



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by the Truth Recovery Independent Panel

29 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for The Executive Office

Briefing by the Truth Recovery Independent Panel

29 May 2024

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:

Professor Leanne McCormick	Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Ms Roisin McGlone	Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Professor Sean O'Connell	Truth Recovery Independent Panel

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I welcome to the meeting Professor Leanne McCormick, co-chair of the Truth Recovery Independent Panel; Professor Sean O'Connell, co-chair of the panel; and Roisin McGlone, who is a member of the panel. It is good to see you at the Committee. Do you have some opening remarks that you want to lead with?

Professor Leanne McCormick (Truth Recovery Independent Panel): We do, if that is OK.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Go ahead.

Professor McCormick: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today. I am one of the co-chairs of the Truth Recovery Independent Panel.

I know that you have our interim report and the written briefing, so I will speak very briefly about the establishment of the panel. In October 2021, the truth recovery design panel published its report, and the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to implement the recommendations of the design panel in full. Recommendation 3 in the truth recovery design panel's report related to the establishment of:

"An integrated truth investigation ... comprising an expert Independent Panel and a statutory Public Inquiry."

The panel was appointed in April 2023 following a public appointments competition.

There are 10 members of the panel. Uniquely in the context of an independent panel, there are three victims and survivors on the panel, as well as members on sociology of discrimination and gender-based violence; trauma-informed practice; human rights and domestic law; archives; genealogy; and social and oral history.

We have a number of strands to our work, as you know. I will briefly reference some of the work on archives and records that I work closely on. I work closely with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) on identifying and locating records, working with institutions and organisations, and on the process of conserving, preserving and digitising records. That last process is particularly important in making sure that there is a high-quality copy of all records and so that the independent panel can work efficiently and effectively on those records, that they are then available for the public inquiry, and, most importantly, so that there is access for victims and survivors. As you have heard before, a large number of those records have been collected and have been digitised in the process. Confidentiality is very important as part of that. We have data-sharing agreements in place. As part of that, it is also very important that victims and survivors have access to their own records. Part of our role is advocacy.

I will hand over to Roisin now, who will introduce herself and speak a little bit about that aspect of the work.

Ms Roisin McGlone (Truth Recovery Independent Panel): Thanks very much for having us here today. I am a member of the independent panel. I am a victim-survivor appointee. I am a birth mother who, as a young girl — actually, a child — was in a mother-and-baby home. My son was adopted. Some of you may know my face from the voluntary and community sector, where I have worked all my life. I have worked in conflict resolution on issues such as parades and policing and in community development.

Sometimes, there can be confusion when people do not really get the differences between the work that Leanne is doing, for example, and the work that my colleagues and I are doing on access to records. We have quite a long name. We are the access to records, advocacy, genealogy and legal services group.

Ms McLaughlin: Oh, that is easy, then.

Ms McGlone: Yes, get your mouth round that one.

One of the things that became very apparent from the truth recovery process and from listening to victims and survivors was the fact that there was a maze out there. People have referred to it here at the Committee. I know that you are aware of it. There is a maze, and people do not know where to start. As you can imagine, people are on a continuum. For example, some people may have been involved in this for four, five or 10 years, as you mentioned earlier, and may have found their way through the maze. Then, you have people who are coming to this for the first time and have absolutely no idea. They ask, "Where would I get a birth certificate?"; "If I had a child, where would I get the birth certificate?"; "Where would I look for records about my care when I was in the mother-and-baby home?"; "Where would I look for medical records after what happened to me?"; "Where would I look for a court record?"; and, "Where do I start this journey of mine?".

I do not know whether any of you are adopted or have adopted children — you may do — but, if you do not, many of you will have children. It is very natural that children know, from stories from their granny's knee, what happened to them when they were born, and whatever. People who had children taken from them and adopted, and adoptees, do not have those stories, so they want to put those stories together. One of the saddest things that we hear when we listen to people is that it is still not easy in society for people to find out their stories and what happened to them because there are no people to tell them. If they have not found family members, there is no one to tell them.

On the access to records group — I will not say the rest of it — we have been looking to develop a guide for individuals, so that, if you come to the website or eventually to a hard copy guide, and you are looking for a birth certificate, it will tell you where you need to go and what it will cost, although some of the costs can be met through the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). If you are looking for an adoption record, for example, it may be that you went through a mother-and-baby home, so some of the adoption agencies might have it. I will not go into an awful lot more about it. That is a short introduction on the work of the working group that I am on. That work is finished. We are just doing accuracy checks on it and making sure that solicitors have a look at it. There is data protection — the

general data protection regulation (GDPR). All that advice is in there. Legal advice is in there. The institutions and different trusts are also in there.

