



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Mother-and-baby Institutions:
Executive Office

29 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradshaw (Chairperson)
Ms Connie Egan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Brian Kingston
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Ms Emma Sheerin

Witnesses:

Mr Martin Carey	The Executive Office
Ms Pauline Corscadden	The Executive Office
Mr Gareth Johnston	The Executive Office
Ms Michaela Jordan	The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I welcome, from the Executive Office, Gareth Johnston, senior responsible officer; Martin Carey, programme director; Michaela Jordan, programme manager; and Pauline Corscadden, programme team and secretariat. We have three panels presenting today, so I would appreciate it if you could keep your opening remarks brief. Over to you.

Mr Gareth Johnston (The Executive Office): Thank you, Chair. We appreciate the opportunity to present. I will say a little bit by way of introduction, and then I will pass over to Martin.

As Ministers have acknowledged in the Assembly, the historical discrimination of women and girls and their children in mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses should be a source of shame for us all. The truth recovery programme aims to provide truth, acknowledgement and accountability to people affected by those institutions and by their historical pathways and practices. That has been an important ministerial, Executive and departmental priority, and I have no doubt that it will remain so.

As we start, it is important that we acknowledge the many years of campaigning by victims and survivors to get to this point. While there is much work still to be done, there is now a process that has been agreed by the Executive to deliver those aims. For our part, my team looks forward to working with and assisting the Committee in its important role in this. I am conscious of that role now and when legislation comes forward. There will be very intense scrutiny.

I will hand over to Martin to outline the progress that has been made to date and, secondly, to say something briefly about the plans for the public inquiry and the redress public consultation, which, we hope, will launch in the coming weeks, subject to Executive agreement.

Mr Martin Carey (The Executive Office): Thanks to the Committee for inviting us today. As Gareth outlined, I will provide a short overview of progress against the five recommendations that were agreed in November 2021 and are contained in the truth recovery design panel's report.

Recommendation 1 centres on the principles, including having a victims and survivors-centred approach. In practice, that has been demonstrated through two key elements. The first is a monthly Victims and Survivors Consultation Forum, which has met on 30 occasions and is chaired by our independent chair, Avila Kilmurray. You will have the opportunity to hear from Avila and other forum members today.

Those meetings have, at times, been challenging, but they have been important in providing an opportunity to inform, consult and challenge and in helping us to get to this point. Work is ongoing with forum members on how the next phase looks, including as regards advocacy roles. We thank all those who have attended and participated for their important contributions. Secondly, over 300 people have accessed dedicated and comprehensive support services. Those include general and individual needs packages, including psychological, social, information retrieval and oral testimony support. The packages have been tailored to meet people's needs.

Recommendation 2 centres on the responsibilities of the Executive Office (TEO). Those include the establishment of the truth recovery programme and close working with colleagues in the Department of Health around access to records, with the Department of Justice on legal support and with the Department for Communities on the preservation of documents via the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Recommendation 3 centres on the investigation, seeking to answer three core questions: what happened, why did it happen and who was responsible? Those questions pertain to the period between 1922 and 1995. The investigation is a two-stage process. The first stage is a non-statutory, 10-person independent panel, which was appointed in April 2023 for a period of 24 months. You will have the opportunity to hear from that panel in the next session, including on the findings of panel's interim report and its focus for the next 12 months. The second stage is a statutory public inquiry, which will have the additional powers to compel evidence and hold public hearings. Public consultation on the inquiry will outline powers equivalent to the Inquiries Act 2005 and will seek views in relation to that.

Recommendation 4 centres on information, including the preservation of and access to information. The passing of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 was important for the preservation of statutory and non-statutory records in relation to this matter. TEO has commissioned PRONI to survey, preserve and digitise over 4,500 items from private collections held by institutions. To date, deposit agreements have been put in place for 3,000 items, based on the close working relationship between PRONI and the independent panel and the institutions. Importantly, there will also be an examination of records held by and for public bodies in PRONI and elsewhere.

