

Revealed: past lies of abuse witness

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A WOMAN whose claims of Satanic child sex abuse helped put eight people in the dock had a history of making false allegations, which was known to police, Scotland on Sunday can reveal.

Angela Stretton was the key police witness in the Lewis abuse case which collapsed this summer with charges against all the accused being dropped.

An investigation by this newspaper has revealed that Stretton was convicted of making false allegations of child abuse in 1987, and that Scots police were aware of her track record of false claims before deciding to press charges.

Last night, several of the accused - some of whom are suing for compensation - demanded to know why they were dragged through the courts by social workers and police on the evidence of a discredited witness.

The results of our investigation also raise serious questions about whether the authorities have learned the lessons of previous abuse inquiries, and whether similar mistakes will be made in future.

The Lewis case began in January 2003 when a small group of children told social workers they had been sexually abused. Initially, the allegations related only to two individuals and involved inappropriate touching.

Island resident Stretton, now 37, emerged as crucial adult police witness in the case. After she became involved, the number of suspects spiralled to eight and the nature of the allegations broadened dramatically.

Police documents seen by this newspaper show that Stretton told police that Satanic rituals were used in the abuse, and that adults were filmed having sex with children. The evidence included lurid claims of drinking blood, orgies, and slaughtering animals.

In October last year, eight island residents appeared at Stornoway Sheriff Court charged with offences including rape, lewd, indecent and libidinous practises. The eight were remanded in custody for a week before getting bail. They faced years in jail if convicted but nine months later all charges were dropped without explanation.

What also remains unexplained is why the case got so far when there was considerable evidence that Stretton's testimony needed to be treated with the utmost caution. We can reveal that:

- In 1987 Stretton was fined 100 at Leicester Magistrates Court after admitting making hoax calls to emergency services alleging a former landlord who kicked her out had been abusing his daughter. Police and social services examined the child several times for injury and found nothing after Stretton alleged the landlord and his wife threw her down the stairs. Stretton was only caught when the landlord identified her from police 999 tapes.

The landlord, who asked not to be identified, said last night: "Angie is a very dangerous person. She makes lots of stories up."

□ Stretton's mother, Lily Place, said her daughter falsely claimed she had been raped when she was a 14-year-old in Leicester. "She claimed this man was stalking her when she came out of school and that they had intercourse," said Place. "I got the police on to this and the police surgeon examined her and said she had not been touched." Place, 75, was one of those falsely accused in the Lewis case.

Not only does Stretton have a history of making false allegations, the authorities knew this when investigating the Lewis case.

Stretton's brother David Disney, who was also wrongly accused in the Lewis case, said he told social services in Stornoway in 2002 that his sister was a fantasist who had a long history of inventing abuse claims in the Midlands before moving to Lewis in the 1990s.

"She's a very sick person and the authorities should have known that. We want to make sure she gets the help she needs so she doesn't do it again. We are very bitter sometimes because it has turned our lives, but we want to help her," he said.

"She has developed from minor things to this. What is she liable to do next? When the allegations first surfaced, it was obvious to me that my sister was up to her old tricks again.

"She has a long history of making false allegations about sex abuse. I kept thinking, 'If I could get to the authorities I could put them right about her with the necessary proof.'"

Lawyer Cameron Fyfe, who is preparing a possible compensation case against Western Isles Social Services for one of the accused, John Sellwood, told Scotland on Sunday: "We intend to argue that the flimsiness of the evidence indicates that the social work department was negligent in proceeding with the investigation.

"Our case for negligence is greatly strengthened if we can show that the social work department knew about these unfounded allegations but proceeded nonetheless."

David Brookens, who represented Sellwood when he first appeared in court, said: "If this woman is someone on whom the police are relying as an essential witness in this prosecution, I find it quite alarming if they did not know about her background.

"If they did check her background, I find it alarming that they treated her as a reliable witness. From inquiries I made on behalf of Mr Sellwood, I believe at least one of the inquiry officers had serious misgivings about Angie Stretton's evidence.

"It is quite awful that people are blackened like this, hung out to dry and never given the chance to clear their names." The case had chilling echoes of the Orkney scandal of 1991, when members of a Satanic paedophile ring were alleged to have been abusing children.

A 6m inquiry into the case - which collapsed due to lack of evidence after nine children were taken into care - strongly criticised the actions of social workers. Kenny MacAskill, the SNP's justice spokesman, said: "We would have hoped the lessons of Orkney would have been taken on board. Post-Orkney, we should not be repeating the same lessons."

Northern Constabulary confirmed in a statement that they were aware of previous allegations by Stretton that had proved to be false. A source confirmed the force was aware of these before charging the suspects in the Lewis case.

The statement added: "However, we are also aware of allegations by her which resulted in convictions and custodial sentences against people she had accused of a variety of offences, including violent and sexual crimes."

A police report on the Lewis case, seen by Scotland on Sunday, appears to show that there was some evidence of abuse not related to Satanism, including inappropriate touching and indecent pictures of juveniles kept on a computer. A Crown Office spokesman said: "In coming to their decision to discontinue proceedings, Crown Counsel were provided with the results of an extensive and very detailed inquiry by the police and Procurator Fiscal. It would not be appropriate to provide information about the details of this case."

The whereabouts of Stretton are presently unknown. Scotland on Sunday asked family members, lawyers involved in the case, and Western Isles Council for assistance in tracing her for comment.

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