

West Sussex
Safeguarding Adults
Board
Making Safeguarding Personal



In conversation with Tom Somerset-How



About Tom

Tom is forty-one-years-old. He has Cerebral Palsy with complex postural needs; kyphosis, scoliosis, titanium spinal rods, and is unable to stand or walk; and is severely sight impaired.

Tom lives close to his parents and has a twin sister and a brother. Prior to 2016, Tom enjoyed a full and varied life.

Tom refuses to be defined by his disabilities, or by the four years of trauma he experienced at the hands of his then-wife and paid carer between 2016 and 2020.

Background

In 2016, Tom began to experience neglect and emotional/psychological abuse by his then-wife and paid carer.

This abuse worsened over time and isolated Tom from his family and friends, until 2020, when Tom's circumstances came to light and a safeguarding referral was raised by his mother.

The safeguarding process identified concerns about serious neglect, coercive control, and intimidation. In August 2020, Tom was safely moved to temporary residential accommodation, and on 12 May 2023 Tom's ex-wife and paid carer were found guilty of holding a person in slavery or servitude and were jailed for eight years, with a further three years on license. This was the first case of its kind in the United Kingdom.

Tom, tell us a little bit about yourself, and the events that led to the safeguarding concern that was raised.

A little bit about myself. I've got cerebral palsy and I'm also severely sight impaired. I was married in 2012 and I lived together with my wife in my own house since 2010, and we had a normal life. I had 24-hour care, so we had a carer coming in who would stay, usually from about Sunday night to Friday, and then we'd have the weekend to ourselves to be a couple. This worked really well up until 2016, when things deteriorated.

The carer wouldn't get me up in the mornings, and he would stay at the weekends for no reason at all. He basically became a lodger. He became volatile and there were instances where my wife was also a victim of his outbursts. Any other carer that we had that behaved like this before, my wife would have thrown out straight away. But she would say "he's got something over us that I can't tell you", which I thought was strange. I ended up being neglected for, I'd say, literally 24 hours a day for 95% of four years, from 2016 to 2020. Then the safeguarding was raised.

I was very, very lucky as I had an iPad, and I could message people. But I'd have to erase every evidence of those conversations. Luckily, my friend then contacted my Mum, which I didn't know about. Mum tried to call me, but I was under threat from my wife that if I spoke to my Mum without her there, there would be consequences. So, as soon as Mum messaged me to ask if it

was safe to call, I thought that was strange. If I hadn't had that initial door that was opened just a crack, I would still be in this situation. I was under that level of duress, 24 hours a day. Yes, I got out, but I was very lucky.

This abuse and neglect went on for a number of years; what, in your view, were the main barriers to support being accessed sooner?

The only barrier was that they were the first and only line of defence. My wife and carer did not open the door to anybody except the postman and his drug dealer. They did not let anybody in. Not even visually. The minute there was a knock on the door, they would turn off all the lights and wouldn't even let us breathe until the people went away. The windows were quite thin, and you could still hear. They would control everything I did.

I mentioned getting past the first wall of defence. You might not know why I say that until I describe all the conflicts. If anybody is being controlled by anybody like that, if you've got no way of getting past that first line, there's no way to get out. Because I had multiple people that would have literally bashed down the door to get in; family, friends, everybody.

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Even with my wife's parents, they would call up and say, "we've not seen you in six months". This was before it properly deteriorated. I would say to her, "if you want to go up to see them without me, just ask [the carer] to come in for a day". But she would dismiss it and argue with me about it. So, she cut everybody off. It was really hard.

What was your experience of the planned move into temporary residential accommodation, in response to the safeguarding concern?

Well, after Mum and my friend had that initial conversation, and I knew why Mum wanted to get in contact with me, I told her the best times to call me. And within about a week, we had multiple conversations. Every time Mum called, my sister would be next to her recording the conversation, and every time my sister called, Mum would record the conversation. That happened for about a week. They said I would get a call from the social worker, but they couldn't get me out until he heard directly from me that I wanted to leave.

