

# Report documents widespread abuse in British children's homes

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The *Lost in Care* report published last week by the Waterhouse Inquiry into the sexual abuse of young children in local authority care in Wales recommended a major overhaul of the system.

The 500,000 word report makes harrowing reading. This is all the more so because the hundreds of cases of abuse recorded concern especially vulnerable children—those abandoned or separated from their families, with learning or emotional difficulties—children whose lives were already tragic without the abuse that was then heaped upon them.

The Waterhouse report is undoubtedly an indictment of the present system of childcare in Britain. But even more distasteful is the thoroughly reactionary purposes for which the report is being used by the Blair Labour government and the political establishment as a whole—namely, the dismantling of state-provided childcare.

The tribunal was intended as a catharsis. It was established under the Conservative government of John Major in June 1996, after allegations that sexual and physical abuse of children in the care of Welsh authorities had been covered-up by politicians and police.

It followed more than a decade of allegations of the abuse of children in care. Only after a campaign by one social worker who had evidence of abuse—and who had earlier been dismissed from employment for raising her concerns—was a police investigation carried out in 1991. This uncovered evidence of serious sexual and physical abuse for which seven people were convicted. However, there were continued allegations by former care residents, now adults, that others had been involved in the abuse and were being allowed to escape prosecution. It was also alleged that police officers had participated in the abuse or in covering it up to protect dignitaries or friends.

In 1994 the Social Services Committee of Clywd County Council set up an investigation into how the abuse

had gone undetected for so long. Their report was suppressed on the advice of lawyers, who warned that the authority's insurers would regard it as a breach of contract, “entitling the insurers to refuse to indemnify the Council in respect of outstanding and potential claims against the Council by children formerly in its care who alleged that they had been abused”.

The tribunal, under Sir Ronald Waterhouse QC, heard how more than a dozen people who had complained of abuse had met suspicious deaths. During the 18 months that it sat, the tribunal took evidence of 259 complainants, of whom 129 gave oral testimony. It examined the histories of almost 30 residential establishments in Wales and 15 foster homes. It investigated the existence of a paedophile ring and allegations of a cover-up.

The inquiry found that there was widespread sexual abuse of young boys in particular in several of the children's residential homes in Wales during the period under review, and other instances of physical abuse. It also proved the existence of a paedophile ring which targeted young boys, and concluded that whilst “the evidence does not establish that they were solely or mainly interested in persons in care... such youngsters were particularly vulnerable to their approaches”.

The tribunal was intended to draw a line under the entire sordid affair. Social workers, care home staff, local authorities and the Welsh Office were all severely criticised. But the inquiry absolved the police and authorities of any cover-up.

Waterhouse had previously prohibited “naming names” in print, other than those against whom allegations had publicly been made and/or had been convicted of abuse. The police immediately announced that there would be no further prosecutions. The politicians made their obligatory speeches. Prime Minister Blair wrung his hands at the “appalling catalogue of terror and tragedy inflicted on some of the most vulnerable children in our society.”

None of the underlying issues raised by the inquiry are to be addressed. The scale of abuse uncovered can only have been possible due to two decades of under-funding of social services in general, and children's services in particular.

The Waterhouse Inquiry found a lack of financial resources for children's services, a lack of suitable staffing and generally inadequate provision at all levels. Several of the homes in which abuse occurred were privately run. Up until the present day those in charge of children's homes have not had to be qualified social workers. One of the people later convicted of sexual assault had been a labourer, coach driver and insurance agent before taking up his position as a "house parent" at the Bryn Estyn home.

Commenting on the report, Drew Clode of the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) said a significant factor in the crisis in childcare is the "chronic underpayment" of residential staff. This means many have no real training in the type of care necessary, and function as little more than wardens. Figures from the Improvement and Development Agency revealed that of the 10,603 workers in local authority homes in England, more than 5,505 were unqualified.

Low pay, long hours and media reports of abuse have also led to a drop in social work applications by 50 percent over the past three years. In addition, cuts in local authority spending mean that four out of ten authorities are failing to inspect their residential homes even twice a year. It has also led to the closure of many homes, with children being put out into foster care.

Whilst this is presented as a more progressive alternative—and given the problems in residential homes, it can appear this way—it has its drawbacks. Many children requiring authority care have emotional and/or learning difficulties that foster parents are unable to deal with. Nevertheless, as far as the government is concerned, foster provision has the benefit of being far cheaper than residential care. Cheaper still would be adoption. Hence Blair's announcement that the government intends to relax current adoption procedures.

Most damning of all, the Waterhouse report heard how a group set up in 1997 by the Welsh Office to implement recommendations on childcare facilities had run into financial difficulties. The Adrienne Jones Report Implementation Group gave oral evidence to the tribunal. Delays in implementing recommendations were due to "the issue of finance for children's services in the context of enforced overall cuts in social services... All of [the

local authorities] spoke of identified needs that cannot be met in the current financial situation".

The tribunal report draws attention to the increasingly authoritarian attitude taken towards children. Childhood difficulties are seen as the result of some innate "evil" or failing on the individual's part. The trend towards retribution rather than rehabilitation has led to ten-year-olds facing Crown Court trial for murder and over 200 young children being tried for sexual assault, even rape, and placed on the "sex offenders" register.

The report notes that in the late 1960s the ethos was that "delinquent" children, "whose misbehaviour was seen as a consequence of deprivation and disturbance, should receive the same programme of care and treatment as children who had suffered similarly but who had not offended." This was "not effectively implemented". Instead children who had offended were subject to control orders up until the age of 18, whilst those children who had not offended were often also regarded as "little criminals".

The report states, "Neither category of child received a service that could be described as remedial or therapeutic and some regimes encouraged absconsion and increased offending. It is not surprising in the circumstances that many regarded themselves as lost in care". It is in such a climate that the maltreatment of young children can proceed.

Conservative Party leader William Hague immediately seized upon the report to demand the privatisation of children's homes. "Charities, churches and business have shown that they can run children's homes at least as effectively as local authorities", he claimed, in order to provide the private sector with a chance to make a quick buck.

For its part, the Labour government is equally prepared to utilise the catalogue of suffering as fuel for its own privatisation plans. Labour has established a "league tables" register for England's 150 social services authorities. In cases where the authority is found to be "underperforming", the government will "change the provider", i.e., contract out to private tender.



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