



Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Historical Institutional Abuse and Memorial for Victims:
Ms Fiona Ryan, Commissioner for Survivors
of Institutional Childhood Abuse

27 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Ms Emma Sheerin

Witnesses:

The Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Fiona, it is good to see you. You are very welcome. I hope that your signal holds up and allows you to give your presentation. We welcome you in your new role as commissioner. You took up the position before Christmas [*Inaudible.*] We have had the opportunity to meet some of the key agencies and people involved in the area under your remit, and we are delighted to have the opportunity to hear a few words about your priorities and about what is to take place in the months and years ahead.

We will pass over to you to make a few remarks, as you would were the meeting in a Committee room. I will then open the floor to questions.

Ms Fiona Ryan (The Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse): Thank you so much, Colin and Committee members, for having me. I am just checking the sound level, Chair, because your sound was fading in and out. Am I OK?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes.

Ms Ryan: OK. As you said, I am the new Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse, a post that I took up before Christmas. Before I provide an overview of where we are and where we are going, I give profound thanks to the representatives of the victims and survivors' groups whom I have met. They have been gracious with their time and expertise. I say "expertise" because they are the experts in their lived experience, and they have shared that with me. They have also shared their concerns, and I hope to share those with you. However, I am mindful that we are having this conversation less than 24 hours after the publication of the mother-and-baby report, and I extend my sympathies to all those impacted on by that. I am very conscious that any comments that I make today are in that context.

I thank the victims and survivors of institutional childhood abuse whom I have met over the past number of weeks and who shared their experiences. I know that the Committee is deeply familiar with the issues for victims and survivors, but it is worth reiterating that victims and survivors of institutional childhood abuse endured pain, suffering and trauma at the most vulnerable time of their lives. It was a time when they most needed love, care and protection; a time when they were children. It has been a long road for the victims and survivors. For a long time, in common with their counterparts in the South, their experiences were denied or minimised. They were robbed of that by their abusers and by a system that facilitated the abuse of agency. Their rights were taken away. They have had to fight for the recognition of their lived experiences and realities. They have had to do that as a group and as individuals. I say that because survivors are more than just their experience of abuse; they are individuals. They also share common experiences with victims of domestic childhood abuse. Consequently, it is worth understanding those individual experiences, their commonalities and how the two interplay. We need to be aware of that when talking to people about their unique lived experience.

I am conscious of the realities of the victims and what they have experienced, but, at the same time, I want to reach out and send a message. Mistakenly, I alluded to my experiences of working with victims of domestic abuse. In my previous role, I spent seven years as chief executive of the largest front-line service provider for women and children experiencing domestic abuse in the Republic of Ireland. Half of our clients were children, and one in five of our women clients were victims of sexual violence in the context of domestic violence. I realised, as we know from international best practice and experience, that 80% of victims of abuse will not disclose their experiences to agencies. In fact, they might not even tell their loved ones. As I have had the privilege of engaging with victim and survivor groups, I am very conscious that there is a much larger constituency of victims and survivors out there who will never disclose their experiences to anyone.

I have spoken to you, Chair, and to other MLAs, and people have asked, "How do we reach out?" We reach out by ensuring that there are services for victims and survivors. We also need to recognise that consent and agency are paramount in principle. I could talk more about this, but I am conscious of the time. Fundamentally, any engagement that we have with victims and survivors needs to be founded on respect for agency and the principle of consent. Do they want to disclose or not? If they do, the services must be available and appropriate. Even if they do not, the services that they may encounter must be officially informed on and aware of trauma so that people are not re-traumatised.

As you said at the start, Chair, the office has been up and running for the last six weeks. Obviously, and at a very prosaic level, we are focusing on organisational development. We are focusing not only on developing our capacity to move forward with our work as outlined in legislation but on reflecting the concerns that victims and survivors have shared with us. The last month has been spent engaging with victims and survivors and with key stakeholders involved in service provision. We have also engaged with statutory stakeholders, including TEO and the redress board. We are developing our organisational capacity so that we can put in place the infrastructure to support victims and survivors with their issues. That is the fundamental goal of our office: to promote the interests of victims and survivors.

