

Child abuse inquiry call

Public inquiries should be set up to examine cases of historic, institutional child abuse to allay suspicions of cover-up, a leading lawyer has claimed.

Peter Garsden, the Cheshire-based president of the Association of Child Abuse Lawyers, believes full inquiries, with evidence given in public and the results freely available would ensure that victims feel they have been heard.

Victims

In the wake of the Savile scandal and the re-emergence of sexual abuse claims in children's homes in North Wales during the 1970s and 1980s, Garsden said: "It is very important to victims that their stories should be listened to and believed.

"It's easy for people to develop feelings of persecution and conspiracy against them when they have been abused all their life by figures of authority. Full and open public inquiries in which they can tell their stories would be a good way forward."

During the late 1990s, Garsden – who works at the law firm QualitySolicitors Abney Garsden in Cheadle Hulme – pushed for a public inquiry into North West children's homes, when the links between homes and abusers named by his clients seemed to suggest the existence of a paedophile ring. Although the then Labour government promised to consider the request once investigations were over, an inquiry never materialised. As many as 88 homes came under investigation in Merseyside, and 66 in Greater Manchester, but police preferred to charge individual abusers than to prosecute conspiracies.

Police inquiry

In the North Wales case, young people, mostly boys, were abused by staff and influential outsiders at Bryn Estyn in Wrexham and up to 40 other homes over many years. The government recently announced a new police inquiry and a review of the original tribunal.

The victims's voices have



Garsden: listen to victims

been drowned out in the aftermath of the *Newsnight* report, which led to the false naming online of Tory peer Lord McAlpine as an abuser, and the resignation of BBC director general George Entwistle.

Garsden questions the value of the new police investigation and would prefer to see a continuation of the Waterhouse inquiry of the 1990s, only with much broader parameters. There has already been a group compensation action for North Wales, and Garsden's firm is now acting for other victims.

He said: "In hindsight it is clear that the parameters for

the first North Wales inquiry were not broad enough: it only covered the children's homes themselves, rather than other locations where abuse took place, such as a hotel in the centre of Wrexham. This led victims to believe there had been a big cover-up, because there wasn't an investigation of the well to-do people who were also abusing them elsewhere, using their paedophile ring connections.

Cover-up

"The government did this because they were concerned that the inquiry would never end if its scope was unlimited, but the effect was to leave the impression of a cover-up.

"The best course of action now in this case would be a full public inquiry. I wouldn't want to interfere with a police inquiry but I do question what they are going to investigate and whether they are going to get anywhere."

CIARA LEEMING