Individuals being able to access information about themselves has been and remains a key issue. Many adoptees and birth mothers have been unable to access the information that they are entitled to. That has caused understandable frustration and distress. To help address that, adoption practice guidance for social workers and adoption agencies responsible for the release of historic records was issued in November 2023. That was developed by the Department of Health in conjunction with a small working group of victims and survivors who co-wrote helpful and clear guidance. There is a programme of training and monitoring in place for the next 12 months, and we are hopeful for positive developments in relation to that.

Recommendation 5 centres on redress and righting the wrongs of the past, including financial and non-financial redress. The public consultation will seek views on that. We appreciate that this is one of the most difficult and emotive parts of the process, with strong views held. The policy proposals reflect the recommended two-stage process, with a standardised payment before a formal investigation concludes. That is likely to be based on admission to an institution. The individual assessment would follow the public inquiry and be based on an individual's experience. It is likely to include factors such as duration, severity and impact.

The redress consultation will also seek views on proposals to establish an independent body to administer the scheme and gather views on the policy proposals, with a focus on the standardised payment, including on eligibility for posthumous claims, which have been key issues in the pre-consultation engagement and have important equality, privacy and human rights considerations. The Ministers plan to meet victims and survivors ahead of the consultation. It is planned to be a 12-week consultation that will include a number of face-to-face and online events, with those being advertised to encourage wide participation. It is an important call to action and will enable people to make an informed choice on how they can engage with the programme based on their preferences and the support available. Once the public consultation closes, work will be taken forward to rework a draft Bill before seeking ministerial and Executive agreement ahead of introduction of the Bill to the Assembly this year.

To conclude, there is a clear moral need to comprehensively deal with these issues in a clear and sympathetic way. Despite the many challenges and while acknowledging that there is much more work to do, it is important to note the meaningful achievements, which have been driven, in large part, by our victims and survivors. Those achievements include the fact that 300 people are accessing the co-design support services; the consultation forum, which has met on 30 occasions; the independent panel being appointed and its interim report being published; the passing of the Preservation of Documents Act; the identification of the 4,000 archival items and the deposit agreements for the same; the development of the practice guidance, which was co-designed by victims and survivors; and the preparatory works for the upcoming public inquiry and redress consultation. We are committed to helping to provide truth, acknowledgement and accountability to those affected.

Thank you for the opportunity to make those opening remarks. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you very much, panel. We really appreciate it.

I will start way back in 2016, when I first came to the Executive Office and met maybe one of you. At that time, Birth Mothers and their Children for Justice was calling for a public inquiry. We then had the research commissioned by Queen's and Ulster University (UU) in 2018, and that was to set up the business case for a public inquiry. We then had the truth recovery design panel set up, and it made recommendations in October 2021. In April 2023, the Truth Recovery Independent Panel was established. Now, in May 2024, we have the consultation on a public inquiry — I appreciate that it lasts 12 weeks — and we will then have the appointment. That will be 10 years. Why did you not listen to Birth Mothers and their Children for Justice 10 years ago? It was clear that there needed to be a public inquiry into what happened.

Mr Johnston: We are following a process that has been followed across a range of areas. We do research, establish the need for a public inquiry, the public inquiry reports, there is a redress scheme and the issues that a public inquiry has identified can be addressed. Throughout this, we have sought to listen to victims and survivors, but an evidence base needed to be gathered through research and through the truth recovery design panel. There was a co-design process through that panel that needed to be worked through. We all would have liked, in retrospect, to have been able to go through the stages quicker, but it was important that we gathered the evidence base and did the co-design. You see in other situations that, when those stages have been missed out, there have been issues further down the line.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Ten years. I will move on.

On the redress scheme, was there talk about the potential for a cut-off date for posthumous deaths? Will that be consulted on? I will come back to the consultation in a wee second.

There is another issue. The Truth Recovery Independent Panel talked about publicly funded legal advice to get the institutions to provide records. Can there not be provisions in the Bill that would compel — I know that you talked about preservation — them to hand records over? Why should public money — I do not mean that flippantly — be spent when institutions should be compelled to hand over those records? Can we not consult on that in the context of this Bill?