A recruitment drive started on 18 January, and we hope to be up to full capacity by mid-March. Going forward, the priority of the office will be to establish a victims' panel — that is also outlined in legislation — and to ensure that that is up and running. As I said, by the end of this year, in addition to the panel being up and running, we want to ensure that we have good working relationships with the statutory and non-statutory service providers and that we have established a means of open communication. Other issues are outside the remit of the legislation that outlines the powers of the commissioner but reflect the outcomes of the Hart inquiry, including the apology process.

I am sorry: I cannot hear you.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It would help if I took myself off mute. It would make it a lot easier to be heard. *[Laughter.]* Thank you very much for your presentation. I missed a little bit at the end because I was getting some information from the communications team. It may have dovetailed with the question that I wanted to ask, which is about the three immediate priorities in your work stream. Will you give me a flavour of some the key priorities in the next *[Inaudible.]* What are the top three things that *[Inaudible]* your operation?

Ms Ryan: The top three priorities include making sure that we are at full capacity as an agency. Right now, we have three members of staff, and the projected team is 10. I am delighted to say that my colleagues are maintaining the work that they have been doing to support victims and survivors in

making statements to the redress board. We have been able to carry on that personal support unit work. I hope that we will have a full team complement by the end of March.

Going forward with our work and our strategic or operational plan, we are looking at establishing the victims' panel. The panel is outlined in the legislation, and, effectively, it will be there to facilitate consultation and discussion with victims and survivors. A key goal for the office this year will be setting that up.

Victims and survivors have raised a number of concerns with me. The fundamental remit of the agency — the commissioner's office — is to promote the interests of victims and survivors. I have been looking at and pursuing those concerns, grouping them and seeing how they can inform our work programme.

Largely, the concerns raised with us are very much current. If I can impress anything on the Committee, I want it to be this: the reality is that we are talking about victims and survivors who experienced abuse and trauma as children and have lived with the legacy of that throughout their lives. Imagine that you broke your leg as a child: it was never set properly, you never received physio, and you carried that pain around with you for your whole life. That is what we are talking about, except that we are talking not only about physical reminders of abuse but about psychological and mental reminders and the impacts on relationships — all those things. We are talking about a community of people who experienced tremendous abuse as children and have lived with it as adults.

That community of individuals is an ageing population. I reached out to Margaret Bateson — I am very grateful to her and her team in the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) — for some basic statistics on the victims and survivors who present to them. First, they are equally split between genders, but the vast majority of individuals who engage with services are over the age of 50 or 55. Therefore, we are talking about all the issues that people have as they get older, compounded by being a victim of trauma and abuse. Added to that is the potential socio-economic deprivation that they may have experienced as a result of those experiences. In the future, because we have the powers, I hope that our office will be able to commission a wider piece of research on victims and survivors and their presenting needs, such as has happened in Scotland and Ireland. I would like to use that information to inform health services, social welfare services and social care services so that we are starting with an informed evidence base that is based on public health and demographics. That will be year 2, perhaps; year 1 is about getting up to speed with the actual presenting [*Inaudible*.]

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you for that. You mentioned getting staff in place. Do you think that you will have a full complement of staff once all of the positions are filled, or do you envisage needing more staff to enable you to deliver the work that you would like to do?

