

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Robert JENNINGS

Support person present: Yes.

1. My name is Robert Thomas Jennings. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1955. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background

2. I was employed at Pendeford High School in Wolverhampton for five years. It was a mainstream high school with day pupils. It was my first teaching job. Initially I was employed as a maths teacher and later on supervised PE as well, after school, as support. This was followed by employment at Starley Hall School, Burntisland, Fife for four years as a teacher. I can't remember the specific years, but I think it would have been during the mid to late 1980s. After that I worked for Fife Council for thirty-three years as a secondary school maths teacher. I retired from teaching in 2021.

Qualifications/Training

3. I have a teaching qualification in secondary education in physical education and mathematics, awarded in 1979. I also have a Post Graduate Certificate in special educational needs, awarded in 1991. I did that course at Moray House in Edinburgh. It was a one year course.

Experiences at Starley Hall School, Burntisland, Fife

The Institution / Culture

4. The institution was based in Burntisland and was an independent provider of education for children of primary and secondary school age with behavioural issues and special educational needs.
5. My first impression was of a well organised institution with a dedicated group of experienced staff who collaborated closely with local authority education and social work/care departments responsible for the placement of children. Staff worked well together and with external agencies in supporting children with a range of complex educational and educational needs.
6. The staff presented positive and enabling attitudes in their relationships with children to make them feel supported in dealing with life issues. Staff fostered an open culture so that children were aware that they could seek help at any point.

My role and recruitment at Starley Hall School

7. Whilst at the institution I taught mathematics to senior boys. Typically there would be six boys in a class. They were aiming towards a Royal Society of Arts (RSA) examination. The children would get a certificate at the end of it that they could show to a college or place of work after they left Starley Hall. I was the person who introduced that examination to Starley Hall School. After that the English teachers at Starley Hall introduced the same examination.
8. The subject-based classes were held in the mornings and institution activities or educational trips ran in the afternoons. The classes were primarily aimed at preparing children for further development opportunities, through for example, college education and training. I was also timetabled until 10 pm, usually twice a week, as after-school

support staff and supervising activities for the children. I was also on duty on one day in the middle weekend of the two-week residential cycle, along with other teaching and care staff. I would then come to Starley Hall in the morning to help the care staff to get the children up and get them to breakfast and then sometimes take them out of the school on trips or activities with the help of the other staff.

9. The recruitment for my role involved a curriculum vitae application and covering letter with referee names, from my last employer, included. I was invited for a face-to-face formal interview with SNR, FXE, SNR, KYU, and an external member from a secondary school.
10. The prerequisites for the role included a secondary teaching qualification and experience of educational work with children with behavioural challenges. I had that experience from working in Pendeford School as there I was given the classes of children who were considered the most challenging pupils for registration and teaching.
11. I cannot recall that my employment included a probation period. Teaching observations could happen at any time, but were undertaken at least once a year by a senior teacher or the headmaster. Throughout my employment at the institution, I used feedback and discussions around teaching practices to inform my continuing professional development (CPD) for professional registration. Further training and development opportunities were available through links with behavioural support units in local authority schools.

Layout and Structure

12. The school is between Aberdour and Burntisland in Fife. There were portacabin classrooms in the main grounds. There was also a tarmacked playground in front of the main building where you could turn your car round. The accommodation for the children was in the main house and some older boys were in The Lodge at the bottom of the drive. The school was in an old country house. There were dining facilities in the main building. The boys in The Lodge would sometimes eat in the main dining hall

and, as they were being taught how to look after themselves they would be supervised to make their own meals to eat in The Lodge.

Staff structure

13. The staffing structure consisted of teaching, care and support staff led by SNR and SNR. The leadership style was strong and ensured that decisions made at staff meetings, held twice a month and attended by teachers and care staff, were actioned. The staff meetings focussed on the progress of children and identification of further development needs.
14. Staff lived off-site with one care worker as a full-time resident at The Lodge. All staff had access to residential areas of the institution, but protocol saw female staff being responsible for the girls' area and male staff being responsible for the boys' area. Overnight duty staff were drawn from care staff and the same protocol applied. I didn't have overnight duty shifts at the school myself.