Mr Carey: I will take the second issue first. The independent panel recommendations outlined the legal support that is available to people, particularly in accessing personal records and individual records that are specific to their adoption or their care. It is specifically in relation to the records that are held by public bodies and adoption agencies: the five trusts and the three non-statutory adoption

agencies. It is about trying to provide additional support to those people to access information about themselves. Now, I think —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Before you go on, that is even worse. If they are publicly held records, should the institutions not be handing them over? Connie and I have written to all five trusts to ask them about training and the introduction of the new guidance on handing records over, and the feedback that we have been getting is quite positive, so why would there need to be legal advice and support to access public records?

Mr Carey: The specific issue is around adoption records and what information someone is entitled to under adoption legislation. It is basically around GDPR and what individuals are entitled to access about themselves. Legal support has been requested and recommended because access to records is another, potential, form of redress. The adoption practice guidance aims to provide meaningful and pragmatic support for social workers who have an obligation in the process. Everybody in an adoption file has a right to privacy. Adoption files will have mixed data. It is about making sure that the right and appropriate legal basis exists for information about the individual to be shared.

Mr Johnston: That is about individuals getting access to their records. It is important to acknowledge, alongside that, that the public inquiry will have statutory powers to call for information and to receive it. The redress service will have statutory powers to insist on receiving information. Chair, you mentioned that there should be powers in the legislation to insist that records be provided. Those powers will certainly be in the inquiry.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Did you cover my first point?

Mr Carey: The truth recovery design panel report did not specify whether there should be posthumous claims, so there was a decision for the Department about what we should do about them. We tried to look at a number of schemes to see what precedents exist. Some redress schemes do not permit posthumous claims, but we felt that it was important that they be included. There are three or four key questions that we would like to ask as part of the consultation. The first question is, "Do you agree that posthumous claims should be included as part of the redress scheme?". The second question is, "If you agree that posthumous claims should be included, at what part of the scheme should they be included?". We would ask that question because we have two stages: a standardised payment scheme and the individually assessed payment. We would try to get views from people about whether posthumous claims should be eligible on one, both or neither. The third question is, "Who should be entitled to submit a posthumous claim on behalf of a loved one, a deceased relative?". A number of models have been used in other schemes, including the executor of an estate. Another model, which has been used in historical institutional abuse (HIA), is around residual beneficiaries; that is tied to estate and intestacy law. The third element that we hope to consult on is next of kin; that would allow spouses, partners and surviving children to make a claim on behalf of a loved one. The fourth question relates to the date.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Yes, 2010. I think that that was the issue.

Mr Carey: Yes. The proposal was that we did some pre-consultation engagement before Christmas, and the precedent, looking at other schemes, was November 2021. It is about trying to get views from people on that date, and, if not that date, looking at what other options are available.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): This is the last question from me, for now. A year before the HIA inquiry report, Sir Anthony Hart said that there was going to be a redress scheme. That report was published in 2017. It was March 2020 before the scheme was open for applications. How do we know that there will not be the same level of delays? The redress board will cease taking applications. Is there learning to be had from that redress board? Is there potential for that board to morph into this?

Mr Carey: The intention is to try to use as much as possible of the infrastructure, staff and practical things such as IT facilities. The key thing is to try to use as much as possible of that experience and the practical things. That should make the process on the other side of the legislation quicker and more efficient. You have that opportunity. We also want to try to build in things from other redress schemes.

That includes supporting people through the application process. Some of the critique of other redress schemes is that they can feel very legalistic or that they have very legal processes. We want these to be supported processes. There are models of caseworkers supporting people to prepare an

application. People should have the opportunity to have legal support so that they can make informed choices around redress. Those are some of the practical things, but there are also things that will be specific to this programme. That will add different things that we have to consider. However, the intention is to use as much of the infrastructure as we can and to try to learn lessons from other schemes and the challenges that they have faced.

Mr Johnston: There is a fair amount that we can be working on in the meantime and have ready to go once legislation is passed. In fact, conversations about operationalising all this are already happening.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I have some other questions, but I will move on. Connie, please?

Ms Egan: Thank you for coming in today. Are you aware of unmarked graves, and, if so, what work you are doing in relation to them? There have been calls recently from family members, victims, survivors and archaeologists around babies from mother-and-baby homes who were not buried properly and were put in unmarked graves. It has been incredibly distressing for them to learn that some of those graves are now, they understand, being disturbed. What work does your Department do to ensure that all records and graves relating to mother-and-baby homes are preserved?