Ms Ryan: That is a great question, Colin. In the past, I have delivered two start-up organisations and a restructure. At the moment, we do not know what we do not know, so, we are making a best guess. I would like to be able to report back to TEO and the Committee within, say, six months, and say, "This is what we anticipated in our first three months in operation; here's what we have experienced". One of the duties outlined in the legislation — I have become very familiar with the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Act 2019, which outlines the powers of the commissioner and the statutory duties of the office — is to facilitate individuals seeking information in relation to their records. We know about the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), but the reality is that it is a huge area that we will, potentially, be asked to look into. It is a complicated area, given that, as the mother-and-baby report showed, some of the information and records are not there. I believe that the team in front of us is sufficient for the next three to six months, but I could well come back to you in three to six months' time to say that, on the basis of need, we expect it to be increased.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That makes sense. I have a final question. This may be a difficult question to answer because of the stage at which you are in establishing the process. Following yesterday's announcement on the mother-and-baby scandal, there is to be a six-month process to co-design a programme and a way forward. I am worried that the six months to put in place might end up being a year, a year and a half or two years. Many survivors of that scandal could be identified tomorrow. Is there any way in which support services could be offered to individuals quickly through the work that you are doing and the support services that you provide, perhaps with a little investment and some enhancement of your team? Are the two experiences similar enough that, with a little bit of effort and some resources, you could reach out quickly? You might hand that role on to somebody else in the future, but is it possible to provide a support network for survivors of the mother-and-baby scandal?

Ms Ryan: First, we have to establish what is possible in principle; then, what is possible in reality. There are huge overlaps between the victims of historical institutional childhood abuse and the victims and survivors of mother-and-baby homes, not least because, as I understand from yesterday's report, a third of the women or, more appropriately, children were under the age of 19. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is an individual under the age of 18. Therefore, children, some as young as 12, and many of whom were victims of sexual violence, rape, incest and unlawful carnal knowledge, gave birth to children. My first response to you is, "First, do no harm". I recognise the similarities and that some people will have moved from one institution to another. However, this could be a very specialist area because of some of the needs with which victims and survivors of the mother-and-baby homes will present. When you arrive in a post, you are in the privileged position of being able to ask all the really obvious questions. For example, I have been asking what specific specialist supports are available for victims of child sexual abuse — those who were sexually abused as children in the context of historical institutional abuse. I am waiting to hear back and get a comprehensive assessment of what resources are there because, obviously, I do not want to generalise on the basis of what is available in the Republic. Once those potential services emerge, we may see victims and survivors of mother-and-baby homes having to engage in that respect.

I am conscious that my office was set up under a statutory remit. That is not my wanting to use legislation as an excuse not to take on additional work, but I am conscious that we were set up to support victims of historical institutional childhood abuse. This is a community of people who have waited a very long time for this work to be carried out. I guess that I am giving you the typical answer that, in principle, of course, there are huge parallels. I do not want to pre-empt anything by saying that specialist services may need to be provided. The reality is that the office is there to support victims of historical institutional childhood abuse, and, right now, they are our priority as we set up the advisory panel.

I was hoping that my response on coming back to the Committee in three to six months' time would avoid that mother-and-baby question, but, very cleverly, you headed me off at the pass. We will not turn away anyone who comes to us. We are victim-centred. I do not know whether that answers what you asked.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That is grand. Thank you very much indeed for that, Fiona.

Mr Beattie: Fiona, thank you very much. I hope that you can hear me. That was really good. There was so much information there, and you really have hit the ground running with this. Thank you for all that you have brought forward so far.

I will ask about a couple of things, Fiona, if I may, that reflect the feedback from some of the victims' groups that the Chair and I have met. I have to say that they have been carrying themselves with incredible dignity throughout all of this. One of the issues that they raise is that the flow of information on individual cases from the redress board is not at the level that they would like. Is there any way in which we can address that issue? They also feel that respect from certain elements of the redress board has been a little lacking. In fact, they are slightly disheartened by the historical background checks, which have nothing to do with their particular case, that are being done.

Ms Ryan: Thanks so much, Doug. You are very kind. The concerns that you raise have been shared with me. I am a good talker, as any woman from Cork is, but I like to think that I am a better listener. I have spent the last month listening and hearing, listening and hearing again, taking on those concerns and ensuring that I am reflecting them appropriately, not my interpretation of them. I am very like members of the Committee in that sense.

