



Why speaking up is hard to do

Despite numerous recent cases of abuse relating to vulnerable adults and children, those who dare speak out can still often find themselves more vilified than celebrated. Whistleblower **Jim Wild** recounts his own experience of breaking the silence and offers suggestions on how to make it easier to raise the alarm without becoming a victim.



Over the past year there have been a string of revelations about men who have been abusing children and young people, both inside and outside of the care system.

The spotlight has recently included a focus on celebrities and, at times, overwhelmingly on the activities of one celebrity – Jimmy Savile.

There has also been wider concern in relation to the quality of care in hospitals and residential units, for children and adults – Winterbourne View is a high profile example. There seems to be little that can shock us in terms of the abuse of vulnerable adults and children. Clearly we have a long way to go in delivering transparent and accountable services to prevent such abuses.

In my 30 years in child protection I have found it necessary to ‘blow the whistle’ on three occasions and each time the response was dire, defensive and at times utterly contemptible. I want to examine some of the

experiences I endured attempting to raise my concerns, to explore the process of organisational responses and make some suggestions that may improve the situation.

It has been almost 16 years since two important reports destabilised social work in children’s services – the Utting report, *People Like Us*, and the Waterhouse report on abuse in the looked after system in Wales. Both were damning indictments of the care system, of children and young people being victims of abusers within care and local communities. Utting suggested we were dealing with events and circumstances that were about “predominantly male wickedness” and both the English and Welsh reports provided structures and guidelines aimed at combating such abuse of the most vulnerable in our society.

In England, the Quality Protects initiative was launched in 1998 and was seen by the then Government as the most effective way of dealing with shortcomings in the care system.

Yet despite a range of initiatives from that era we now find, in addition to the historical abuse associated with Jimmy Savile and the ongoing Operation Yewtree, more contemporary examples of child sexual exploitation from local communities around the UK.

What is interesting about both looking back and considering where we are today in respect of child sexual abuse and exploitation, is how easily we forget the past events and make ‘new’ discoveries about what some men are capable of. We seem unable to learn and integrate that understanding into robust and safe cultures.

In his wonderful publication, *The Elephant in the Room – Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, Eviatar Zerubavel suggests denial involves “active avoidance” rather than simply failing to notice something.

He adds: “Furthermore, it usually involves refusing to acknowledge the presence of things that actually beg for attention, thereby reminding us that conspiracies of silence

revolve not around those largely unnoticed matters we simply overlook but, on the contrary, around those highly conspicuous matters we deliberately try to avoid.”

In the case of Jimmy Savile this denial lasted many decades yet, as has been revealed, many people knew about his reputation and did nothing.

In my own experiences of whistleblowing, I was well aware that people knew of the concerns about professionals who inexplicably seemed untouchable in relation to suggestions that they abused children and young people. I raised my concerns when newly-appointed to a post which included developing training resources to protect children and young people from abuse. I discovered a male head of a home who was ‘lifted’ from the residential unit due to very serious concerns about his behavior and possible sexual abuse of children. He was then promoted to a senior management role – a position where his main function was to put into place systems of protection for looked after children.

I was told by my line manager I should not “rock the boat” so early on in my job. I constantly pressed for clarification, finally being told by my line manager that he had seen an internal report that exonerated the promoted worker.

A few years later I discovered the ‘report’ had disappeared. I resubmitted my concerns to the newly-appointed director who allocated the investigation to the head of safeguarding. I was concerned they were unwilling or unable to clarify why a manager could be suspended from a residential unit due to allegations of sexual abuse, yet subsequently promoted to a lead officer post to develop policy in relation to protecting children and young people from this exact same harm. At times it felt surreal and outrageous that no young people from the home were traced or interviewed and no explanation could be given over the inexplicable promotion of an individual who was the subject of so much controversy.

Whistleblowers can be undermined in many ways. In my example, the argument implied to me was that if this became wider public knowledge then many professionals would be implicated and careers ruined. Organisations have ways of dealing with those who raise awkward questions.