Recruitment of staff

15. I was not involved in staff recruitment and do not recall formal policies. I was not involved in line management or supervision of staff. The institution did not have volunteers.
16. I was not involved in training and development of staff and do not recall formal policies.

Supervision / appraisal / evaluation

17. I was not involved in supervision, appraisal, or evaluation of staff.

Policy and Strategic Planning

18. I was not involved in policy and strategic planning in relation to care of children other than through developing their individualised subject-based development plans. Plans

were developed and updated as appropriate through review of work and feedforward processes.

Children

19. Children were placed in the institution by local authorities that had exhausted behavioural and special educational needs support in their schools and specialist units. Reports on the issues and needs of children were provided by professionals involved in supporting children within their local authority environments. The content of these reports was cascaded to institution staff to inform the development of individualised learning and development plans. Children usually attended the institution for somewhere between one to six years.
20. The institution covered both primary and secondary provision and numbers totalled somewhere between thirty and thirty-five. There was usually an even split between primary and secondary numbers, however there were more boys than girls in the institution. The ratio of staff to children was between 1:2 to 1:3 depending on circumstances.

Routine at Starley Hall School, Burntisland, Fife

Mealtimes / Food

21. Children were provided three full meals per day and a supper time drink and snack. Children's dietary needs were ably catered for with specially plated meals being prepared as appropriate. Food preferences were also accommodated as nonspecialist meals were plated by staff at the dining tables.

Sleeping Arrangements

22. Accommodation at the institution was split between two buildings. The older boys were accommodated in The Lodge building to a maximum of six children. All others were accommodated in the main institution building, with the downstairs accommodation for girls and the upstairs for boys. There was a mixture of single and bunk bed provision.

Washing and Bathing

23. Showering and washing facilities were upstairs in the main building and every child was required to wash daily. Children could shower daily if they wanted, but had to shower at least twice per week. The care staff were overseeing that. The older children in The Lodge had their own showering and washing facilities.

Leisure time

24. Children had leisure time after their evening meal and had the choice to engage in indoor activities, held in the main building lounge area, or outdoor activities which were weather dependent and usually involved a team game in the main playground. This was after the main institution activities undertaken in the afternoon.

Trips and Holidays

25. There were trips to museums and other attractions, outdoor education and walking trips as part of educational activities. Every year they would go up to Aviemore on a camping trip and I went on those trips. There were no individually organised trips and no visits to an individual's home to my knowledge.

Healthcare

26. The health needs of children were primarily looked after by the institution's nurse who was supported by a local doctor as required. The nurse didn't live-in. The nurse administered all prescribed medications and parents and guardians were consulted on any change in health status.

27. Staff were also made aware of specific medical conditions and briefed by the institution nurse, and where required other professionals, about symptoms and possible impacts on a child. I was unaware of any child having to take medication to control their behaviour.

Schooling

28. The main class contact occurred in the morning sessions and involved children attending various subjects in classrooms situated in conjoined portacabins that formed a single building. Teachers were supported by care staff in managing the learning experience in the classroom.
29. Sessions were designed for the specific year group and the balance of subjects in any week was decided by the progress made towards subject qualifications. Subjects taught included mathematics, home economics, history, English, geography and computing. Teaching strategies also enabled the development of life skills.

Chores

30. Children might help serve food at mealtimes. I'm not aware of the children having to clean the school or residential area.

Visitors

31. Parents and guardians were encouraged to visit, but had to pre-arrange these with senior staff. Visits were noted in the institution logbook. Parents and guardians were able to take children off-campus with an agreed time for their return.

Review of Care/Placement

32. Children were supported by professionals on a case-by-case basis. There was always the opportunity for professionals, most commonly social workers and educational

psychologists, to meet with children alone. Any outcomes were recorded by the professional and then passed on to the institution.

33. Review meetings could be requested by any party involved in a child's care to update and discuss issues influencing the child. Any resultant actions would be recorded on the child's institution care file by senior staff and forwarded to all parties along with arrangements for any further review meetings. Senior staff would cascade information and any specific requirements to staff and oversee their implementation.
34. Discharge case meetings were the vehicle for discussions around the needs of children moving on from the institution into supported care packages, work placements, college courses, paid employment, or a return to mainstream schooling. To my knowledge the institution did not initiate discharge for any child other than for cases where a return to mainstream was the identified care and educational package goal.

