

# Crewe Alexandra's refusal to accept any Barry Bennell blame beggars belief

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The first thought upon reading it was the sheer indignation that Crewe Alexandra felt at having to defend themselves for having the most prolific child abuser on their books for seven years, and then the longer it went on it turned to how it seemed the club were seeking to avoid taking any responsibility at all.

Crewe's statement, on Friday, regarding Barry Bennell's systematic abuse of boys in their care was as much a list of what the club will not be doing as what they have done.

There will be no independent investigation, even though they promised one in November 2016. There were no boardroom minutes submitted to Cheshire Police that corroborated the claim by the whistleblower, former managing director Hamilton Smith, that he had raised concerns.

This may come as a surprise to you but not one person connected to Crewe who was interviewed by police had ever nurtured a single suspicion that one of the most ruthless paedophiles in British criminal history was abusing boys at the club over seven years. To which the only response can be, how were these people allowed to run a football club in the first place?

If there was a fit and proper persons' test for the competent safeguarding of children, it does not sound like the credulous men in the Crewe boardroom would pass it.

John Bowler, the chairman since 1987, the year of Bennell's first appointment, feels that the criminal investigation is all that counts. But the Cheshire Police investigation was a criminal inquiry into Bennell, its purpose was not to find who knew what at the time because there is no law against failing to report abuse.

"Whatever Crewe might say, the police were investigating Bennell's crimes, not Crewe's potential failure to report them," says the lawyer Dino Nocivelli, who represents many of Bennell's victims.

No one at Crewe knew anything about Bennell at the time, no one could have done any better, and the club seem to have gone to great lengths to put Cheshire Police in contact with lots of other people who also knew nothing and heard nothing.

All told, Crewe Alexandra presided over a spectacular failure, but despite that there will no further inquiry, however awkward, into the way the club safeguards children in their care.

When these old men who saw nothing, and heard nothing during the Bennell era finally pass away, the chance to do so will be lost forever.

Crewe would also like to draw our attention to the number of statements in support of Bennell when he was first charged with child abuse offences in the United States in 1994, mentioning that, as well as Dario Gradi's letter, there were 57 others who sent character references.

However, Crewe will surely know that among those 57 were boys, now men, who were abused by Bennell.

Why they sent those letters is not so hard to understand when you read of the hold that Bennell had over his victims and the hopelessness that they felt at ever being able to tell of their suffering at his hands.

The effect of the abuse that paedophiles such as Bennell perpetrate is not straightforward, it does not always mean that the victim can be open about it in the short term or even the long term – a lesson that, if we did not know already, we surely know now.

Those statements from 1994 are irrelevant. Some of them, perhaps many, sent by frightened, confused victims of Bennell. They are unworthy of mention other than to signal that Crewe failed the boys abused in their care during Bennell's years and they are failing them now by using the statements as cover for their own ignorance of the crimes committed.

As for Smith, Crewe's implication is clear: his failure to report to the police and his subsequent support of Bowler's re-election as chairman makes Smith a liar. If only Crewe had put as much effort into speaking to Bennell's victims as they had in defending themselves against Smith's allegations.

One can only hope that Smith's daughter, Laura, who happens to be the Labour MP for Crewe and Nantwich feels differently about the accountability demonstrated by the biggest football club in her constituency.

She is one of the few who could demand that the club take a closer look at themselves.

Bennell's other club, Manchester City, have Jane Mulcahy QC overseeing their internal investigation. Charles Geekie QC is in charge of Chelsea's historic sex abuse investigation. Crewe have seemingly not even tried.

Now that the criminal investigation is over, they are taking the easy – and cheaper – option of pledging to work with Clive Sheldon QC's Football Association inquiry. There are some who think participating in the Sheldon inquiry will be sufficient, even though he has to examine an epidemic that goes far beyond one club. Sheldon's inquiry is focused much more on the FA's role in its governance of the clubs, under its published terms of reference, than the actions of the clubs themselves.

Sheldon's brief, as far as the FA is concerned, in the years from 1970 to 2005, is to look for "failings" within that organisation and "whether it failed to act appropriately in response to anything raised with it relating to child sexual abuse" – be that in relation to any club or any abuser.

As for the clubs, the terms are much less forthright. Sheldon will consider the steps that clubs linked to abusers took at the time and what they "did or did not know and/or did or did not do". Unlike with the FA, there is no explicit mention of failings. In fact, it sounds distinctly unwilling to assign blame or culpability to the clubs.

There are many other clubs that have associations with abusers and Sheldon will likely do his best, but none will ever know a club's own business better than that club. None can draw connections better in a historic network of coaches and scouts.

If there is any respect for the victims, clubs need to do everything to find out what happened and why, before death and old age intervene. The survivors' organisation, The Offside Trust, said in a statement on Friday that there must be transparency from all clubs where abuse took place and, of course, they are right.

The FA inquiry will do its best but it is stretched between thousands of cases and scores of clubs. Crewe could have an investigation, but they just do not want to.

They said, finally, on Friday that they would like to extend their regrets and sympathies to the victims and survivors of Bennell. But most of all what they want to say is this: none of us knew a thing and no one wants to take responsibility.