Mr Carey: The first thing to say is to acknowledge that this is one of the most distressing elements of the design panel's work. Work to date is on unmarked graves and the burial of infants, who could be babies from mother-and-baby homes or from baby homes themselves. The inquiry is focused on the investigative side of that. There are meaningful powers to compel evidence, particularly from looking at the difference between burial and death records and from looking at infant mortality rates.

On the separate question of the protection of those graves, I understand that there is legislation that currently sits with the Department for Communities around burials and the protection of graveyard sites. There are specific orders and powers. There are discussions on what powers are available. The public inquiry is focused on the investigative side and trying to establish an evidence base around not only infant mortality rates but, specifically, the difference between burial and death records, which is a key part of the evidence base.

Ms Egan: Have you had any conversations with the Department for Communities around this? Campaigners inform me that this is happening now. They are really distressed about it. Urgent action is needed to make sure that unmarked graves are not disturbed. Have you had any conversations with the Department for Communities about getting something in place urgently to stop it from happening?

Mr Carey: We have. We have spoken to the Department for Communities. Those discussions are ongoing, but we are happy to write back to the Committee once we have a bit more information.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not understand the difference between the various class of records that are in the Public Records Office and why there are some that people cannot get access to. We have data protection legislation, GDPR, the Public Records Act 1923, freedom of information (FOI) and a non-FOI undertaking. Why is there a need for an additional layer for people trying to get access to their records?

Mr Carey: It is specific to evidential records that will be important for both the independent panel and the public inquiry. Those are 4,500 items, and they are a mixture of registers and individual files about individual people. If an individual chooses, he or she can request that information about themselves from an adoption agency. When an individual presents and puts in a request for that, a social worker has to look at that file, gather the information in relation to it and disclose what they can provide, based on the legislation.

Ms Ní Chuilín: What legislation are they benchmarking that against?

Mr Carey: The 1987 Adoption Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We amended that recently.

Mr Carey: It was amended, but the practice guidance is about how it works in practice. These are still balancing tests for social workers. They have to determine what —

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry, but that is not good enough. It is not good enough. We are waiting on the Civil Service to catch up with legislation that we passed recently. People have a right even under article 8, which is engaged, to have access to records for private and family life, and you are telling me that legislation from 1987 still has not been caught up with. When did we do that?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): The Adoption and Children Act was in 2021 or 2022.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. It has not caught up with that. People who are trying to get access to what happened to them have to wait on the Civil Service catching up, basically.

Mr Carey: The adoption practice guidance is there to provide support to social workers. The principles are about maximum disclosure. There is a balancing right in article 8 around privacy. It is about balancing the rights of, say, a birth mother with the rights of an adopted person. It is not that we are denying an individual access to information about themselves. It is just about providing information that is clear and standardised so that a social worker can look at an adoption file and decide, based on the information and guidance that is there, what is the maximum disclosure that they can provide.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Does the 1987 Adoption Order supersede freedom of information, non-disclosure, the 2022 Act, GDPR and the Data Protection Act?

Mr Carey: The Data Protection Act actually supersedes some of what was in the 1987 Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes.

Mr Carey: An exemption was applied in the rest of the UK that was not applied here. That exemption needs to be resolved on a statutory base in Whitehall, but the practice guidance is written and should be deployed as if the exemption were in place. It is trying to give effect to the exemption as if it were in place. The adoption practice guidance is clear about what people can disclose and what they should redact, and the things that they should redact are very limited. The question is about the application of that guidance. It is about supporting social workers. A number of workshops have been completed. Deirdre Mahon, one of the lead authors of this, has been commissioned by the Department of Health to provide support to social workers who deal with adoption in the five trusts plus the three non-statutory bodies, so that there is a consistent and clear way.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Are the three non-statutory bodies religious orders?

Mr Carey: Some of them are affiliated. There is Family Care Adoption, Barnardo's and another one.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know it, but I cannot mind the name either. What is to stop those bodies destroying their records?

Mr Carey: The Preservation of Documents Act 2022 places an obligation on them to preserve the records that they hold. That applies to not only non-statutory bodies but statutory bodies. There is a piece of statute in place that means that those records have to be preserved.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Paula made the point at the start about people having had to wait 10 years. It just seems that, when people get close, the system adds a lot of bureaucracy and process, and the outcome seems further away. That is really unfair.