Discipline and Punishment

35. Discipline could be administered by any staff member through the reiteration of unacceptable behaviours. Punishment measures could be raised by any staff member and discussed with the senior staff member on duty. Any resultant punishment was recorded in the logbook.
36. Punishment related to the removal of privileges for the day's activity sessions and considered the behaviours demonstrated. Punishment was for behavioural issues such as disrupting classes in a negative way.
37. There was a general understanding about what constituted unacceptable behaviours and this was communicated to children at start of term gatherings and facilitated by a senior staff member. Individual staff would then remind children of these behaviours as required.

38. I do not remember if there was a specific policy document around discipline and punishment.

Restraint

39. Physical and medical restraint were not strategies used at the institution. I did not restrain any children and did not witness restraint. The staff were very good at talking the children down and de-escalating their behaviour. I had to talk to children to de-escalate their behaviour. I would try to take their mind off the immediate situation and try to make them laugh. If you're laughing, you can't be angry with somebody else.

Concerns about the institution

40. I'm not aware of the school ever being the subject of concern during my time there.

Reporting of complaints/concerns

41. Complaints and concerns could be raised with any staff member who would escalate to senior staff if required.

Trusted adult/confidante

42. I was not aware of a specified confidante for any child, beyond members of their care and support team, as defined through professional roles and responsibilities. We encouraged the children to talk to the care or education staff about any personal issues.

Abuse

43. I cannot recall if the institution had a specific definition of abuse, but as practitioners I think staff had a general awareness of parameters through engagement with professional and regulatory bodies.

Child protection arrangements

44. I don't recall any formal guidance and instruction from the school on child protection arrangements in my time working there.

External monitoring

45. I was not aware of any external monitoring visits.

Record-keeping

46. The two main record keeping formats were the institution logbook and the child's institution care file. The former provided a record of each session, positive and negative behaviours demonstrated and any interventions. The care file recorded details of care plans, care team meetings and any development decisions.
47. The logbook was a physical book resource kept in the institution office that staff were required to complete to report on each class and activity session immediately after completion. All staff made themselves aware of logbook updates before commencing the day's activities and were naturally updated throughout each day as they themselves completed their logbook entries.

Investigations into abuse – personal involvement

48. I was not involved in any investigation on behalf of the institution into allegations of abuse.

Reports of abuse and civil claims

49. I was not involved in handling reports or claims against the institution regarding historical abuse.

Police investigations/ criminal proceedings

50. I became aware of a police investigation into alleged abuse at the institution when I was interviewed in relation to that investigation. I have not given evidence at a trial concerning alleged abuse at the institution.

Convicted abusers

51. I am not aware of any others convicted of abuse at the institution. I maintain my innocence.

Other Staff

KYU

52. I recall this person. I remember him as a strong leader and empathetic teacher. I did not see or hear of him abusing children.

Robert DeKoning/De Koning

53. I do not recall this person.

Robert (Bob) Taylor

54. I do not recall this person.

Angus Munn

55. I do not recall this person.

FXE

56. I recall this person. I remember him as a strong strategic influence on the institution. I did not see or hear of him abusing children.

Nigel MN Robinson Lloyd

57. I recall this person. I remember him as a professional colleague, popular with staff and children. I did not see or hear of him abusing children.

PBT

58. I recall this person. I remember him as an effective senior staff member and teacher. I did not see or hear of him abusing children.

Leaving Starley Hall School

59. I left the institution as I had a young family and wished to spend more time with them. I provided referees names to my prospective employer which was Fife Council.

Helping the Inquiry

60. I did not experience or witness abuse at the school and I do not know why people would make allegations of abuse there.

Convictions

61. I was convicted at Kirkcaldy Sheriff Court on 21 October 2021 by majority decision on the indictment that:
- (1) on an occasion between 25 January 1987 and 24 January 1988 at Starley Hall School, Aberdour Road, Burntisland, Fife [I] did use lewd, indecent, libidinous practices and behaviour towards [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] and did place [my] hand under her skirt and touch her on the leg and vagina over her clothing.
62. I was sentenced to a nine-month Restriction of Liberty Order, £2000 compensation, and SOR notification for five years.
63. I maintain my innocence.

Other information

64. 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. [REDACTED]

Dated..... 8TH July 2025