

Inquiry into 'cover-up of rape at care home'

Andrew Norfolk

An independent inquiry was ordered last night into a watchdog's cover-up of the suspected rape of an autistic man by a high-risk sex offender in a care home.

It comes after *The Times* revealed that the incident in 2015 was kept hidden from the public by the Care Quality Commission, which regulates England's 16,000 care homes. CQC also failed to prosecute the company for criminal offences linked to the incident.

This newspaper told yesterday of multiple sex alerts at three north London homes run by Hillgreen Care. In the most serious case, at a home in Enfield, north London, a known predatory sex offender was found by a member of staff in the bedroom of a young man with severe autism. It seemed that a sex act had taken place. Questioned by care workers, the man — who can be identified only as JL — admitted that he pulled down the victim's lower clothing and had sex with him.

At the time, JL was awaiting trial for sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl on a bus, an offence for which he received a suspended prison sentence last year.

Senior managers at Hillgreen initially ordered staff not to report the suspected rape, even though the victim was considered to lack the mental capacity to consent to sex. The victim's underwear, which had potential forensic evidence, was washed before it could be tested.

More than 20 months after the inci-

dent, no charges have been brought. When it inspected the home after it was informed of the suspected rape, CQC published a report describing it as a place where residents "felt safe".

Civil enforcement measures taken by CQC have since led to the closure of three Hillgreen care homes, including the one at Enfield, but the company continues to operate homes for adults with complex needs in the London boroughs of Haringey, Hackney and Greenwich.

Sir David Behan, the CQC's chief executive, said last night that *The Times* "rightfully challenged the action we have taken in respect of the care provided to the people who were resident" at the Enfield home. "I believe that we could and should have taken more action more speedily," he added.

Sir David said that he was commissioning an independent investigation to report to the CQC board. Its findings will be made public. Enfield and Hackney are among local authorities that no longer place adults in Hillgreen homes.

Both councils are understood privately to share the frustration of the Enfield victim's mother at the CQC's seeming reluctance to bring criminal charges. Yesterday she demanded to know "why Hillgreen is still able to run homes with vulnerable people in them".

Solicitors for Hillgreen described many of the criticisms of the company as unfair and inaccurate.

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