As Zerubavel says: “Silence breakers are ridiculed, vilified, and often ostracised. Aside from their immediate punitive function, such retaliatory tactics are also designed to intimidate anybody else who contemplates breaking the conspiracy of silence, which indeed prevents many potential silence breakers from actually doing so.”

So how can we respond effectively to abuse we hear about or know is happening in our services and feel confident that raising concerns

If you're going to do it do it right

Whistleblowing – the reporting of concerns about malpractice, serious wrongdoing or fraud at work – can be complicated, and while The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) can protect people who raise concerns, it only applies under certain conditions. Rosemary Crockett, Policy Manager of Mencap's Whistleblowing Helpline, offers some advice.

- Your organisation should have a whistleblowing policy. Find a copy of this (try the staff intranet or the HR Department) and follow the procedure to maintain your protection under PIDA. You need to be mindful of any safeguarding issues which must be raised in line with your organisation's safeguarding procedures.
- You would normally be expected to raise your concern with your line manager but if it involves or implicates them you may wish to talk to someone else. Does your organisation's whistleblowing policy suggest someone?
- For independent advice, contact your professional association or trade union – such as BASW or its trade union arm, the Social Workers Union; a HR manager or a solicitor.
- Before formally raising your concern, write down what happened, when and where, to get your thoughts in order. Keep this as factual as possible, recording events chronologically.
- Consider the impact of what happened – is it service user safety, abuse in care, bullying, unethical practices, health and safety, a criminal offence, failure to meet a legal obligation, issues around professional or clinical practice or competence?
- Approach colleagues who may share your concerns. There is strength in numbers.
- You can ask for your identity to be kept confidential, but be aware that even if senior managers try to keep your name out of any investigation, colleagues may be able to work out who you are. If you are being bullied, tell managers you expect to be protected.
- Be mindful of confidentiality issues – it is important to be careful about what you do with certain information. A union or professional body can advise.
- Keep a note of anything that is said in discussions about your case. Perhaps email this to the person spoken to afterwards with a summary of the main points. State explicitly that you are raising concerns in line with the Public Interest Disclosure Act. Keep a record of the dates of any meetings and what was discussed, but do not keep these notes at work.
- If you have exhausted all options internally, you can go to the relevant regulator or inspector for your country. You must have reason to believe any allegation you make is substantially true – suspicion is not enough.
- Making wider disclosures to the media, police or MPs can have serious repercussions to your employment if not done in the right way. It is recommended you seek guidance on this.

Useful contacts: The Whistleblowing Helpline provides free advice and support for workers, trade unions and employers in adult social care and healthcare. Visit www.wbhelpline.org.uk. In England, contact the Care Quality Commission or, if you work in children's services, Ofsted. In Scotland the regulator is the Care Inspectorate; in Wales it's the Care Council for Wales and in Northern Ireland, The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. You can contact the BASW/SWU Advice and Representation Service by emailing www.aras@basw.co.uk and contact Public Concern at Work on 020 7404 6609

will not have negative effects? Here are several suggestions:

- Local Authority Designated Officers (LADO) must be made independent. Like CAFcASS, they should be at arms length in investigations.
- There should be active training for all staff on whistleblowing and information should be openly available to employers on independent services that can help.
- The whistleblower (and the person subject to the allegation) should be given access to independent support services.
- There should be monitoring of the whistleblower's future employment applications. I know that due to my

whistleblowing on three occasions in 15 years I have found it impossible to be employed within 30 miles of where I live.

- There must be training – historical and up-to-date – about abuse in care systems. Our memories are frail and we need reminders of how past controversies were dealt with. Finally, there is the issue of men and abuse. Undoubtedly, abuse in looked after systems and wider communities is what some men do. But it's a debate mostly ignored.

PSW

Jim Wild is lead trainer for The Centre for Active and Ethical Learning. His publication *Exploited Childhood* will be released in September. Contact Jim via editor@basw.co.uk