

Autism charity accused of care abuse cover-up

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By Victoria Ward

THE National Autistic Society has been accused of covering up a care home scandal in which residents were forced to eat chillies and repeatedly thrown into a swimming pool.

The abuse was likened to “Winterbourne View without the cameras”, echoing a scandal in Bristol that was exposed in an undercover BBC Panorama documentary.

Mendip House in Somerset was run by a male “gang” who threw cake at residents, forced them to crawl on all fours and made them fund staff meals out, a review found.

One staff member is said to have put a ribbon around a resident’s neck and ridden him “like a horse” while another made a resident eat an onion.

The report, by the Somerset Safeguarding Adults Board, noted that the NAS conducted an investigation and had evidence of “degradation” but failed to report it to the local council or the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

“The staff at Mendip House engaged in behaviour that was cruel and far below the standard expected,” the review said. “The NAS’ own records revealed that critical information, including poor staff conduct, alleged assaults and drug use or sale, was not shared beyond senior managers, who took no action.”

It called for a nationwide change to the way care homes are managed.

Mendip House closed in 2016 after an anonymous tip-off triggered an investigation that led to the review. The

CQC admitted it should have responded to allegations made two years earlier. Staff were disciplined and police investigated but no criminal proceedings were launched.

Set in 26 acres, Mendip House, near Burnham-on-Sea, was home to six adults and had a staff of 26. It was one of seven homes that formed Somerset Court, the first specialist centre for people with autism in the UK.

The review said the “laddish culture” allowed staff to turn up late because of tattoo appointments or bring their children into work. When it

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emerged that residents had been funding staff meals out, £10,000 had to be reimbursed. One staff member preferred playing video games rather than take residents out.

A resident in her 20s vanished from the site in 2015 and again the following year without staff noticing.

Richard Crompton, the independent chairman of the SSAB, said: “This happened to be in Somerset, but the weaknesses in the system are nationwide and must be considered at that level.”

Mark Lever, chief executive of the NAS, has apologised and said the charity was committed to “making sure that the lessons are learned”.