

Child abuse 'cover-up' claims after Barnardo's admits systematically destroying files



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CHILDREN'S charity Barnardo's systematically destroyed records at its residential care homes where child sex abuse occurred over three decades – but claimed to victims that files had been lost in a flood.

The organisation's solicitor made the shock admission to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry. Victims of abuse say they have been left “distressed” by the revelation that the charity had a policy of disposing of files when they shut care homes where abuse happened in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Groups representing survivors have accused Barnardo's of “covering their tracks” after the charity's solicitor admitted to inquiry chair – the Supreme Court judge Lady Smith – that they were aware of child abuse but did not recognise the need to retain records which could have been used as evidence in criminal or civil cases.

Barnardo's has denied there was an attempt to cover up abuse and insisted the charity was “acting in accordance with guidelines at the time”.

The inquiry is investigating the abuse of children in care at more than 60 residential institutions and will report to the Scottish **Government** in 2019.

The first public hearings began on Wednesday when organisations which ran homes where abuse took place were given the chance to make opening statements. Many groups used the opportunity to apologise to victims but Barnardo's stopped short of saying sorry, only admitting they were “aware” of abuse which “was not investigated at the time”.

The charity's solicitor, Graham Watson, said Barnardo's had been asked by the inquiry to provide information on seven former institutions, the last of which closed in 1994. But he

said they only retained “around 10 per cent” of “staff records or administrative or governance records”.

Stunned survivors have learned that “it was Barnardo’s practice during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to destroy those records as closures of homes came about” and “the need to retain records was not recognised at that time”.

Janine Rennie, chief executive of survivors’ charity Wellbeing **Scotland**, who is assisting people who were abused while in the care of Barnardo’s, said: “They were particularly distressed by the revelation that records had been systematically destroyed. They were led to believe they had been lost in a flood. Barnardo’s was adamant that this was the case.

“Then, on the first day of hearings, we are told that this is different. As a modern charity Barnardo’s should have known how upsetting this would be to survivors. It’s difficult to be critical of Barnardo’s because it is now a modern organisation doing good work but they should not be trying to protect themselves.”

Rennie said that as abuse was happening at the time, any fair minded person could draw the conclusion that Barnardo's could be perceived to be "covering their tracks".

She added that it was time for the charity to "to take responsibility and apologise.”

David Whelan of FBGA (Former Boys and Girls Abused of Quarriers Homes), a core participant in the inquiry, warned that the policy of destroying staff records could mean abusers are still working in the care system now. He said: “I’m shocked that Barnardo’s systematically destroyed staff records. I fear that staff who abused children and were asked to leave an institution were then free to move around the care system. Many will have gone on to perpetrate crimes in other places. Some could actually still be in the care system.”

Whelan said he felt that most people would see the destruction of records as "negligent at the very least".

He added: "They have effectively corrupted the care system by not keeping records on these people.”

Another core participant in the inquiry, Helen Holland, deputy chair of Incas (In Care Abuse Survivors), also said that most fair minded people could interpret events as an apparent attempted cover-up.

She said: “I find it unbelievable [that records were destroyed]. I think the destruction of records is going to be a really interesting factor in the inquiry. It’s certainly going to be

interesting for the survivors to find out what records were destroyed and who gave the authority to destroy the records. There are so many questions there."

She added that "an ordinary person might think they were trying to cover their tracks".

"The biggest burden I carry as a representative of survivors is whether or not they're going to get the justice they deserve. Any court system is based on evidence and people have admitted this week that evidence has been destroyed."

Speaking to the inquiry on Wednesday, John Scott QC, senior counsel acting on behalf of INCAS, said the complications of investigating abuse are "almost as extensive as the unknown number of victims". He added: "In part this is because of the loss, or deliberate destruction, of records or, in some cases, the failure to keep proper records in the first place."

Abuse survivor Dave Sharp, of SAFE (Seek and Find Everyone abused in childhood) said the records could have been used as evidence to help victims get justice. He explained: "If records are destroyed we have got to rely on the state to believe us because we don't have the evidence to say where and why, which makes it very difficult...The organisations [which disposed of records] have to realise we won't go away, evidence or not, because our lives were destroyed. And every single person in this country has a moral responsibility and a duty to find these people who did it."

Director of Barnardo's Scotland, Martin Crewe, said: "While it must be frustrating for victims and survivors to hear that a number of Barnardo's records are no longer available, the charity was acting in accordance to guidelines at the time and is in no way an attempt to 'cover tracks'. Barnardo's has a history spanning 150 years and there will always be things we would wish we had done differently or not at all. But we've learnt always to face up to our past, to be honest and work closely with survivors groups."