

Article for the post - June 2018

The head of social services in Nottingham has said there is no evidence which would suggest there was widespread historical abuse of children in its care by a large number of people.

Ahead of an inquiry looking at whether councils failed to protect children in children's homes and foster care from sexual abuse, corporate director for children and adults Alison Michalska said that while there had been abuse by individuals, there was no proof that it was more extensive than this.

"There isn't the sense that there was a paedophile ring, or that at any one time there was a whole corps of people who were harming children," she said.

"What there has been, over a 70-plus year period, is a number of individuals some of whom have sexually abused the children in their care, and others who have very inappropriately physically chastised children who were in their care."

She said that when she arrived at the city council in 2013, she began a review of previous decisions that had been made about individuals who had been under investigation - and whether a different view would be taken of it post-Savile and post-Rotherham.

For example, an underage child having sex with a man might have been considered as child prostitution, rather than child exploitation.

"Where there had been a decision made about any inappropriate relationship with children, we went back and reviewed all of those decisions, with today's eyes," she said.

She said some people had been dismissed as a result. And although this related to "tiny numbers", she said it had given a confidence that if there was a sufficient doubt over a member of staff, then they would not be allowed to continue with children.

"There's no evidence that has appeared to date that has said, 'I told X and they did nothing about it'," she added.

"It's people saying they weren't able to speak about it at the time - which is terribly sad and awful of itself.

"But as yet there is nothing that has said, 'everybody knew that 'X' was a wrong 'un and nobody did anything about it'."

The council ran children's homes in the city up to 1974, and then again after 1998.

Along with the county council, it is the subject of a three-week hearing later this year as part of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

There has already been criticism in preliminary hearings about the difficulty of accessing council records of children who were in care.

But Mrs Michalska said there was a genuine reason why in the past records weren't kept.

"You destroyed records unless you had good reason to keep them. There was no lawful requirement to keep them.

"Certainly, the lack of records has hampered people's rights to understand their own scenarios.

"It's terribly sad. These are people's lives and we've thrown away the records."

AM88

So far eight people have been convicted for offences investigated under Operation Equinox, Nottinghamshire Police's team looking at allegations of historical abuse in children's homes.

Only one of those has actually been a city council employee - Helen Logins, the wife of paedophile Andris Logins, who used her position as a team manager to access data on children who had told police that her husband had abused them.

However, the city council - unlike the county - has not yet made a public apology to victims of abuse generally.

"There's a bit of a line out there that the city council hasn't apologised, but that's absolutely not true," she said. "We've apologised appropriately, meeting with the individuals that have been affected."

"When we've met with individual victims and survivors, we've been very clear to apologise to them in person, should they have been harmed while they were in our care."

And Mrs Michalska, a former president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, is certain that the lessons of the past have already been learnt.

"The sort of behaviours that happened in those big institutions were just awful, which is why children's homes now are two or three beds.

"Do I think there's anything to learn from the care in the 40s, 50s, 60s, even up to the 80s? No, I think we've learnt the lessons.

"That's why we have small children's homes, it's why we have qualified social workers working in our units, it's why we have independent visitors, it's why every child in care has an allocated social worker as well as their key worker, it's why in schools we have designated teachers for children in care.

Looking back, the way that disciplinary investigations were dealt with in the 80s, it just wouldn't be done today. I think those lessons have been learnt.

"Now, we listen and we believe children.

"Some people might almost say it's gone too far when you think about it; there are teachers who would say they've had their career ruined by a child making an allegation that turns out to be malicious."

<https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/local-news/no-evidence-major-abuse-ring-1653723>