

False rape accusation ends 35 years caring for disturbed children

by Andrew Fraser

LANCE Dowson needs a job but is a virtual leper in his field of work.

His CV is superb. He has spent 35 distinguished years working for Stockport and other councils with the victims of violence and sexual abuse, battered wives and husbands.

He has helped rehabilitate drug dealers as young as eight and counselled people who suffered the horrifying effects of cosmetic surgery gone wrong.

He has represented Stockport Council on television and radio as an authority on education and social services issues.

But an unfounded allegation of rape by a disturbed 16-year-old girl led him to be sacked.

He was investigated and cleared three times on the same allegation by the council, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Cleared

Not one shred of evidence was ever found against him he says. The girl had made five similar allegations against other men and Mr Dowson claims she was recovering from a drug overdose when she was interviewed. Investigators found no evidence that accuser and the accused were ever alone together.

But still he was sacked.

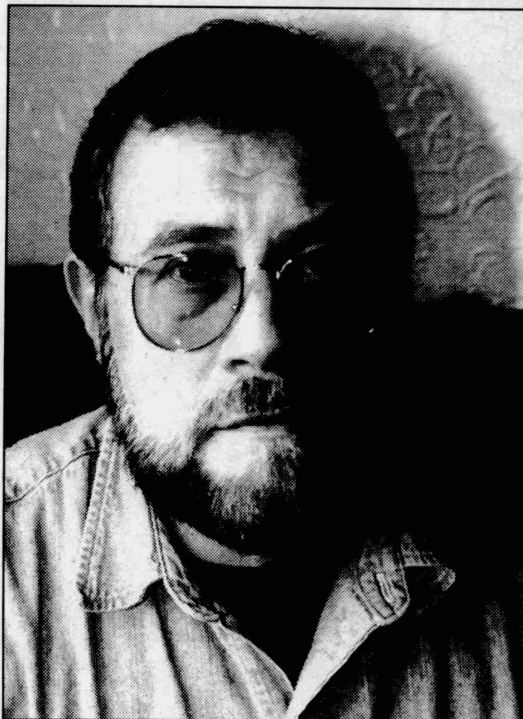
And should future employers choose to ignore that fact they will still be confronted by his police file, which contains the unfounded rape allegation alongside the words "insufficient evidence to proceed" — hardly a ringing endorsement of his innocence.

Mr Dowson's terrible ordeal highlights the dilemma society faces in how best to protect the vulnerable from abuse, without in turn abusing their protectors.

Stockport Council's handling of the affair not only left his life devastated — but cost the council hundreds of thousands of pounds and he says left his colleagues fearing the same could happen to them.

Struggling to contain his bitterness, Mr Dowson says: "There is a cancer in Stockport Social Services which must be rooted out. I'd hate to say they'd ruined my life — because then whoever was behind this would have won."

Lance Dowson has spent his whole life working in social services, especially with disturbed teenagers. Known as "the firefighter" for his ability to deal with calamitous situations — he would often work a 120 hour week.



MENTALLY strong: Lance Dowson

Some of his clients had been abused from as young as 12 months — others include an eight-year-old boy who dealt drugs for gangsters.

Ironically, he also taught other staff how to protect themselves against unfounded allegations of sexual abuse.

"It was an incredibly demanding job and it could be depressing," he says. "But it was worth it when you saw clients in the precinct with their girlfriends or boyfriends. You could see they had made some sort of sense of their lives."

"It was incredibly rewarding when people would come to me and say 'you're alright. I think I can talk to you.'"

Two years ago Mr Dowson was informed of the sexual abuse allegation by a manager at the Baker Street centre, where he worked for the education division teaching disturbed and abused children.

He remained in his job for a few days and incredibly was still asked to represent an abused client at a conference, the day after the allegation was made.

Shortly after he was suspended

from his job and told not to have any contact with colleagues.

"It was absolutely shattering," he said. "You can't believe that anybody could believe that of you. I thought I'd be backed up and supported by the managers but nobody wanted to know."

A full investigation was carried out into the girl's claims — and Mr Dowson was fully exonerated.

A week before he was due to return to work Mr Dowson got a call from his union. "They told me there was a problem and the matter had been reported to the police."

But this time the allegation was of rape.

Mr Dowson believes that social services were unwilling to accept the education department's findings — believing it to be a cover-up.

"I had to go down to the police station and be interviewed," he said. "They weren't even aware that it had already been investigated by the council."

"During the weeks of the second investigation I felt angry. I couldn't eat or sleep and began taking anti-depressants.

"I used to find my daughter crying on the stairs. She had trained to become a teacher but now didn't want to go into the profession."

"My colleagues supported me. They knew I wouldn't and couldn't do what was alleged."

Again no evidence was found, but almost immediately a third investigation was launched — this time by the Crown Prosecution Service.

The process lasted 18 months until the final investigation was dropped. Mr Dowson prepared to return to work — but found his employers were not keen to find him a job.

They said that a return to his job would leave Mr Dowson "vulnerable to other allegations" which would destroy his credibility, confidence and health.

"I find it incredible that what Stockport Council seems to be saying is that any teacher who has false allegations made against him or her is unable to return to work in case further allegations are made. That must be a denial of natural justice."

Later Mr Dowson was given early retirement. An industrial tribunal found that this amounted to dismissal because he had been put under considerable duress.

Last week Lance Dowson's industrial tribunal hearing for UNFAIR dismissal failed to go ahead, after the two sides reached an out of court settlement. He is bound by the terms of the deal not to reveal how much he was paid.

Chief education officer Max Hunt says he cannot comment on the case because of a confidentiality clause in the out of court settlement.

Mr Dowson is not prepared to leave it there. He wants a full investigation into WHY he was hounded and plans further action for the emotional harm inflicted on him.

He knows that he will always be tarnished with the "no smoke without fire" line of thinking. He wasn't even able to clear his name in a court, as the allegations were never credible enough to lead to charges being made against him.

"I was doing the job I loved and that I was good at," he said. "It's important to me to find out who was responsible for this and to make sure it never happens to any of my colleagues."

"In a sense I feel I have been abused myself by this treatment. Like all abusers they tried to make me feel like I was responsible for my own predicament."

"I've always been mentally strong. If I wasn't they would have destroyed me."

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'In a sense I feel I've been abused myself by this treatment'