

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Norman SINNET

Support person present: No

1. My name is Norman Sinnet. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1966. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Life before going into care

2. I was born in Bangor Hospital in West Lothian. I had a great upbringing. My father was a coalminer who worked all of his life. My dad was [REDACTED] and my mum was [REDACTED]. She was known as [REDACTED]. There were six of us. [REDACTED] was the oldest sibling. He will be about sixty-six now. [REDACTED] is next, he is sixty. I am the third oldest. [REDACTED] is forty-eight. [REDACTED] is forty-five. [REDACTED] is the youngest, he is about forty-two.
3. I lived in Blackridge beside Harthill. I went to St Anthony's Primary. I got on fine at primary school. I went to Armadale Academy when I was eleven or twelve. I didn't get on very well there and started playing truant. I was doing stupid things so I came to the attention of the social work department and other authorities. The social workers became involved.
4. I had a great social worker called Jim Harvey. He was based in Bathgate. He was a fantastic man who helped me through a lot. I had a very good relationship with him. I was sent to a children's panel. I think I was sectioned by the Secretary of State under a 413 certificate. I am sure that I was taken to an adult court because of some of my behaviour. I think I appeared two or three times before being put into care.

5. The children's panel decided that I should be taken into care. It was in 1978-1979. I didn't have any choice or legal representation. I tried to escape out of the back of a car. I was still young and had the common sense to try to run away. I didn't get very far before they caught me.
6. I knew I was going to Howdenhall Assessment Centre. Jim Harvey took me to get clothes in McKays in Bathgate. My family was obviously a big family so they didn't have a lot of money. So, Jim Harvey made sure that I had pyjamas, shoes, and clothes.

Howdenhall Assessment Centre, Edinburgh

7. I won't ever forget the day I went in, I would have been around twelve or thirteen. It was a horrible experience. It was like going into a children's jail. The doors were all kept locked. I was locked away and treated basically like an animal. The people who worked there were animals. Some of the things they did to some of the children was shocking. The assessment centre is not there now. It's been knocked down and is a police station. It's ironic given what happened in there was criminal.
8. It was an assessment centre so you went there before they moved you on somewhere else. They just put me there to decide where to send me. However, at the time I didn't know that. There was a place called St Katherine's which was right beside it.
9. The bedrooms were upstairs. I think there were four in a dorm. The girls were in another part of the building. I think on the other side. There were twenty boys. It might have been more. There was a wee guy with black hair. I think his name might have been [REDACTED]. I don't know why the older boys were there. I think they misbehaved or their families didn't want them.

Routine at Howdenhall Assessment Centre

10. I can't really remember a lot about it but I can remember the beatings. Every single bit of it. I can remember we went for breakfast and a shower. Everything was open plan so there wasn't even privacy to have a shower. I didn't actually have schooling in there. We didn't go to classes or anything like that. I just tried to survive and tried to escape and did anything to get out of there. We did some chores like mopping floors.
11. I can't remember anything about the food in the place. I was a child so I suppose food was food. My social worker, Jim Harvey, came to see me while I was there. My family didn't come to see me as they would've had to get three buses, so it wasn't an easy task.
12. If you were good you got to go out on a day trip somewhere. I think they took us out in a bus on a Saturday or Sunday and drove us around to places like Seton Sands. We were kept on the bus. We didn't get off the bus. I wasn't in the assessment centre at Christmas time because I had moved into St Katherine's next door by then. It was basically the same regime there. The staff members were the same in St Katherine's.
13. Once, we went on holiday to Loch Doon in Ayrshire. It was a big house at the end of the loch, like a smallholding. We could go canoeing there. It was supposed to be for a week but four of us ran away from there. We broke into a local house in Girvan to get money to get away. The police caught us and took us back to Loch Doon. We got our punishment there then we were taken back to the assessment centre, where we got it again.

Abuse at Howdenhall Assessment Centre

14. There was a member of staff called Mr ^{EWA} [REDACTED]. He stayed in [REDACTED] Edinburgh. He was an ex-Navy man. He came in smelling of rum all the time. I think he was quite high up. He was a main abuser. I can't remember any of the other staff but a lot of them were violent.