I believe in straight talking. I engaged with the secretariat of the redress board. We had a very open and frank conversation. I said, "Here are the concerns that are being relayed to me". Being a bit of a nerd, I grouped them thematically, and I thought, "Let's just do this". The concerns expressed to me were very similar to those expressed to you. One thematic grouping is process concerns, such as turnaround times and the length of time taken for communications, and it goes into the whole area of awards and appeals. Also in that grouping is the use of language, which reflects, I think, one of the points that you raised: when engaging with victims and survivors, we have to start with first principles. If you get those first principles right, you can cascade. I am going to put my hand up here and say that I am sure that I, as commissioner, will make mistakes, as will my office, but we will own them, and it will not be from lack of trying.

To understand where you are going and in order to use those first principles, you should be aware that the first is that you should be victim-centred and respectful. I have shared with the secretariat of the redress board what I consider to be legitimate concerns. It has listened and taken them on board, and it has offered to meet the groups in order to hear those concerns, in particular those on the use of language, and to be mindful of the fact that, when people are getting communications from the redress board, they are not communications between a social worker and a doctor or a judge and a solicitor. There is a victim and survivor at the other end of that communication. There is a person who was abused as a child and has lived with that their whole life, so the board should be mindful in any communication.

So far, the redress board has been very open with me in disclosing its statistics. For example, it has two panels operating, and I know that, potentially, it would look for a third panel to operate. That may have a positive impact on turnaround times and reducing the distressed calls arising from a very long process. I do not know whether this is cheeky — as they say, carry on until you are told not to — but I went to the redress board and suggested that we have a real opportunity with the new president who is coming in, Mr Justice Ian Huddleston, to engage with victims and survivors and to really hear from them about what was going on, and, rather than having one-off engagements, particularly with the secretariat of the redress board, we could open up, which I hope would be through the advisory panel. That is why I emphasised to Colin that there could perhaps be a more structured means of engagement in order to take those concerns forward. I do not know whether that answers your concerns, Doug.

Mr Beattie: Fiona, it does. It is absolutely clear to me that you are alive to this and that you are already taking proactive action. That is always positive.

I will ask a very brief question on something that has been raised, if I may. I had a presentation from the VSS about its service delivery model for survivors of historical institutional abuse. I thought that the presentation was very good. It has really got its act together on this. However, there are two issues with that. Of course, the support is always difficult in the COVID environment that we are in now. There has always been the question, and we have raised it before at the Committee, about a funeral fund for those who passed away before they went through the redress board. I think that we had one quite recently. It is something that our Committee may well have to take forward. Is that something that you are looking at?

Secondly, some of the survivors' groups may have their funding pulled in the next little while because the VSS support is up and running. Do you have any view on that?

Ms Ryan: Again, those are great questions, Doug. First of all, Margaret Bateson and her team in the VSS appear to be doing a sterling job. Margaret and her team were able to provide me with those demographic details. That information will allow us to look at what needs are presenting. They are using a very well-established best practice social care model that I am familiar with from my previous role.

I alluded to funeral costs earlier. While the Hart investigation spanned institutions from 1922 to 1995, the reality is that the community involved is ageing, and that will present more as an issue for Northern Ireland's social services and the Executive. What are we going to do for that population and that community of people? You mentioned burials and funeral costs, and, yes, that issue came on my radar. I will be looking to raise it with the HIA team in the Executive Office. I wanted to get more of an understanding of the issues and costs that are involved and to just be able to talk and find out what the capacity is. My understanding is that it may have an implication for the Department for Communities. So, it is on my radar and is legitimate. It is going to be a growing issue for that community of individuals as they get older.

Can you still hear me? It looks like the sound is dropping. [*Interruption.*] I will turn to grants, which have fallen under TEO's remit. From my highly educated position of spending six weeks in the role, my view is that the grants are potentially crucial for the groups that are involved for their capacity building and their outreach work. In principle, I certainly see a future for them. However, since I have no authority over them and I am unaware of, shall we say, criteria or project plans that are being put in place for funding, I cannot comment much more beyond that except to say that, if they increase the capacity of victims and survivors to engage and reach out, they are a welcome thing.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Fiona.