Mr Carey: We feel that frustration as well. There is very considerable distress. Hopefully, you can hear some of that in your evidence sessions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, fair enough.

Mr Carey: The key thing is to resolve this. It is about what people should be entitled to and providing access to that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I think that I took you down a different route. The report of the independent panel states:

"Discussions are ongoing with those institutions/organisations which have not yet agreed to facilitate digitisation and unfettered Panel access to records."

Will that be consulted on, or are you suggesting that that information will come forward through the public inquiry? Quite frankly, I have lost patience with those institutions. Whether it is the children's homes or the mother-and-baby institutions, I have lost patience with them holding us to ransom when it comes to accessing money or records. What is happening there?

Mr Carey: The first thing is that, of the 4,500 items that have been identified, we have 3,000 records across a number of institutions that have deposit agreements in place. On the other two — maybe Sean and Leanne from the Truth Recovery Independent Panel can provide a more detailed update on this in your next evidence session — there are ongoing discussions with the remaining institutions. Part of that is around some of the safeguards and the legal basis for that. The public inquiry will have the option to compel those institutions. That is a power that the public inquiry will have.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Good.

Mr Kingston: Thank you for the information, so far. The more I read about this, the more I agree with Gareth's comments, at the start of the session, about this being a shocking indictment of society and about the scale of it. Whoever's interests were being served by the running of the institutions and the way in which people were treated, it certainly was not the women's —

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, 100%.

Mr Kingston: — nor, for those who were pregnant or mothers, was it the babies'. It is shocking. Your briefing paper says:

"Among Magdalene Laundries residents, there would have been women referred by the criminal justice system, girls transferring from industrial schools, women fleeing domestic violence and those with substance and mental health issues."

The fact that that was considered an appropriate setting for people in such a wide range of circumstances and how they were mistreated is shocking.

There is a further shocking twist in the fact of how far behind these institutions seem to be in the process. We have heard from other historical institutional abuse centres, and the process in relation to these institutions seems to be in the slow lane; it is much further behind. I do not understand why it has been set up and treated separately and whether it is because of the scale of it. In the briefing paper, it says that 10,500 women are estimated to have entered mother-and-baby institutions and 3,500 to have entered Magdalene laundries between 1922 and 1990, and that there were 20 workhouses.

Why have these institutions been treated separately? Why are they so far behind? There is currently no redress scheme; we are only at the start of a truth recovery programme. The pursuit of the institutions for financial compensation seems to be at a much earlier stage than for other institutions. Is that being expedited? How can it catch up? The women affected must feel, once again, that their interests have been neglected. What is being done to expedite the process?

Mr Johnston: The women affected have always been part of the picture and of the plan. What you have highlighted, Brian, is that there is a state side to this. There are things that are very wrong in how the state came to the treatment of the women, as well as with the institutions.

The women have always been part of the picture. A decision was made that there would be a phased approach. As the work on HIA was reasonably far advanced, a decision was made that, rather than hold that back by adding other groups to it, it would proceed, and the group of people we are talking about today, as well as, indeed, the wider issue of historical clerical child abuse, would be dealt with separately by the interdepartmental working group that was set up. I recognise that it has been a phased approach and all that you say about it having taken time, but I want to reassure people, on behalf of the Department, that this has always been part of the plan and that it is not about people being first class or second class; it is about recognising our responsibilities as a Department.

Mr Kingston: Is any process in place for women to register? I presume that there will be criteria when a redress scheme comes into place, so is there an opportunity for women to register, whether or not

they will be fully assessed at this stage, so that at least we capture people and they know that they are recognised?

Mr Johnston: We will keep people up to date.

Mr Carey: Brian, there are registration lists or mailing lists that people can join to find information updates on the programme. The support services are a key part of that. There are also other options that people can join, one of which is our consultation forum. Opening up for applications for redress, if that is what you mean, is not in place at this point, but there are opportunities through public calls, particularly as part of the public consultation, which will be about trying to ensure that we have information and that people can register for the programme and access different parts of it.