15. Mr EWA came into the room at night drunk and he removed some of the boys. I saw it happening. As soon as I got the chance, I ran away because I decided that it wasn't happening to me.
16. I knew that boys were being abused by the looks on their faces. They looked broken. I think they had been told not to tell anyone so it wasn't discussed. They were only twelve or thirteen. I feel terrible for running away because I didn't help them. I should have been stronger and helped them. I was stronger minded than they were. I knew it was happening so I should have tried to do something but I couldn't because if I tried to intervene, I knew what I was getting.
17. There were girls in the assessment centre too so I can imagine what was happening to them. There were three or four of the staff taking the boys out of the room. I genuinely don't have the words to describe what it was like. It seemed normal to them.
18. The staff had no qualms about hitting you in front of everyone during the day. They didn't have a problem coming up and back handing you and slapping you on the back of the head. That happened to me and others. It happened constantly. They hit you with fists, by punching, and slapping. They didn't hit you around the face but it was your arms and legs.
19. I can always remember a time when a boy called HWD got some beatings. There would be more than one member of staff hitting him.
20. There was a locked room beyond the dining room. It was like a punishment room. It was on the right-hand side of the building. It has glass windows so you could see into it and what was happening during the day. It happened in plain sight to a lot of people. A lot of people got beatings in there.
21. I had bruises. There was violence all the time. It was acceptable back in those days. The staff just wanted you to do as you were told and if you didn't, you got a beating or abused. That was the regime.

22. When I ran away from the assessment centre I walked to Blackridge. It took me about half a day. I always remember going down the Royal Mile and thinking 'how do I get to Blackridge?' Looking back, it was actually quite clever. I always had a great sense of direction.
23. The police caught me and took me back. I got a beating for it. I only ran away once from there. After that, they kept an eye on me. The police didn't ask me why I was running away. They were only interested in taking me back to the home. Jim Harvey asked me. I told him about the beatings but in those days, they weren't writing things down. It was probably more than their jobs were worth.
24. When we ran away from Loch Doon, we were punished by the member of staff in charge of the place when the police took us back. It was a proper physical beating. We were kicked, punched, and slapped. When we got back to the assessment centre, we got it again from another member of staff. I was black and blue on the side of my face, arms, legs, and back. I don't remember the names of the staff.

Leaving Howdenhall Assessment Centre

25. I was there for about three months then I went to the children's panel in Bathgate. I didn't get the chance to speak. I knew I was being sent somewhere else and that I wasn't going home to my mum and dad. My father came through but he knew it too. That was just it. I tried to get out of the car on the way there. The children's panel sent me to St Katherine's.

St Katherine's Centre, Secure Unit, Edinburgh

26. St Katherine's was next door to Howdenhall, it was fifty to one hundred metres away from the assessment centre. It was different because you could go outside there and enjoy the grounds. I had my own room too. You could have a shower.

Layout

27. You went in the front door and the toilets were on the left-hand side. There were stairs and the rooms were upstairs. It wasn't a bad place but I hated the memories of the staff next door. The staff were different but some of the ones from Howdenhall used to come over because, being next door, they all knew each other. It was a more relaxed, better atmosphere because you weren't locked up all the time. There was a lot more freedom. There wasn't the same type of violence in there.

Routine at St Katherine's Centre

28. You had to do chores like being made to scrub the toilets. They just asked you to do it, so you did them because you weren't being attacked or bullied into doing it. I can't really remember the routine. I just remember the freedom. There were classes but they weren't very good. It wasn't like proper school. I don't think any of the staff were actually qualified to teach.
29. I ran away from there too because I knew the violence was going on right next door. I knew the abuse that was taking place. When the police took me back, the staff told me not to do it again but there weren't any beatings in there. I told the staff what happened next door. The staff weren't interested in what was going on. I think they already knew because they weren't stupid. I don't know if the staff kept records there.

Leaving St Katherine's Centre, Secure Unit

30. I think I was only in St Katherine's for around six months because of my absconding but I can't be sure. The children's panel sent me to Loaningdale in Biggar.

