

# Tribunal hears of 'toxic' environment at ambulance service

5th March  
HEALTH  
NORTH EAST



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**NEAS worker shares 'toxic' workplace (Image: NEAS)**

**A member of staff at the North East Ambulance Service has spoken of a "toxic" workplace environment as bosses face allegations of "bullying colleagues" and covering up crucial information sent to coroners on patient deaths.**

Shelley Dyson, formerly head of patient safety, and Joanne Baxter, ex-director of quality and safety at the North East Ambulance Service (NEAS), appeared virtually before a Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) hearing today (Thursday, March 5).

It comes four years after NEAS faced repeated claims it misled coroners before 2020 in a bid to cover-up medical mistakes after patients died, prompting families of loved ones affected to call for a public inquiry.

Both Ms Dyson and Ms Baxter face allegations of "concealing and altering" information sent to coroners and "bullying colleagues" who previously tried to blow the whistle.

If the claims are proven, the pair, who are both no longer employed by the trust, could be handed a caution, conditions of practice, suspended, or even struck off from nursing altogether.

A number of witnesses are expected to be called during the hearing process, which is set to conclude on March 26.

During the first day of the hearing, Carol Anne McLachlan, safer care manager at NEAS, spoke of a “toxic” work environment she felt she was working under, adding it was “driven” by Ms Baxter from 2018 onwards.

A witness statement read by case presenter Rowena Wisniewska said: “I felt that the work environment was toxic and it was driven and created by Ms Baxter.

“The toxicity created made it a very difficult to come in to work.”

Ms McLachlan added: “Staff morale was very low. Some people weren’t talking to other people.

“It was just a very challenging time to work in. Nobody knew what they were coming into the next day.

“It wasn’t a pleasant environment to work in. The trust values weren’t being adhered to.”

In another incident, the date of which could not be confirmed, Ms McLachlan explained how she felt “singled out” by Ms Baxter after being a few minutes late to a meeting.

But after raising concerns with a line manager, Ms McLachlan said any disciplinary action “clearly didn’t happen”.

Ms McLachlan told the panel: “We were due to attend a director meeting. I went to retrieve some papers from the photocopier. I explained that I was on my way.

“When I got to the meeting with the other two colleagues, it was made publicly aware that we were late in front of everybody. We sat down at the back of the room.

“I felt very upset by Ms Baxter’s public humiliation as other colleagues asked if I was alright. I felt totally victimised that day by [her] approach.

“It was the way that Ms Baxter was singling me out... everybody was asking me if I was okay.”

Representing Ms Baxter was Christopher Bealey, who questioned Ms McLachlan on why she felt singled out.

“All Ms Baxter said was ‘come on guys, take a seat so we can start’,” he told the panel.

Ms McLachlan disputed this, adding she could not recall that happening.

The tribunal was adjourned and will resume on Friday (March 6).

As reported, whistleblower Paul Calvert first alleged in 2022 that NEAS had misled families and coroners at inquests to cover up medical errors dating back to 2018 and 2019.

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He raised the alarm on at least 90 cases where he believes medical reports were changed, meaning crucial details of what happened to people in their final moments, including potential negligence, may have been kept from grieving families.

MPs previously heard Paul was “bullied, harassed and blackmailed” after raising concerns about evidence being allegedly covered up within NEAS, where he worked as a coroners' officer.

NEAS apologised to families affected after a 2023 review and has repeatedly stressed it has improved and enacted 15 recommendations including around its internal culture and communication.

The trust said it has and will continue to support the NMC in its investigation.