

CRIN and accountability: practising what we preach, even in the most difficult cases

Child sexual abuse is a global problem with devastating short and long term impacts on children and on society. [One in five children](#) experience some form of sexual abuse and a third of these children will never tell anyone about it. For those who do come forward, it often takes years or decades for them to feel able to speak about their experiences. Where these crimes against children go undetected, justice is not served, children cannot be provided with treatment, therapy and support, and perpetrators are free to continue to abuse with impunity.

At CRIN, we see accountability for abuse as essential not only to ensure justice, but also to prevent future sexual abuse and exploitation. Sexual abuse of children will never end if impunity prevails. With this in mind, we have long campaigned to improve children's [access to justice](#) for violations of their human rights, and to end the silence around [child sexual abuse](#).

But what happens when organisations like ours are directly confronted with a case of child sexual abuse? In May 2016 CRIN found out that one of its board members, Peter Newell, was being investigated for child sexual abuse. He notified CRIN immediately after he was informed that he was under police investigation over events that occurred 47 years before. He offered his resignation as a board member with immediate effect and it was accepted at an emergency board meeting. Once in court, he pleaded guilty and was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for six years and eight months. The perpetrator had been connected with CRIN for a decade (8 years as a trustee) and had been a prominent children's rights advocate.

The fact that it took the abuse survivor in this case decades to bring a complaint against his abuser is indicative of the many hurdles and difficulties faced by child and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It reinforces how important access to justice for children is.

Aside from dealing with the deep shock generated by the case, this situation of board member wrongdoing also required us to decide how to respond as an organisation.

After we found out about the abuse complaint, the Chair of our board carried out an immediate investigation into whether the perpetrator might have come into contact with children through CRIN. They also reviewed our child protection and safeguarding procedures, and our trustee recruitment process. The findings of this investigation were that the perpetrator had not been in contact with children through CRIN and that the necessary procedures were in place. We informed our funders at the time and the Charity Commission, which regulates charities in England and Wales. We also notified other organisations that we knew had had contact with the perpetrator to ensure they could conduct their own investigations. We also prepared a press release in case the media wanted to speak with CRIN. Newspapers reported on the case, but CRIN was not contacted. Had we been, we

would have told journalists that our recruitment policy complied with all statutory requirements, that our staff did not work directly with children, and that Newell's work through CRIN never put him in a position where he would have had contact with children. We would have also said, *"If he is found guilty, we will condemn his actions in the strongest possible terms."*

Shying away from the situation was not an option. We believe that everyone working in human rights should be held accountable for their actions - or inaction - including organisations like ours. If we ourselves were unable to practise what we preach in terms of children's rights, transparency and accountability, how could we demand that of others?

In dealing with something as serious as sexual abuse, we should remember the opening sentence of the [UN Study on Violence Against Children](#), "No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable". A perpetrator's contributions to a particular field or endeavour must not blind or limit an organisation's response. A perpetrator's previous good standing must not be used to excuse offending behaviour, particularly against a child, or to undermine or compromise an abuse survivor's rights. The focus must be on the victim or survivor, on ensuring that the organisation's accountability mechanisms are robust, and on redoubling efforts to prevent and combat violations. There is still too much [silence around child sexual abuse](#) and this was reflected in some responses, or absence thereof, to this particular case.

At CRIN we recognise the ethical importance of openly discussing even the negative. We do it because it is the right thing to do and in the hope that others will do the same. This thinking is reflected in [The CRIN Code](#), which sets out our values, principles and vision. Among other things, it explains our resolve to practise what we preach and not be hypocrites, to always fight for the fulfilment of children's rights and to ensure accountability at CRIN as well as across our partners and funders.

In 2016 we would have said: *"We shall continue to press for justice, accountability and redress wherever violations of children's rights occur - and hold all individuals and organisations advocating for children's rights to the same standards of transparency that we expect from ourselves and others responsible for guaranteeing them."*

This remains just as true now. Break the silence.