Professor Sean O'Connell (Truth Recovery Independent Panel): I am the other co-chair of the independent panel. My main responsibility apart from co-chairing is to work on the testimony gathering and analysis working group. Testimony is at the heart of what we do and what we will do, and it will be at the heart of our report. We have learned a lot from previous reports in other parts of this island that were less successful than we hope to be about how testimony is used, the primacy of testimony as a form of evidence and the experience of the individuals who tell us their truths.

Testimony will absolutely be at the heart of what we do. It will be trauma-informed. We have all been through a careful training process with people who worked on collecting testimonies of this type. That includes me, Olivia Dee, who worked with us on an earlier project that was published in a 2021 report, and Beverley Clarke, a trauma-informed specialist who is also on the panel. We have worked with the testimony facilitators whom we recruited to ensure that we do things as well as we can and do not cause harm in collecting the testimonies. We are also working with the Victims and Survivors Service, Adopt NI and WAVE trauma centre to ensure that there is support in place for those who come forward to us.

We have been careful about how we roll out the testimony process. We have been slow and cautious to begin with. Not only did we not want to overwhelm VSS, WAVE and Adopt NI with lots of new individuals coming forward looking for their services and support but we wanted to get things right. We wanted to assess carefully and cautiously as we moved forward.

So far, we have been in contact with 35 individuals about testimony collection and have collected testimony from, I think, a dozen. All the feedback that we have had so far has been very positive. We are happy about that, but we will not rest on our laurels. We will keep assessing that as we move forward.

Just today, the invite went out for the second wave of individuals who will want to come forward and speak to us. We will take testimonies from those individuals — possibly up to 60 of them — over the next three or four months, hopefully. In October, we will be looking at a third phase. That will be aligned with the comms strategy that we develop, which is about finding new people who are not registered on our database and who have not yet come forward. Perhaps, they do not even know that we exist and need to be made aware of that. We have big plans for how we want to do that.

Many people have assumptions about whom we want to speak to. We want to speak to people who were associated with the institutions; people who were residents — if we want to use that term; some may not like it — of those institutions or who were incarcerated in those institutions in other instances. We also want to speak to relatives, partners, people who worked in or were associated with the institutions, people who may have visited in their professional capacity; and those involved in pathways and practices associated with those institutions. That might include private nursing homes, for example. It might include people who were involved in the cross-border transfer or movement of young children or girls and women coming across the border into Magdalene laundries, for example. There is a wide range of people whom we want to speak to.

I acknowledge that this has been a long process. As the Chair said, it has been 10 years and longer in the preparation. We would like to pay tribute to the victims and survivors who began that process, particularly the people in the Birth Mothers and their Children for Justice Northern Ireland group, who began the process a long time ago. We also pay tribute to the truth recovery design panel, which developed this process and put the idea of the independent panel in place to create a safe and non-adversarial space that did not repeat some of the failings of the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry, which, as we know from research, re-traumatised lots of individuals who came forward to give evidence.

Finally, I will remind you of the recommendations that we have made. Listening to you, I am impressed that you have all read the interim report, so thank you for paying us that compliment and attention. We recommended that Ministers consider the early appointment of the chair of the public inquiry. You might want to ask us why we consider that to be so important. We believe that in future uses of what is an innovative new process — an independent panel coming before a public inquiry — the independent panel members and co-chairs should have greater control of the budget so that that independent panel and any future independent panels can hit the ground running. We have also asked the Minister to consider extending our work for six months. We know that not all victims and survivors will like that, because it means, potentially, a further delay. However, we have spent a lot of our first six months

talking about things, trying to get money released etc and preparing things, rather than actually doing some of the work that we were asked to do. We have also asked for the removal of the means test for legal aid for access to records, which was requested by victims and survivors. I know that you discussed that in the previous session.

Finally, we asked Ministers to continue to support efforts to secure access to relevant records in reports that have already been produced in the Republic of Ireland. There will be lots of material down there that is relevant for us: it is in the commission's archives and the archives that were collected by the McAleese report on the Magdalen laundries. It would be ideal for us to have access to that where it relates to individuals from this part of the island. Thank you for listening to my opening remarks.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you to the panel, and thanks again for scanning the report through to us. It was very useful to have sight of it. I want to pick up on the point that you made, Sean, about testimony. When you, Leanne and others did the research way back, a lot of that was around testimony gathering. To what degree is there a duplication, and to what degree are those testimonies feeding into this? Leanne, you mentioned that those testimonies will be available to the public inquiry. However, we know from other public inquiries in the past that, sometimes, when there is a police investigation, those testimonies cannot be handed over. To what degree are conversations taking place with the PSNI about historical cases?

