had to. The culture within the organisation wasn't a safe culture for staff.
23. Within St Katharine's staff, there were two camps with a massive split between them. There was the 'in crowd' and another which was very much on the periphery. Those on the periphery were a team of staff that were focused on the needs of the children, worried about the young people in the unit, and tried to do their absolute best. They appeared to be under a lot of pressure from the other camp to conform to the culture. That was the sense I got from speaking to the teams.
24. One of the things that sticks in my mind was interviewing a staff member, a gay man, who told me that he had a very hard time within that culture. He told me about a colleague of his who had left St Katharine's after he was pushed out by other staff. I was told that the individual who left had moved house several times due to being sent a wreath every year on his birthday. He believes the wreath was sent by staff members at St Katharine's as a result of him trying to speak up about the culture. I appreciate that information is hearsay, but I believed it was significant, and I passed it on to Scott Dunbar.
25. I recall a female staff member at St Katharine's who was in a senior or manager's position. She really was trying to do her absolute best but was under constant pressure from other staff. She eventually went off sick and then left. There was very much this

culture where those who were trying to do their best were pushed out of the organisation and had a lot of sickness.

26. I didn't go into the backgrounds of staff a huge amount during the interview process. I heard from a number of staff that the cause of this culture within St Katharine's were some very dominant personalities and a lot of staff from an ex-military background. There were concerns raised about a couple of staff members in particular. Prior to meeting with these individuals, I went to Scott Dunbar and said that I wanted to make sure that the meetings happened in the front office of St Katharine's.
27. No matter how you paint it, St Katharine's was like a prison. It was all magnetic doors, and you had to get buzzed through. As soon as you go in as a visitor, you lose your liberty. You are at the mercy of the staff and you're very aware of that. I asked Scott Dunbar to make sure that there was always someone else in the office when I met with these guys who had been named by other staff members. I'm not someone who is easily intimidated, but these individuals were big guys who had a reputation.
28. One of the individuals who concerns had been raised about was a staff member called IMB [REDACTED]. During an interview with him, I asked about the magnetic lock system and how it worked, because that was part to the single separation incident. He could have shown me the lock system on one of the doors around us, but he said I had to see it on the young person's door. This was not a misunderstanding on his part of me wanting to see that door in particular.
29. IMB [REDACTED] took me to the young person's door which meant we had to go right into the unit, and we were as far away from the administration block as you could be. When we went through, at one point he just stopped. Everything about his demeanour was letting me know that he had complete control over me in that unit and there was nothing I could do to get out of the unit. I remember really clearly thinking, if he's prepared to do this to me, an officer of the council who he knows has been asked by the most senior manager for his service to carry out an investigation, how must young people feel with this person. Him being prepared to exert that level of power over me

was quite striking. I reported it back to Scott Dunbar at the time because I didn't feel safe in that building.

Response to Internal Review St Katharine's Report

30. Following my investigation of St Katharine's, the report was presented to Scott Dunbar, and I would have sat down with him and Ricky Dover to discuss it. It's interesting because I don't really remember their response, so it couldn't have been particularly one way or the other. The only action that I do remember being taken was Alistair Gaw, who I believe was the Chief Social Work Officer for Children and Family Services, meeting with the mother of the child concerned in the single separation. I don't know if she was given a copy of the report and the only reason, I know that meeting happened was because I observed it from where I sat in the office.
31. I wasn't kept updated at all after submission of my report. I wasn't told what the next steps would be, and I had no idea whether any of my recommendations were being implemented in an action plan. I now know, anecdotally, that none of my recommendations were actioned. I don't get the sense that the report was widely circulated or that it was used for any purpose.

Record of Internal Review St Katharine's Report within The City of Edinburgh Council

32. When I submitted my report, I can't say exactly what, but something told me to keep a hard copy of it. I continued to have concerns about residential care in Edinburgh and I discussed these concerns with my colleague, Pauline McKinnon. Pauline worked in the Quality Assurance Team, and I asked her to look into residential care. She approached senior managers about that but was shut down. Given my concerns, I gave Pauline a hard copy of my report in case I was moved to another team in the council and had to leave my paperwork behind.
33. After I left City of Edinburgh Council, when I was working in Orkney, I received a telephone call from Pauline. She was carrying out an investigation into St Katharine's

and she no longer had the hard copy of my report. Pauline told me that she had looked for it on the council computer system but couldn't find it. I told her that I had submitted an electronic copy and a paper copy, along with any accompanying papers. Pauline told me that there were no records anywhere on The City of Edinburgh computer system of my report having been submitted. She also told me that Scott Dunbar had denied that I ever carried out an investigation into St Katharine's and that he, along with others, stated it absolutely never happened.

