

Sex abuse inquiry shows English football failed children for 35 years

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The English Football Association-commissioned independent review said there were at least 692 abuse survivors and 240 suspects from 1970 to 2005. [Photo: Peter Powell/Reuters]

London, March 18 (RHC)-- English football did not do enough to protect children from paedophile coaches in an “institutional failure” by the game’s governing body, an inquiry into sexual abuse up from 1970 to 2005 has found.

The English Football Association-commissioned independent review said there were at least 692 abuse survivors and 240 suspects in a 710-page report that catalogued failings by eight clubs, including Chelsea and Manchester City, to act on concerns about eight of the most prolific perpetrators of male sexual abuse in the sport.

The inquiry led by lawyer Clive Sheldon was sparked by a wave of media testimonies of survivors of abuse in 2016, including victims of Barry Bennell, a former youth talent scout for Manchester City. The inquiry found City’s leadership in the 1980s did not investigate rumours of Bennell’s conduct when he was known around the club as a “kiddy fiddler” who had boys stay at his home. Crewe, a club where Bennell coached, also likely did not act on warnings from police.

Bennell was first arrested in Florida in 1994 and convicted the following year of raping a British boy on a football tour in the United States.

The inquiry uncovered a letter from Sepp Blatter, who was then FIFA’s general secretary, with a newspaper clipping on Bennell’s case and asking the FA whether it had any information on the case given that Florida’s state attorney expressed a desire for Bennell to be banned from football worldwide.

The FA told Blatter it had no information on a case and Sheldon’s report condemns the governing body for not acting urgently on the concerns sparks by Bennell’s jailing, even after they were highlighted in a TV documentary in 1997. “The FA acted far too slowly to introduce appropriate and sufficient child protection measures, and to ensure that safeguarding was taken sufficiently seriously by those involved in the game,” Sheldon wrote in his report released on Wednesday.

“These are significant institutional failings for which there is no excuse. During this period [October 1995 to May 2000, when the FA launched its comprehensive child protection programme], the FA did not do enough to keep children safe.”

Sheldon said “other matters took higher priority” at the FA. It was not a small organisation given England staged the European Championship in 1996 and worked for years on an ultimately unsuccessful bid for the 2006 World Cup, with the FIFA vote in 2000.

It took until 2004 — 10 years after Bennell’s arrest in Florida — for the FA to introduce rules for tours and tournaments addressing child protection, which Sheldon concluded, “ought to have been agreed far earlier.”

He was first jailed in Britain in 1998 after returning from the US but was not suspended from football after his release in 2003. Bennell was also jailed in 2015, with further convictions in 2018 and last year.

“The failure to take any action with respect to Bennell following his release from prison in 2003 is troubling,” Sheldon said. “Although there is no evidence that Bennell did seek to involve himself further with football, the FA had taken no steps to prevent this from happening.

“As a result, the FA allowed children to be put at potential risk of abuse by Bennell had he attempted to involve himself in football.”

Sheldon said although child protection in sport has improved since 2005, he was making 13 recommendations, particularly for the FA to now act on. They include assigning one board member the role of children's safeguarding champion, developing a five-year strategy, and annual spot checks of grassroots clubs safeguarding policies.

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