

**Sandy Brindley, CEO Edinburgh Rape Crisis  
BBC Radio Scotland, 19 September 2024**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0022yk6> (starts at approx 1:06)  
or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRrnXyRFVLU>

Interviewer

The Chief Executive of Rape Crisis Scotland has apologised unreservedly to survivors after a damning review found one of its centres failed to protect women-only spaces. Sandy Brindley said she would not resign from her role, but is focused on addressing concerns raised at Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre. In an independent review published last week, it found that the centre had not put survivors first, and that women-only spaces had not been provided for 16 months. That led to the resignation of the centre's chief executive, Mridul Wadhwa, a transwoman who was criticised in the review. In an exclusive interview, Sandy Brindley spoke to me earlier.

Sandy Brindley

What happened here was significant failures within one of our rape crisis centres. They're autonomous organisations, but they're members of Rape Crisis Scotland. To be a member of Rape Crisis Scotland, you have to work to National Service Standards. Edinburgh Rape Crisis faced a tribunal in January when it was very clear they weren't working within our standards. We commissioned an independent review, which really revealed significant failings, and we are committed to working with Edinburgh to implement those recommendations. And also, there were some recommendations for Rape Crisis Scotland. I think there's a lot to do, and I am determined that we're going to do it and make sure survivors across Scotland can be confident in the service they receive, no matter where in Scotland they're looking for support.

Interviewer

So you're not going to resign?

Sandy Brindley

I've worked in Rape Crisis, I started when I was 21 as a volunteer on a helpline. I turned 50 in January. I really believe in this movement. We have achieved so much working with survivors, working with staff, working with volunteers. I think there's still a lot to do, and as long as I feel that I can contribute to that and make a difference for survivors, I will be staying.

Interviewer

Okay. There's someone that would say that you're putting yourself before the service, because this row has been damaging. Are you putting yourself before survivors? Some have said you're hiding behind survivors.

Sandy Brindley

Yes, and that is one of the key reasons I wanted to do this interview today, is that there have been a whole number of survivors speaking out on social media defending Rape Crisis Scotland. And that is really lovely, but I am the Chief Executive of Rape Crisis Scotland. It is my job to answer questions and answer any concerns and to be accountable for what is happening in terms of rape crisis services across Scotland,

Interviewer

There have been failings. Do you apologise to the survivors?

Sandy Brindley

Yes, I would unreservedly apologise to any survivor who's either been let down by Edinburgh, although I do think it is important to recognise the report, the independent report found that many, many survivors received a vital service from Edinburgh Rape Crisis, but to any survivor who did not feel able to access a service at Edinburgh, I would apologise, and I would also apologise if we have not been clear enough at Rape Crisis Scotland that our absolute priority is making sure that every survivor who needs a rape crisis service will get the service they need.

Interviewer

How involved were you Ms Brindley, with the appointment of Mridul Wadhwa?

Sandy Brindley

I had no involvement.

Interviewer

None at all?

Sandy Brindley

None at all. They're an independent centre. They have their own board. It's the board that is responsible for appointments. It'd be totally inappropriate for Rape Crisis Scotland to be appointing a member of staff at a totally distinct, autonomous organisation.

Interviewer

Do you agree with her appointment?

Sandy Brindley

At the time there was no reason not to. She had significant experience in the Violence Against Women sector. I think what we have seen in this report, however, is quite a significant failure of management and governance within the centre, and I think it is incumbent on the ERCC board, with our support, to make sure those failings are addressed.

Interviewer

How much of that would you take responsibility for, as your failure, in the position that you're in?

Sandy Brindley

I think the key learning for us from what's happened with Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre is that we need a much more robust framework in place for assessing the national service standards. So at the moment, what happens is, centres sign up, so they do a declaration on a yearly basis that they're working within the standards, including providing women-only spaces. However, despite making this declaration to us, it's clear that Edinburgh were not working within the standards for 16 months, and we weren't aware of that. And that is something that really concerns me, so what we're looking to do is to put in place a robust framework of assessment with external verification to make sure that we can be confident

the standards are followed, but most importantly, to make sure survivors can be confident the standards are followed.

Interviewer

Why wasn't that failure picked up for 16 months, do you think?

Sandy Brindley

I discovered the situation in Edinburgh last October. The leadership team met with me to tell me about the circumstances leading to their forthcoming employment tribunal. And I was really concerned by what they told me, and it was apparent from that meeting that they were not following our standards and they were not following trauma informed practice, in my view. So what I did was I requested an urgent meeting with Edinburgh Rape Crisis board, and I asked them to conduct an urgent internal review into policies and guidance around the support service at Edinburgh.

Interviewer

And that was in October?