Ms Ryan: You are welcome.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I want to bring Martina into the Spotlight. Go ahead with your questions, Martina.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for your presentation, Fiona. It is good to meet you. It would be remiss of me not to pass a short comment after the publication of the report yesterday given how we all heard details about the horror of the living conditions of the children and young girls in the mother-and-baby homes — places that were far away from anything that most of us would call a home. For many of them, it was hell on earth. I hope that the report is taken forward in a way that provides disclosure and allows society to ensure that that will never happen again.

I will declare an interest because, as a junior Minister, I had a responsibility for the establishment of the historical institutional abuse inquiry and the appointment of Judge Hart. I am very aware of the victims who you talked about, and I am conscious of all that they went through. I heard some harrowing stories of their conditions and what they were subjected to. We know that historical child abuse is extremely traumatic, with lifelong impacts, and, unfortunately, a stigma is attached as well. As you and others know, the impacts of such traumas on victims result in memory loss, blocking the trauma out and difficulties in speaking out about their experience, which leads to victims and survivors not coming forward. Will you ensure that, insofar as you can, your staff are educated in trauma or have a trauma-informed perspective when dealing with victims of historical institutional abuse?

Ms Ryan: Martina, that is really insightful, and I echo all your comments. Having led a 45-strong team of specialists in abuse in my last role, I am highly aware of the need to have appropriate staff who are trauma-informed. At the very least, when you are looking to put together a team like that, you must ensure that everyone who is working in your organisation is trauma-informed, from administration, perhaps, through to IT.

It might sound ridiculous to say, but anyone who has an opportunity in any way, shape or form to encounter a victim or a survivor needs to be trauma-aware. As people progress in different roles where they are directly engaging with victims and survivors, perhaps on their traumatic experiences, that is where the training needs to be more progressive and more advanced. You go from being trauma-aware and trauma-informed to having the appropriate qualifications that allow you to carry out that work.

We are very lucky as a start-off organisation to be able to put that in place. For example, I have a colleague in the personal support unit at present, and she has a background in counselling and mediation and has helped, I think, over 80 victims and survivors with their statements to the redress board. You made a crucial point about the reality for a lot of victims and survivors. We know that with victims of trauma their memory comes and goes and that new memories can resurface, and my observation, as a general point, is that I would hate for that to ever be taken as, "Why did someone say that in one place but did not say it in another?". The reality is that you can have recovered memories. We know that trauma impacts on memory. Also, someone who has been through a form of abuse, especially, forgive me, sexual abuse, might not even have the language to describe what happened to them, particularly male victims of sexual abuse. People cannot envisage it happening to a boy, and it undermines masculinity and identity. As a whole system, we need to have that awareness of what it means for victims, their trauma and the role of memory.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Fiona. How will you ensure that the victims are engaged with, supported and made aware of the redress scheme? It relates a bit to what I spoke about and to something that Doug mentioned. Victims and survivors need to know that emotional support services are available. Some members of the Committee have been informed — probably all of us at this stage have been informed — that some victims are reporting that they have lost faith in the redress board, and some of them say that they feel that it is like being on trial. Going back to what I said, many victims thought that it would be a private way of telling the extent of the abuse, and some of them are saying that that is not their experience. I find that a bit concerning.

Ms Ryan: Again, Martina, you are asking really important questions. These are general observations. The redress board and the commissioner's office, as you know better than I do, were set up under the Historical Institutional Abuse Act 2019, and when you go through the legislation for the redress board, even if you are familiar with legislation, you see that it takes about two or three passes to even get it into your head. I am thinking, "How is a victim or survivor meant to understand this?" You cannot get away from the fact that the redress board is a legalistic infrastructure with legal processes involved. I

know that it has brought social care specialists on to panels in order to provide that holistic knowledge and to inform the process so that victims and survivors who are engaging with the panels do not feel that they are in a judicial, legalistic or adversarial environment. Be that as it may, that was the intention.