A key part of the independent panel's work over the next 12 months will be collecting oral testimony. That is about trying to provide supported oral testimony so that people can feel comfortable. The feedback from people who have provided oral testimony to the panel to date has been excellent. It has been very supported, and the panel has shown great care and expertise in that process. That is the main initial call to action, but the public consultation is a key part of ensuring that people know about the programme, what bits of it they can access now and what bits will come later.

Mr Kingston: At what stage are the negotiations with the institutions on the compensation that they need to provide?

Mr Carey: To date, the engagement with the institutions has been twofold. The first part is on records; that has been led by PRONI and the independent panel. The second part is about the public consultation plans. We have offered briefings on those to the institutions.

A key aspect of this is formal investigation. We have to enable the formal investigation to work its way through and answer the questions about what happened, why it happened and who was responsible. It is important that we go through due process on that, so contributions have not been part of those discussions other than that, if responsibility were deemed, there would be a process similar to that of HIA. It is about trying to establish the facts of this first.

Mr Kingston: So we have not reached the stage of their financial obligations being recognised.

Mr Carey: We have to have the investigation in order to have that. There are elements of a human rights investigation that are about procedural fairness.

Mr Johnston: If it is demonstrated that there is systemic fault and blame, the Department fully intends to pursue institutions for contributions in the same way as it has for HIA. As Martin says, however, we need to let due process happen before we get to that point.

Mr Kingston: As I feared, unfortunately, it is very much at an early stage compared with others.

Ms McLaughlin: I will be a bit pedantic about this. In your briefing paper, you lay out the key facts and background figures on mother-and-baby institutions. You indicate that 10,500 women entered, and there is a correlation or an assumption that 10,500 children were subsequently born to those women. That is probably not the case, because a lot of them died at birth or before birth, but anyway. You state:

"This represents about a quarter of all 'illegitimate' births during this period."

I do not like that terminology. It is hurtful for the mums and the babies. No baby is illegitimate. I understand that this is research from Queen's University, but we need to be careful about the words that we use when we prepare papers.

Mr Carey: Of course. I acknowledge that, and I apologise. We have been very careful in our documentation. There was a terminology section at the start of that research that outlined why some of the terminology was used. That term should not have been used. It should not be part of the briefing pack. I apologise for that.

Ms McLaughlin: You refer in the paper to the "Ongoing engagement" with the institutions. Is that ongoing engagement ever going to end? What is the deadline for that work? Are you, as a

Department, being assertive and ambitious enough to get what you need from the institutions in redress and contributions? Can we speak about how ambitious you are to get those talks completed?

Mr Carey: Gareth, do you want to talk about the HIA process?

Mr Johnston: You go ahead.

Mr Carey: The engagement on truth recovery to date has primarily been about records and the plans for a public consultation. The process that HIA has followed is around negotiation, mediation and arbitration. If responsibility is deemed, the question is about how much responsibility there is. That is the basis for negotiations to start in that regard. We are at a slightly earlier stage in the truth recovery process than we are with HIA, which is at an advanced stage, where payments have been received. Gareth, is there anything that you want to say over and above that about HIA?

Mr Johnston: The engagement, as you have said, is down the line. Some of it will be about contributions. At the moment, it is focused on records. The fact that the Public Records Office now has commitments for over 4,000 records to be transferred across is significant. That will make the task of the public inquiry easier, because they can be indexed and so on. We are committed to working with the remaining institutions. There are different ways in which records can be made available while making sure that there is as much transparency as possible.

Ms McLaughlin: The paper also refers to relationships in the consultation forum. From my engagement, I know that some victims and survivors found that forum a very difficult experience. They feel that they need a voice and have talked about having an advocate for them. What are your thoughts on getting a commissioner to advocate for them at this stage of the work of the consultation forum? You have had one in-person hybrid meeting, which they found very useful. Are you planning more?

Mr Carey: I will invite Pauline, as secretariat to the consultation forum, to say a few words. The forum meetings have been difficult. These are difficult issues. I thank the people who attend. There are lots of moral and legal issues that have to be worked through. Those meetings have been very helpful in shaping not only the policy but how the policy is delivered. There is an intensely personal element to it. We are talking about access to records, for example. There is considerable frustration around access to records. Some of those things have not been resolved satisfactorily. It is about trying to get views and trying to work together in order to resolve those things.

