

BREAKING NEWS

Govt announces Wanganui decision - both Wanganui and Whanganui OK ... [Read more](#)

Editorial: A burden on police conscience

The Dominion Post Last updated 05:00 29/09/2009

OPINION: The more that is learned about police delays in investigating child abuse in Wairarapa, the worse it gets.

It is a wonder some police officers can sleep at night. Adults suspected of physically and/or sexually abusing children were allowed to continue living with their alleged victims, sometimes for years.

Exactly which police knew what and when is unclear. Police National Headquarters is declining to say how bosses responded to warnings that child abuse cases were going uninvestigated because an Independent Police Complaints Authority inquiry is being held into what police themselves admit were "unacceptable" delays.

However, the known facts are these: in 2006, Masterton detective Sue Mackle went over the heads of her immediate superiors in an attempt to get more resources to deal with child abuse. A part-time police officer responsible for investigating abuse in an area with a dreadful history, she said she could not cope with the 140 – "probably more" – uninvestigated cases, and had been unable to get more staff.

"My excessive file load has been widely known at a local level for years (literally) but obviously child abuse is not an area of importance for the police, as opposed to areas such as traffic, which is," she wrote in an email that went to Deputy Police Commissioner Rob Pope, Wellington district crime manager Harry Quinn and others.

Police headquarters has declined to say what was done in response, but all the evidence points in one direction. Not practical.

Police did not start tackling the backlog of Wairarapa cases until last December, when it again came to light during planning for the creation of a new District Child Protection Team.

Since then, 41 people have been arrested for offences that include rape and assault with a weapon. One case dates back 11 years. The average delay between a complaint being laid and the case being fully investigated was five to six years.

That suggests senior police in Wairarapa, in the Wellington district and at national headquarters knew of allegations of child abuse, knew they were not being investigated, but did not act to prevent further harm.

They may argue that resources were tight, but that is not an excuse for inaction. Nothing should be of higher priority to the police than protecting children.

The same year that Ms Mackle wrote to her bosses asking for help, the Police Association's publication *Police News* ran a long article highlighting delays in dealing with child abuse cases. It concluded by asking: "if a Child Abuse Team is stretched that files start backing up and a file lies unattended for six months to a year and a paedophile named in that reoffends, then whose fault is it?"

Unless the Independent Police Complaints Authority investigation throws a different light on events in Wairarapa, it is a question a number of senior police officers should ask themselves. If they cannot answer it satisfactorily, they should resign.

It is unconscionable that the police could leave a defenceless child in an environment in which he or she is being assaulted, or worse, for a day longer than necessary. To do so for years is a gross dereliction of duty.