You asked how we can promote the redress board. Obviously, public awareness campaigns need to be undertaken to make people aware that this is a reality for victims and survivors. Some victims and survivors have come back to me and said, "I do not want redress. I am not looking for money. I do not want people to think that I am saying this only because of money". Coming from a working-class background, I can relate to that, and I had to say to them, "This is your right. This is a reparations framework on behalf of the state. This is your right to [*Inaudible*.] You will not be looked down on because you have gone for redress". I have to reassure them that it is right. The first thing is that we need to break through any perception that victims and survivors have that people will think that they are after money.

The second thing is to carry out a good public awareness campaign, because, again, my office is supposed to promote the redress board, but, with that promotion, there will need to be monitoring and responsibility. It will be hugely important for the advisory panel to open up communications and to ensure that there is a two-way flow of communications and that the redress board listens to victims and survivors. We have to do that in a structured way and not just in a one-off way, and, to be fair to the redress board — I have raised concerns with it in quite frank language — it is open to hearing that and wants that dialogue. The advisory panel of victims and survivors, which my office is due to set up, could be a useful mechanism for exploring that. Rather than telling victims and survivors, "How do you want this to happen?", it could ask them, "What do you think is the best way to ensure that the redress board is victim-centred and trauma-informed in how it carries out its processes?"

Ms Anderson: I have one last point. It touches on what Doug ended with. We are all aware that, unfortunately, many victims of historical institutional abuse have died —

Ms Ryan: Yes.

Ms Anderson: — and some of them do not even have a headstone. This question relates to the memorialisation, because there had been discussions about a type of memorialisation. I encourage you to do this — I do not think that I need to — but I just want to say that engagement with the victims and survivors about the kind of memorialisation is crucial. For many of them, a headstone is so crucial on the grave of those who have already passed as opposed to a statue somewhere that many of them may not see as fitting as a headstone. However, I take it from listening to you that you are acutely aware of the victims and their needs and that you will listen to them on that.

Ms Ryan: Thank you, Martina. First of all, yes, I am aware of the issue. Do I have an instant solution? No, I do not, but what I can provide is a commitment to follow through on it.

It would probably not be the most politically astute thing to do, but I would observe. It seems a bit hypocritical for us to talk about memorials when people are struggling to find headstones for people who have passed. That goes alongside Doug's comment, and I am glad that you brought up as well that we can sit down and have that conversation with victims and survivors.

I think that there are two wishes. One is about literally honouring people's past on an individual basis, and the second is what you alluded to, which is the memorial process. I know that victims and survivors have mixed feelings about the use of the word "memorialisation", but a memorial process flows on from an apology process, which is, obviously, for the state and institutions to undertake.

We have to look into what people want from a memorial and what has worked. There is the idea of living memorials, for example. The mother-and-baby homes report in the Republic talked about setting up, for example, scholarships to research the area further. Potentially, that is a memorial. I am not being prescriptive here because that is not my role, but a wide variety of potential memorials are available.

Ms Anderson: Fiona, you would know from the last discussion at the Committee that there are lots of differences on the constitutional issue, but I can tell you, from engaging with the members on the Committee and cross-party before, that you will find that this is one issue where you will find common ground. I believe that you will find a lot of support on the Committee as you take this forward. I look forward to engaging with you again. Thank you.

Ms Ryan: Thanks so much, Martina.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Can I ask for Emma Sheerin to be brought up into the Spotlight, please? I have some sympathy for DJs when they have those bouts of dead air when something does not happen. We have Emma now.

Ms Sheerin: That wee lag is incredibly frustrating. Fiona, thanks for your presentation and for joining us this afternoon. It is abundantly clear from everything that you said that the questions that have been asked on victim-centred process and dealing with trauma in a sensitive manner are your focus, and it is obvious from your background that you are well equipped to do that.