34. When I left City of Edinburgh Council, I took a copy of my report with me which is something I've never done before because it's not my property. It just sat on a shelf at my home until Pauline called me. Regardless of what senior managers thought of the recommendations in the report, it should have been preserved on the council computer system as a record. I gave Pauline a copy of my report and my understanding is that Pauline has made sure that it's now part of the records within City of Edinburgh Council.

Culture within The City of Edinburgh Council

35. My sense, at that time, was that Edinburgh Council was an incredibly closed, 'guys together', culture, even within the senior management team. At the time I was carrying out the investigation into St Katharine's, Andy Jeffries was in charge of social work services and the senior managers were Alistair Gaw, Scott Dunbar and Sean Bell. It was not easy to approach them, and you never felt that you or your opinions were welcome.
36. I had a lot of uncomfortable interactions with the senior managers. My first interaction with that culture was at a senior managers' meeting in 2010, just after I started working at the council. I was presenting a report about fostering and adoption frameworks. All the managers were sitting in this meeting, including Andy Jeffries who chaired the meeting. Sean Bell threw my report across the table. He said, *"My social workers won't be doing that."* I asked him what the issue was, and he responded, *"I don't know, I've not read it, but they won't be doing it."*

37. The senior management team were not a team that you felt comfortable sitting in a room with. We, as commissioners, would periodically go along to the senior managers meeting. We would absolutely dread going and always had to have someone in the meeting with us because it was like trial by fire. If they could humiliate you, they would go out of their way to do that, and they never challenged each other about that sort of behaviour. I never understood that attitude because we, the commissioners, were their information source and managed their external contracts. These were people that, on a one-to-one basis, we worked very closely with in designing services but put them all together and it was like going into the lion's den.
38. I don't think the submission of my report really had any impact on my relationship with senior management in the council. It was still as bad as ever. It was as if the report never happened. I raised various concerns with Scott Dunbar throughout my investigation and I was never aware of any of these concerns being taken any further or actioned in any way.

Leaving The City of Edinburgh Council

39. I left Edinburgh Council in 2019 approximately six years after I submitted the St Katharine's report. Those six years were a very odd time within the council. Peter McCloskey, the overall manager of St Katharine's and Howdenhall, was sidelined and no one could ever understand what happened. It was like he was on gardeners leave. There was no formal announcement made and no one, including him, would give an answer to why he was there. He just kept appearing in Waverly Court all the time which he had never done before. I'm certain this happened after my report, but how long after, I can't be sure. That went on for a very long period of time and people I would expect, within the teams, knew absolutely nothing about why he was there.

Impact / Consequences of the Internal Review St Katharine's Report

40. The St Katharine's report didn't have a huge impact or consequences for me at the time I submitted it. A lot of the experiences I learned about during my investigation

didn't land well with me, but I felt like I had done the job I had been asked to do and off the back of that, things were going to be dealt with. I think that was a reasonable expectation. That of course didn't happen, but at the time, I wasn't aware of that.

41. It was probably afterwards, certainly after the Tanner Inquiry, that things started to fall into place, and I felt more of a personal impact on me. After Tanner and residential care whistleblowing, my natural instinct was to question whether I should have pushed my report recommendations more and gone back to check whether changes had actually been made. It was more about failing the kids because they are utterly powerless in that environment. Despite it not being my role, I felt a lot of regret about not pushing my concerns more.
42. I know St Katharine's is a specific part of The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, but it's really hard to unpick what was going on more widely around St Katharine's. I think the Tanner Inquiry showed that the culture, within the senior management team of The City of Edinburgh Council, was so interlinked with all the services and organisations that fed off of it. It's actually quite overwhelming when I stop and try to think about what I could have done about any of this. Actually, I couldn't have done anything more because I didn't know what I was fighting against.
43. It was a closed door when you tried to report or raise concerns, in the same way it was when I tried to whistleblow about Sean Bell. It was a brick wall. When I tried to raise concerns about Sean Bell, I was told by the senior manager I approached, that there was no point as it would end my career. Unbeknownst to me, at the time, Sean Bell was actually deconstructing my career from behind the scenes. He felt threatened because I was prepared to speak up. We had no chance against the system. The system was and remains utterly toxic and I'm left with a lot of anger about that.


Helping the Inquiry

44. Nothing has changed in The City of Edinburgh Council. They say it has and it's all better, but nothing has changed. They've done nothing to implement the findings of

the Tanner Inquiry. The culture within the council allowed a lot of what happened to young people in care in Edinburgh. If we keep trying to implement change by separating and breaking it down into individual inquiries, the culture still remains. The outcome of these individual inquiries is being buried. The platform is there for that failure to continue, there's absolutely no doubt about it. We need to stop and look at the work that has been done, what has been recommended, and actually action it to protect these children who have been failed and are still being failed.

Other information

45. 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.....18 February 2025.....