Loaningdale Approved School, Biggar

31. I was about fourteen when I went to Loaningdale. I can't remember how long I was there. I was always running away from abusers. I got it into my head that I was going to be abused in these places or be around people being abused. I couldn't handle it and I just kept on running. I think Jim Harvey took me to Loaningdale. I can remember thinking 'here we go again'.
32. I can remember arriving in Biggar and going up the hill and passing a graveyard on the left. There was a long driveway with trees. The main building was white. It was a double story building. The staff quarters were in the middle. There was an old building to the right-hand side and the headmaster's office was there. It was run by an old Scotsman who they called Jock. He was a lovely man. I went to stay with him when they shut the place down at Christmas and New Year. I had Christmas dinner with him. Everyone went home except for me.
33. I had to stay with a member of staff. I think it was because they knew I wouldn't go back. I didn't want to be in these places because I had it in the back of my mind, 'abuse, abuse'. I went to stay with another member of staff called GYF [REDACTED]. He was a Geordie. He was alright. He wasn't a physical guy. It was all boys. There were about thirty or forty.
34. There was a dining room, kitchen, and a big TV room. The bedrooms were upstairs. I shared a room. A lot of people who worked in Loaningdale lived in Biggar. One of the women was called Jessie Allan. She used to ask me if she should iron my clothes for me if I was going to run away again at the weekend. The staff were called housemothers. There were two of them. I got the feeling they were trying to look after you.

Leaving Loaningdale Approved School

41. I was there for less than a year. After that I went back to the children's panel. They sent me to Rossie Farm. I think they thought the further they sent me from home that it would stop me running away. I was fourteen and a half and stayed there until I was sixteen.

Rossie Farm, Montrose

42. It was the horror of my life. It had a big, long road up to it. It sits right up in the hill. You can see it from the road. The building was white. There was a swimming pool on the left-hand side. A lot of the staff stayed on site in wee houses. There was a closed block for child murderers. I think it was the only one in Scotland at the time. It had bars on the windows and was locked all the time.
43. My parents weren't able to visit me there as it was too far to go from Blackridge to Montrose. It was pure physical abuse there and it should be burned to the ground. It shouldn't be open. There were boys being sexual abused there too. The way the staff treated us was unbelievable. They should all be sent to jail.
44. The dormitories were named after Scottish lochs. I think there were six to eight in the dormitory. I was in Kintail. I think there were four dormitories. There were 32 of us in there. I don't know who was in charge at Rossie Farm. There were about fifteen to twenty staff there.

Routine at Rossie Farm

45. In terms of the routine there, I think we were woken up with a bell, had a shower and went for breakfast. After that, we went to the 'kid on' classes. The education was non-existent. It was the same routine as the other places as I don't think any of the teachers were qualified. The Art teacher was an old man. He stayed on site with his wife. He

was a talented artist. I think he was the only one who was half-educated between them all.

46. There was schooling there. There were Art and maths classes. The boys were all delinquents. They were very into PE as there was a swimming pool. There was a [REDACTED] who taught me there. He was called ^{HZV} [REDACTED]. I think he was in the [REDACTED]. He was a brilliant teacher and taught me to swim when he realised I couldn't. I got awards for canoeing because they put me through a training course. I learned to canoe and went on an expedition to Braemar. It took us five days. I can remember going past Balmoral Castle on the River Dee and seeing Aberdeen harbour. That's a fond memory I have.
47. I had a friend, ^{HWD} [REDACTED], who was from Bathgate. I hardly see him now. There wasn't much to do in our spare time. I just hung around. I think we went hillwalking there. I can't remember if we wore our own clothes or if they gave us clothes. They didn't celebrate birthdays. It wasn't as though they baked you a cake and made special arrangements. It was just the same scenario, they really didn't care. There were no housemothers at Rossie. I'm sure they were all men. I think there was a woman who worked in the kitchen.

Bedwetting

48. There were young laddies wetting their beds in there. The boys were humiliated and beaten. It was crazy. They had to lie in their own urine. They weren't allowed to change their beds. The staff told the other boys what they had done and made them stand outside the dorm in their wet pyjamas.

Abuse at Rossie Farm

49. The place was like a minefield. The staff took you into cells. There was a cell just outside the closed block along the left-hand side of the building. They were next to the showers and toilets. They took you there and made you take your clothes off. They

hosed you down in the cell and threw buckets of cold water over us. It was freezing. They did it to me two or three times. You would stand outside your dormitory to get back in.