Sandy Brindley

That was in October. I then wrote them formally to outline my concerns. In January, they had the employment tribunal, and it was clear to us, from the evidence that came out of the employment tribunal that there were significant issues, and also that there were clear lessons to be learned. And that's why we commissioned an independent review from Vicky Ling, who's a legal specialist, to review the centre to see where the gaps were in terms of the service standards, to help inform us with a way forward. And what we also asked her to do was make recommendations for us at Rape Crisis Scotland, so that we could look at what are the learnings for us from this, and what can we do differently?

Interviewer

We'll get on to those recommendations. So you were aware of no concerns prior to October?

Sandy Brindley

None at all.

Interviewer

Okay. Just back to the appointment. Was there not any point that you could foresee controversy with the appointment of a transwoman to an organisation like Rape Crisis?

Sandy Brindley

I think it definitely did prove to be controversial. I was not involved in that appointment or that decision, but what I would say is that most Rape Crisis Centres in Scotland, not all, but most, work with, provide support to men, women, trans people and non binary people. So there's no inherent reason within that that you couldn't have a trans person working within a rape crisis centre. I think what is crucial, however, is that if you do have a rape crisis service that is supporting all survivors, that there's dedicated women-only spaces within that so that survivors that need that, and I absolutely recognise that that is a priority for many women, that that is protected within your centre. And this is the issue is that it wasn't protected within the Edinburgh centre.

Interviewer

Do you think there were failings in that that should have been picked up before 16 months passed?

Sandy Brindley

I think it should have been picked up. And I think what that speaks to is the need for a much more robust framework of assessment. At Rape Crisis Scotland, we are not a regulator of rape crisis centres. We're the national office, but we do require centres to work within our national standards. And it is clear to me that the biggest learning from this experience has been that we need a much more robust framework, where if there is an issue with the service standards, that we can identify that at an early stage so that we can work with the centre to address it.

Interviewer

There has been a lot in the media about comments that Mridul made on a podcast called Guilty Feminists that caused some controversy. She said bigoted people who needed to reframe their trauma, talking about some survivors, they should be re-educated if they did not agree all trans women were female. Did that raise alarm bells?

Sandy Brindley

I do not think the word bigot in rape survivors should ever be used in the same sentence. When that podcast came out, we worked with Edinburgh Rape Crisis and spoke to them. Mridul assured us that her comments were taken out of context, that she hadn't intended them to refer to rape survivors that wanted a single-sex service. So what we did was we worked with her to do a second piece to make that clear, to try and reassure survivors that that was not her view.

Interviewer

We'll talk about the independent review that you mentioned, the review of Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre, it said that the actions of some staff there caused damage to some survivors. What would you say to those survivors?

Sandy Brindley

I would say it's a matter for deep regret, I think, for every single person involved in rape crisis, that anyone, any survivor, could be left feeling that. Rape crisis services are vital services. It takes so much courage for a survivor to reach out and to try and get support for something that's happened to her. The absolute priority for us must be that survivors can feel safe doing so, and secure doing so, and the fact that any survivor has been damaged by their experience of rape crisis or by feeling they can't access a service I think is something that needs addressed urgently.

Interviewer

I just want to put some comments to you from an MSP Sue Webber, the conservative MSP for the Lothian region. She said a change of culture was now needed across the organisation, and that you, Sandy Brindley, champion policies at the centre of, she quotes, caustic situation. What do you make of that? Did you?

Sandy Brindley

I'm not entirely sure what she means about the caustic situation, but the issue with Edinburgh was that they weren't following our policies. If they had been following our policies, they would have been providing women-only spaces. That is the issue, a lack of adherence to our policies.

Interviewer

Rape Crisis Scotland said it would ensure no repeat of the failings in Edinburgh through recommendations, you have mentioned them, suggested in the report. How can you guarantee this?

Sandy Brindley

So as soon as we found out about the practice at Edinburgh, that then became the focus of the employment tribunal, last October we convened a meeting of all our centre managers across Scotland to talk through what we saw as some of the key issues in relation to the provision of women-only spaces within rape crisis centres. And I have an absolute assurance from every centre manager that that is the case at every rape crisis centre across the country. But in addition to that, this November, we are starting a formal assessment process for all rape crisis centres in Scotland against the National Service Standards. I know there is really fantastic work happening in our rape crisis centres across the country. Survivors describe it as a life saving service, but after what's happened to Edinburgh, I think the duty is on us as a movement to demonstrate that and to be able to externally validate what I know is a really great service that many survivors are receiving.

Interviewer

The independent review gave recommendations. One was to facilitate a shared definition of a woman or female to be adopted across the network. How will you do this? And what do you think this will be?