He rang me, and I didn't even give him the chance to finish the sentence. When he said, "do you want to leave?" I said, "oh my God, yes!". And then he said, "now that you've said that we've already got a plan in place. It will take about five days, but we will get you out". And for those five days, any car that went past, I was like "is that it, is this the one?!".

On the day, it went slightly awry, it didn't quite go to plan. Because, for

example, the minibus picking me up was supposed to park around the corner, but they parked straight in front of the door. But luckily, because I'd told my social worker, "you cannot leave my side" because otherwise they (my wife and carer) would've asked too many questions. But my social worker was great. He didn't leave my side for the entire thing. All he said was, "Tom has asked for respite", so he was my shield. Luckily my family were there as well, and we went off to temporary accommodation, which had everything in place that I needed.

You've been involved in the production of the Safeguarding Adults Review from the start; what would you say is your main objective when it comes to learning from your experience?

We need to find a way to look at individual circumstance and not fit it to a framework. One of the aspects of the coercion and control was the paternalism. So, the agencies' only point of contact was my wife. They wouldn't talk to me. Even with reviews, as long as they got information from her. She would just say, "everything is good, couldn't be happier".

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They'd communicate through email with her, and because she'd say everything was fine, they'd then say there was no need to see us for another six months or whatever. I only found that out when we were going through court and going through the Safeguarding Adults Review report.


At the time, it was just catastrophic failure after catastrophic failure. I don't blame the individuals, but I blame the framework of the system. There needs to be something in place that doesn't fit within the existing framework; every individual needs to have a system built around them. For example, I got in touch with people because I had an iPad and iPhone. If I hadn't had that, or they'd just taken it away from me, I wouldn't have been able to contact anybody. So there needs to be a system in place, and more professional curiosity. Particularly if you haven't heard from somebody or seen them, even if it's for something like a wheelchair assessment.

They wouldn't even let people come in to repair the hoist. The hoist company should notice that appointments were scheduled, and about three assessments had been missed. That somehow should flag on the system, and somebody should realise that something isn't right, rather than just accepting that everything is okay. That's the main thing for me.

The perpetrators of your abuse were arrested and found guilty of holding a person in slavery or servitude, and have been jailed for eight years, with a further three years on licence. What were your feelings about this outcome?

The police investigation and the court process were brilliant. The PC who worked with me was brilliant, and she still checks in with me today. I couldn't fault it at all. My only issue was the initial getting out of the house. It has opened my eyes to a lot of how the system works behind the scenes.

Organisations needs to be professionally curious. Because the social worker individually could be, but if the whole system doesn't have the resources or the time available, that's when the failure begins. I'm not saying that's the ultimate failure, but that's where it begins. On ground level, the person can be as curious as they want to be, but if they don't have the system behind them to act on the professional curiosity, that's where it falls down.



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Do you have anything else you'd like to say, which you feel people need to hear?

I just hope that my experience that I went through, even though it was horrific, I made it out and survived. My main aim is that no one goes through this again. Not a child, not an adult my age, not an elderly person, nobody. Doesn't even matter if you're able-bodied. Nobody should go through what I went through or any kind of level of what I went through.

You've all heard stories about people, even if they are fully able-bodied, who have been in similar situations where they feel like they can't leave because they have no back-up. Same thing applies.

Just because I'm in a wheelchair doesn't mean there's a system in place for me already. Everybody should have that kind of system. That the second anything goes wrong, you can instantly get out of it and not go through what I went through for four years. And I'm sure there are people that have gone through it for longer. That's my main goal. However long this process takes, I'll be here for every single bit of it.

Transcript taken from an interview with Tom Somerset-How by Russell Hite, Head of Safeguarding, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust, at the West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board Annual Conference, October 2024.

Photos on pages 2 and 6 reproduced with permission from Sussex Police.

These photos are shared at Tom's request to highlight the condition of his environment at the time of his abuse.

Find out more

In October 2024 the West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board published a Safeguarding Adults Review in respect of Tom and his experiences. The report was written with significant contribution from Tom.

You can [read the report](#), alongside learning resources, on our website.