50. I told the staff I couldn't swim and I was chucked into the swimming pool once. I can't remember who did that but it wasn't HZV. I was dragged by the hair to get me out. I can remember HWD jumping in to get me. I was petrified.
51. I ran away. I went as soon as I got the chance. I took two or three boys with me. We climbed out the window and went along the ledge and down the drainpipes. They caught us in Arbroath. We were battered when we were taken back.
52. If you misbehaved, they took you outside the dorm and made you stand in the corridor all night. It was horrendous. It was any excuse to abuse you.
53. The two people who were serial abusers were known as HGO and HGM. HGO came from Montrose, he was an ex-army man. HGO was a big, tall man. I think he was about six foot. He had dirty blond hair. I can't remember his name. HGM was quite a small guy with long blond hair. If he heard you calling him that, he battered you. He stayed on the premises. We were terrified of HGO and HGM. You knew you were getting done in. That's why I was running away all the time.
54. I don't know how many staff were in charge. There were fifteen staff. I felt safer when those two weren't there. A lot of the staff were good.
55. They were interested in just getting you back. When they got you back you got a beating. I think you were allowed to have a weekend back with your family but not me. They had an old bus. I was allowed home once and I got the train back and was collected at the train station in Montrose.
56. We had to have showers at certain times. There was no privacy there. The staff used to walk up and down looking at you in the shower. I can remember HGO and HGM

HGM doing it. Most of the people who were in there are either alcoholics, drug addicts, or dead. I was scared in the assessment centre but it was ten times worse in Rossie Farm. I think everyone was terrified. It was the regime with HGO and HGM HGM

Sexual abuse

57. I got the feeling that boys were sexually abused there. You could see it in their eyes, they didn't want to speak and they were withdrawn. You can tell something is wrong. They were broken. I feel guilty that I didn't do anything about it but I was just trying to survive. The staff were just interested in abusing kids and collecting their wages.
58. I wasn't letting them sexually abuse me. That's why I ran away. You could have told anyone about the abuse but they wouldn't believe you.

Leaving Rossie Farm

59. They practically opened the door and let me out. There was no support in place for me. It was just a case of letting you get on with it. I got the bus from Waverley to Blackridge. I bumped into my mother who had been in Bangor Hospital. I saw her at the bus stop just outside the hospital. She didn't even know I was going home. I felt relieved because I knew that I didn't need to face any of them again.

Life after being in care

60. I started work. I then got involved in petty crime. I have worked as a long-distance lorry driver for a number of years. My mother passed away in a bus crash 25 years ago. After that my father moved abroad and drank himself to death.

Impact

61. I had jobs for years before alcohol became an issue. The abuse turned me into an alcoholic. I had done really well going through rehab. I have some support in place now. I have found it hard being in contact with the Inquiry, it's all come back. It has really affected me. I don't know how I am still alive. I've had suicidal thoughts even about coming to speak about my experiences. It's been hard facing up to it. I will deal with it then I'll get support. I have struggled with feelings of guilt because I think I could have done more and stood up to the abusers.
62. I couldn't hold down a relationship. I would have it for a few years then I would run away. I have four daughters and two sons. I feel like I'm a let-down to everyone.
63. It's always in the background. I feel like everyone is out to get me. It's always been in the back of my mind. I saw a story on the news about a boy being abused which brought it to the forefront. I think about it morning, noon, and night. I seem unable to get it out of my head just now.
64. I think my past offending is linked to my time in care. None of my brothers or sisters have been in trouble. I feel like the odd one out. They always say there is one bad apple and I have it in my mind it is me. I chose alcohol. None of my family are big drinkers.
65. I haven't made any claims for compensation. I would give the money to charity. I don't want any money. I wouldn't feel comfortable taking it. I think it should go to a victim's charity. I hate the word victim. I survived through it.

Treatment/support

66. I have a support worker who makes sure I go to meetings. I just want to be normal. I feel paranoid going out but I don't have anything to be paranoid about because I have told all of my family.

Reporting of Abuse

67. I haven't reported any of what happened in these places to the police yet.

Records

68. I don't want to relive it so I haven't applied for my records. I don't want to read them.

Lessons to be Learned

69. There should have been measures in place to stop this happening. There should be proper social workers and proper places for children to go to get help and support. The social work and the government should be made accountable for their actions. They can't sweep it under the carpet now. The genie is out of the bottle.

70. If any abusers are still living, they need to be made accountable because it wasn't right what happened to us. I really hope that it doesn't happen nowadays. If it does happen then there is something very wrong with the system.

Other information

71. 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..... 

Dated..... 14/12/2022