On the point about an advocate, there is ongoing work that Avila and others could perhaps talk about in their evidence session, on things that could support and would be valuable in helping victims and survivors to engage with the process. It is a complicated process. There are two forms of redress in two schemes. There are two forms of investigation. There are definite benefits to having an advocate. Whether it is an individual, more than one individual or advocacy support through a different method, such as through the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS), we are open to that. The Department will work with our forum to establish suitable routes to do that.

Pauline, will you give your reflections on face-to-face engagement?

Ms Pauline Corcadden (The Executive Office): We have had only one hybrid meeting, and, whilst it was difficult, it was very useful. Part of the reason for having the meetings online is that we have people who dial in from Canada, America and the like. Therefore, a 4.00 pm online meeting suited and was more inclusive of more victims and survivors. We have had some smaller face-to-face engagement sessions for particular themes of the report that are difficult to have a conversation about over Zoom. They were very helpful sessions, not only for us but from the victims and survivors' perspective.

Avila will talk about her work with Danny Taggart on smaller engagements to make the forums a safer space, because, at times, they are not. Sinéad talked about language used. Some things are transactional for officials and need to be done, but we have worked hard to recognise the emotive nature that our processes can have and the emotional distress that can be caused. We intend to run more face-to-face sessions, but, by the same token, we do not want to leave anyone behind, so the sessions will be a mix, using Zoom as well to be inclusive.

Mr Johnston: A lot of benefits have come from the structures we have had, but we are not wedded to them. If there are better ways of doing engagement for the future, we are very open to them.

Mr Harvey: Martin, you said that you have monthly meetings with the victims. Is that right?

Mr Carey: That is right.

Mr Harvey: How many attend those meetings on average?

Mr Carey: Normally, between 15 and 30 people attend. There is a cohort who attend every month and others who dip in and dip out. They are open forums. We send the details to 80 or 90 people on our mailing list who get the agendas and papers. The agenda goes out roughly a week in advance, and we try to send the papers, but that was not always the case. We try to send papers in advance based on preferences. There are minutes of every meeting, which are recorded and issued in advance of the next meeting. We have tried to make it quite structured. It is not perfect, but we have tried to leave it open. The meetings are from 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm on the second or third Thursday of the month.

Mr Harvey: Generally, will the attendees deal with the same person?

Mr Carey: Pauline, Michaela and I attend, primarily, from the TEO perspective. The meetings are chaired by Avila, who has been a great support to us through the process. Unfortunately, as Pauline said, there are elements where, because we are policymakers, some of the language and the processes that we have to go through can feel a bit arbitrary at times. However, there has been good engagement through the forum meetings. There have been about 30 of them to date. A lot of the achievements are down to the forum, and we should acknowledge that. A lot of the progress and drive has been delivered as a result of the forum, and it should be commended for that.

Mr Harvey: I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Emma, would you like to ask a question?

Ms Sheerin: I do not really have a question as such. The details laid out in the written presentation are fairly sobering. Sinéad touched on the figures on the number of women who were victims of this and, obviously, their children. I echo all of Carál and Sinéad's frustrations about the time that this has taken, the language that is being used and the risk of re-traumatising people who have already been through the most horrendous experience. I want to associate myself with those comments. I appreciate the panel's taking the time to come and engage with us, and I appreciate the work that it is doing, as late as it might be.

Mr Johnston: Chair, it is perhaps worth emphasising something, because I am aware that survivors might be watching this. There is a very comprehensive suite of trauma-informed support services available, and hundreds of survivors have already accessed those. Through the Victims and Survivors Service, we will pay whatever is needed to deliver and will support people in whatever ways we can. I want to note that, whatever might happen with redress in the future, those services are currently available.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Thank you.

Pádraig, do you have a question?

Mr Delargy: No, I think that everything has been covered. From my perspective, everything has been said. The only thing to add is that we are keen to hear from the Truth Recovery Independent Panel as well. I have a few questions relating to that next session, so perhaps you could put me down to speak early.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you, Pádraig. I will bring you in early.

Panel, thank you so much. Obviously, we are keen to see the consultation, and we look forward to an update shortly.