Sandy Brindley

So we have started this process already. This was a process we started immediately, as I say, in October, when I discovered the issues that were happening at Edinburgh. I think what survivors need is to be assured they can make an informed choice about the service. I think it's important to also hold that trans people are raped too and also require a service. So it's about making sure that the way that centres structure their service meets the needs of both trans people, of men, if they do provide a service to male survivors, but also provides dedicated single-sex spaces within their centre. I think that is absolutely possible to do.

Interviewer

That could be possible within one centre?

Sandy Brindley

I think it is absolutely possible within one centre. How that is delivered will look different in different centres. So how a centre runs in Shetland, for example, will look very different to how one of our major urban centres will look. So there'll be variance in how it's delivered, but the core principle will be the same. This will be delivered across Scotland, that is what we are committed to, to working with centres to make sure that everybody in Scotland can be confident that that is what they will receive.

Interviewer

Referrals to the Edinburgh service have been paused. When do you think they will be restarted? Because this has left the big provision gap, which must be of great concern to survivors, people watching this, who have been through rape or sexual assault. When will this restart?

Sandy Brindley

This wasn't a decision we took lightly to pause referrals to the Edinburgh centre. The Edinburgh Board has obviously been in a really challenging situation, and they are working so hard to try and rectify the mistakes that have been made and to address the recommendations and the review. I asked them to submit an action plan to me about how they plan to address the issues raised in the review. I received that this week we'll be reviewing that. We'll be speaking with Edinburgh, and once we're confident that we can restart referrals, we will be doing that as soon as possible.

Interviewer

Is that weeks, do you think, months? What would you say?

Sandy Brindley

I think we need to review the action plan. We need to speak to Edinburgh. We need to ensure that we are confident that our concerns, the ones we're particularly concerned about were the data protection and safeguarding issues raised in the report, as soon as we can be confident those concerns are addressed, we will be reopening referrals.

Interviewer

And there will be a single-sex space?

Sandy Brindley

Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer

If you're a survivor of rape or sexual assault watching or listening to this and have seen the coverage of the rows, why should you have confidence again in Rape Crisis Scotland?

Sandy Brindley

Since we were set up in 1976 we have provided support to thousands and thousands of rape survivors. What rape survivors say to us is that it's a life saving service. This was an issue, and one particular centre, we deeply regret that. But that does not take away from the need for rape crisis services across Scotland, and also what survivors tell us about how helpful and lifesaving that service is.

Interviewer

As the head of Rape Crisis Scotland, there was a clear issue between two colleagues in the Edinburgh Centre, which led ultimately to an employment tribunal, which has been damaging. Why do you think it got to this position? Could this not have been sorted out previously? Could you not have sorted that out?

Sandy Brindley

If we had been aware of it, we would have done everything we could to sort it out.

Interviewer

Should you not have been aware of it?

Sandy Brindley

We should have been aware of it. We were informed last October, my advice to the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Board was that they should settle, that I had significant concerns about them proceeding with the tribunal. Fundamentally, all I can do is advise them, because the employment responsibility rests with the ERCC board.

Interviewer

The work that rape crisis centres do is hugely important. There are some that say that you perhaps lost sight of that amid this ongoing gender debate. What would you say to that?

Sandy Brindley

I do not agree that that is the case. At the forefront of everything we do at Rape Crisis Scotland and our centres across the country is making the world better for survivors, whether that's service provision, whether that's trying to improve the justice system or health responses, that is the core of everything we do.

Interviewer

What would you say to survivors of rape and sexual assault who are watching this about what you can guarantee about the future of the service that they may need to access?

Sandy Brindley

What I would say to any survivor who is listening is that our service is here for you. You can rely on us. We will meet your needs where your needs are.

Interviewer

Do you have any regrets about this issue and, if you could, would you have handled things differently?

Sandy Brindley

I have many regrets about this situation, one of my biggest regrets is the impact on survivors, and particularly survivors who have spoken out online to defend Rape Crisis Scotland. They have been subject to the most horrendous abuse, including being told they're not really a rape survivor, they must be lying about their abuse, that they're supporting abuse by supporting Rape Crisis Scotland. And that is my deepest regret, is that survivors have had to face this abuse, and in some cases, come off Twitter. It is absolutely astonishing to me that this is the position we're in where rape survivors can be treated in this way in the name of women's rights, supposedly. And I think the onus is on me as the Chief Executive of Rape Crisis Scotland, and on the rape crisis movement, to try and move to a place where rape crisis has not been weaponised in the way it has, and where rape survivors are not being abused simply for supporting our organisation.

Interviewer

That was Sandy Brindley speaking to me earlier, Chief Executive of Rape Crisis Scotland. You can see more on that story, on Reporting Scotland at 6:30 on BBC One tonight, and more on the Nine on the BBC Scotland channel at nine o'clock.