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## **Coalition of Anti-Abuse Charities Condemns Institutional Abuse That Beggars Belief**

A coalition of learning disabilities charities that campaign against abuse has welcomed today's report from the Healthcare Commission into institutional abuse of people with learning disabilities at Sutton and Merton Primary Care Trust and condemned the abuse that was discovered.

"The Healthcare Commission report has revealed an appalling state of affairs" says Kathryn Stone, Chief Executive of Voice UK. "It states that there was a 'high incidence of physical assault' in a setting in which vulnerable people were meant to be being cared for. There was rape, sexual assault and inspectors finding a man masturbating in front of service-users in a lounge. It is good that staff were well-intentioned, but it was still an institution in the worst sense of the word."

"There are frightening parallels between the institutional abuse of people with learning disabilities in Sutton and Merton and similar abuse in Cornwall highlighted in another Healthcare Commission report a few months ago" says Richard Curen, Director of Respond. "It beggars belief that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in two totally separate settings, staff did not know that holding people down and effectively locking them up is not acceptable. We fear what the Healthcare Commission's audit of learning disability services will find across the rest of the country"

The Healthcare Commission report concluded that in both Sutton and Merton PCT and Cornwall Partnership NHS Trust institutional abuse was occurring but that staff were unaware that what they were doing in fact constituted abuse. Staff also lacked awareness about the appropriate use of restraint. In one case at Sutton and Merton a splint was used to prevent a woman putting her hand in her mouth despite the Psychology Department stating it was unnecessary. In another case, a man was tied in a special chair for long periods. Doors were also designed so that people could not get out.

"It raises the real question as to whether people with learning disabilities were being unlawfully detained – we don't know because no one seems to have done an assessment" says Curen.

"The shocking thing is that staff did not report all the incidents of violence, inappropriate use of drugs and inappropriate restraint" says Deborah Kitson, Director of the Ann Craft Trust. "A home manager raised concerns about a care worker he was working with but says that he was told he faced disciplinary action if he continued voicing concerns. This care worker went on to rape a woman with severe learning disabilities."

In sentencing this care worker last year to six years in prison, Judge Binning stated that:

*"It is difficult to think of a case that would involve a greater betrayal of trust. There you were employed to look after this woman in her 40s with a mental age of two to three. You were employed to look after her and abused her in a way that betrayed the trust placed in you to an appalling extent, and, what is more, apparently in the knowledge that she had already been the victim of sexual abuse."*

“It is fantastic that this man was punished and we agree with Judge Binning’s comments, but you have to ask whether this rape could have been prevented if there had been proper whistleblowing policies in place” continued Kitson. “The Healthcare Commission found management failure at every level and no one person responsible for the problems. Our research has shown the value of effective whistleblowing in adult protection and we hope all care settings will ensure their staff feel able to raise concerns about abuse without retribution. We applaud Sutton and Merton for referring this matter to the Healthcare Commission themselves and are pleased that there have been improvements since the inspection.”

## **Note to Editors**

1. Voice UK supports people with learning disabilities and other vulnerable groups who have experienced crime or abuse. We also support their families, carers and professional workers. For further information visit [www.voiceuk.org.uk](http://www.voiceuk.org.uk).
2. The Ann Craft Trust works with staff in the statutory, independent and voluntary sectors to protect people with learning disabilities who may be at risk from abuse. We also provide advice and information to parents and carers who may have concerns about someone they are supporting. For further information visit [www.anncrafttrust.org](http://www.anncrafttrust.org).
3. Respond offers a range of services which provide emotional and psychological support to victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse who have learning disabilities. It also provides training and support to professionals and carers working with them. For further information visit [www.respond.org.uk](http://www.respond.org.uk).
4. Interviews available upon request.

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