

Oxfordshire Family Support Network - Statement: Whorlton Hall Abuse - Panorama exposé

The abuse, mistreatment, mental and physical torture of people with learning disabilities and/or Autism at Whorlton Hall has shocked, distressed and angered all of us. How can this still be happening, 8 years on from Winterbourne and following the Government's public commitment to transform care?

OxFSN believe that it is too easy to simply blame the culture of one institution and specific individuals who perpetrate this abhorrent abuse. While these individuals and those who stood by and did nothing are clearly culpable there is system wide responsibility. Health Care and support Providers, Commissioners, Local Authorities, the CQC and the Government must all be accountable and accept responsibility for allowing this to continue.

Families all around the country have been raising concerns for years about the poor treatment in these places and their voices have been ignored, individually and collectively. It should not have been the responsibility of an undercover reporter to expose this abuse when systems and processes are meant to be there to safeguard people. We urge statutory agencies around the country to listen to, believe and support families who flag up concerns about their loved ones and take immediate action when they hear about poor practice.

We are seriously concerned that CQC could have rated this hospital as 'Good' only last year, when the hostile culture of that service was clearly, deeply embedded. The environment alone was oppressive and grim beyond words and this should have raised immediate concerns. We are shocked that there were 100 visits from officials and NHS staff in the year before the abuse was uncovered and a former Inspector's warnings, as far back as 2015 were ignored.

Anyone visiting these institutions has to know what a good service looks and feels like and so we therefore have to seriously question the quality and skills of the inspectors as well as those undertaking Care and Treatment Reviews and the processes of both. We are also deeply concerned that there is still a reliance on questioning staff and other professionals and believing them, rather than using their eyes and ears to observe people and speak to them and their families, without staff being present. If any service supporting vulnerable people, whether supported living, residential care or hospital doesn't demonstrate that they work with and involve people's families it should be a huge 'red flag'.

There will inevitably be discussions about funding. It's a fact that despite increasing need, successive Governments have chronically underfunded social care services year on year for decades. This underfunding has led local authorities to focus on fire - fighting crises rather than on prevention and developing local community based solutions. While there is a high financial cost to keeping people in this non/abusive 'care', this is clearly not just about money, it is about how and where money is being spent. People end up in these institutions when their current support breaks down, at

a horrendous human cost so, a focus has to be on prevention and local crisis provision. Money could be better spent on ensuring staff are better trained and appropriately paid for the skills needed to support people to prevent crisis intervention being needed. When or if there is a breakdown in support or people need treatment they should be assessed, treated and discharged as soon as possible, close to home, as with any other medical treatment. Until that happens large private hospitals will continue to be paid millions of pounds to, at best, keep people incarcerated and away from their families and at worst tortured and abused and make a profit in the process. We believe that the solutions lie with a total rethink of the so called system, which is clearly not fit for purpose. This needs real blue sky thinking done in total partnership with families and people with learning disabilities and autism, with a funding system that bridges the gap whilst that takes place.

Oxfordshire currently has three people in Assessment and Treatment Units out of county, and OxFSN supports two of their families. We are working hard alongside NHS and Oxfordshire County Council staff to ensure that these families are listened to and supported and their loved ones come back closer to their families. As a family carer led charity OxFSN will continue to work alongside families and our local services to come up with coproduced local solutions, so there is no need to send people to these large private institutions in the future. And, we will continue to press NHS England for the funding needed to do it!

We aim to build on the good foundations that we have started to lay here through the local Transforming Care Programme. There is much to do but we know what needs to happen locally and will continue to strive to ensure it happens. Alongside this we will continue to support all those families whose fear and anxiety levels will have increased to unprecedented levels. Trust has inevitably been damaged by this and families will feel they need to be ever more vigilant to protect their loved ones.

Finally, our thoughts are with the victims and their families who have had to endure this horrific experience. We thank them for sharing their experiences, it must have been desperately difficult to do this. Our thoughts are also with all the people with learning disabilities and autism currently detained in Assessment and Treatment Units around the country and their families. As parents and family carers ourselves we can only begin to imagine how they are all feeling right now and hope they all get the support they need.

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On behalf of Oxfordshire Family Support Network