I do not want to reiterate anything that has been touched on, but I suppose there is a similarity between the victims of historical institutional abuse and the victims from the mother-and-baby homes. We had the statement on that in the North yesterday following on from what happened in the Twenty-six Counties a fortnight ago. My question relates to what happened, North and South — we can talk about it in an historical context, but it was in the very recent past — as a result of Churches and other organisations institutionalising a policy of misogyny, and their hands were held in doing so by both states. Society, in some circumstances, caved to and facilitated that, and that is so regrettable.

In the North, we have had a change in legislation on abortion. That has not yet been implemented, and the Health Minister has not acted on it. Can you comment on the human rights abuses that the victims experienced and on trying to break down the barriers by having the conversations and breaking down the stigma to this? We can still see laws here in 2021 that have been implemented but that have not been implemented on the ground that equate to human rights abuses. Do you have any comment on that and on how your work will tie in with breaking down that stigma?

Ms Ryan: Emma, that is a pretty far-ranging observation. You made valuable connections between attitudes and approaches, North and South, to victims of historical institutional childhood abuse and to victims of the mother-and-baby homes.

I am probably a bit older than you, but, to put it into perspective, what we are talking about is not ancient history. Those homes were operating in the South up until the mid '90s. I have met women in my personal life who went through those homes and had to give up their children. The reality is, and, again, forgive me, the Southern media said that there was not a family that was untouched by this. That is true. Everyone has a story about a friend or a grand-aunt. There are stories about the hurt and sorrow that was felt on the ground — the emotional part of this. There are the stories about pregnant 12-year-olds. Just think about those words: "pregnant 12-year-olds". As an individual and a person, the rights of a child in that situation were destroyed and smashed. I am not using a passive term. Those things happened. No, someone made the decision to smash that child's rights on every fundamental level. That is what we are talking about: the absolute denial and minimisation.

The victims of historical institutional childhood abuse had their rights denied as children in direct contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is not a radical feminist position, but the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in the South and the Tánaiste said that the mother-and-baby-homes were institutionalised, systemised misogyny — the need for women and girls to be controlled. I was glad to see the Northern Irish media report that these were children — 12-year-old women — giving birth to children when they were children themselves.

Within the remit of my role and what I can comment on, if we do not learn from the mistakes that happened with historical institutional childhood abuse and in the mother-and-baby homes, we will be doomed to repeat them. We need to understand the reality of how that system was able to operate. That practice was not unknown. People knew what was happening. To anyone who looks at this and says, "It was society's fault", I say that society functions on norms. How do norms get established? Who decides what are the norms? They get established because it suits someone in power. It suits the power structures that exist, and those norms are constantly being reinforced and renewed. That is how women and children, boys and girls, were able to be systematically and systematically abused. They were physically, emotionally, psychologically and sexually abused and neglected in the context of historical institutional childhood abuse. For others, there was the emotional and psychological abuse, the neglect and the absolute destruction of any form of agency or control, which you saw in the mother-and-baby homes. I think that that is probably within the remit of what I can comment on in answer to your question.

Ms Sheerin: Everything has been covered. I appreciate that, and I appreciate your time with us this afternoon. Thank you.

Ms Ryan: You are welcome.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Fiona, I do not have any other indications from members that they wish to speak, so I can conclude. Apologies; I think that some of the feedback that is causing problems is coming from the speakers on my computer. I do not have headphones in at the minute, but I will rectify that for next week.

Fiona, thank you for your presentation and for coming along to us. The Committee has had a keen interest in the matter since we got together as a Committee about a year ago. The fact that you are here and knowing that there is a fully fledged commissioner who can move forward and deliver results on the ground and deliver services for survivors gives us some comfort. We know that, if we have issues, we can come to you. Likewise, if there are issues that need to be championed, you can come back to us. That allows the landscape to change and for survivors to know that there are people who are there for them on all fronts. I wish you well in your work in the period ahead. I hope that the staffing is put in place and that you will have the support that you need to do the task that you have ahead. On behalf of the Committee, I wish you all the best in that. Thank you for coming along today.

Ms Ryan: Thank you. I really appreciated the opportunity.