Professor O'Connell: We have a referral process in place with the PSNI. If anybody comes forward with testimony that includes allegations of non-recent abuse, they are referred to the PSNI under particular circumstances: for example, if the individual is named etc. We have discussed that very carefully with the appropriate PSNI team. That process is working already and is working well, I think.

How do previous testimonies overlap with this testimony? There was an option in the consent form in 2018-19 to have that testimony go forward for the use of any future researchers. At that point, we did not know about the concept of the independent panel. So, most of those individuals at that point — the 60 people who gave testimony — ticked the box for future use of the testimony. We have gone back to them and asked whether they are still content that that happens, and pretty much everybody said yes. Only one or two said no. Those testimonies are in the bank, if you like, although some of those individuals will want to give testimony again. They may want to give testimony in a different form. I should have said that we also offer the option of written testimony this time. Some people may prefer to write their testimony. I hope that that answers your questions.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Following on from that, I want to ask you about the conversations that you had years ago when you were doing your initial research. There were difficulties in identifying people from the Magdalen laundries, the workhouses and so on. How is this process different in getting people to come forward and engage?

Professor O'Connell: For a start, we will have a bigger budget. Quite a lot of money will be spent on a fairly extensive advertising campaign that will make a lot more people aware of what is happening. One of the issues around the Magdalen laundries in particular is that there are a smaller number of victims and survivors from those institutions. They are older than those who are associated with the mother-and-baby institutions, so there will be a smaller number because, unfortunately, many will have died. Furthermore, a smaller number of survivors have moved from that institution into care home-style institutions. Our feedback is that they do not want to engage with the process. I do not think that it would necessarily be right for us to knock on the door of those institutions to seek testimony from individuals who have made it clear, at least via intermediaries, that they do not want to engage. We believe those intermediaries when they say that those people are not looking to give testimony. In some cases, they feel that they are still carrying the stigma that was placed on them as young women and girls. That is still very strong in those individuals. Again, we rely on second-hand testimony, not hearsay, to follow that through. For the McAleese report, for example, testimony was taken from a large number of survivors of the Magdalene laundries who were in institutions post the Magdalene laundries, and I am very sceptical about how that came about. It seemed that large numbers of women were bussed by institutions to McAleese to give testimony. That is not ethical, and I would not want to try to repeat that process. I do not think that anyone else on the panel would want to repeat that.

Ms McGlone: I also think, Paula, that it is significant that we are an independent panel, not a public inquiry. From speaking to some of the victims and survivors, I know that they would be anxious about the adversarial nature of a public inquiry. We need to get the message out that we are completely independent but that, at the same time, we are in an official position, as opposed to, maybe, the

Queen's report. We are, in a sense, sanctioned. In light of something that Sean mentioned, that is important. There is not an organic group of women out there. These are individual women, many of whom have never told anybody about what happened to them. They will not necessarily come forward for us, but we need to try to touch as many of them as we can. It is a bigger issue, for me, than just giving testimony. It is about us giving a very loud, clear message that it was not about bad girls. Do you know what I mean?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes.

Ms McGlone: This happened right across our society, and it was about our attitude to girls and young women, how we treated them and, in some senses, how we continue to treat them. For me, that is the importance of this. That is what is critical about this.

I was struck by some comments, Mr Kingston, that you read out from the briefing paper for your previous session. I know that you were talking about the laundries and that the comments may refer to a tiny minority. There were, however, lots and lots of girls and young women who found themselves in circumstances where everybody assumed what the problem was. People had no idea what the circumstances around conception were, but all assumed that they knew and made all sorts of assumptions. We have to break that cycle so that we can touch women out there who, maybe up to now, have felt that they could not even tell their families, never mind an independent panel or inquiry.

For me, that is the value of this. We have a very short time. This is a very short life in this whole process, and we have to try to touch as many people out there as we can and give them confidence. It is really important that we say that this is all confidential. No one will be identified. People will not be identified if they come forward to give testimony. This is a confidential process for people who will be supported in the right way to go through it.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you. I will move on. Connie?

Ms Egan: Thank you all for coming in. I want to follow up on what you said about making sure that those voices are heard. I want to ask about your advertising campaign and where you are with that. What kind of methods are you using to make sure that you are getting to the right people and engaging with as broad a spectrum as possible of those affected by this? Could you talk a bit more about that, please?

Professor O'Connell: We are not yet at the stage where we have an absolutely clear idea of an advertising campaign and where we intend to advertise. My understanding, at the moment, is that we will focus on local media in the first instance: the local newspapers, radio and, possibly, television. Then, we will look at social media to access people in the diaspora who were impacted by the institutions, pathways and practices. We will also engage in a number of outreach events locally and in GB, around Irish centres, for example. We are thinking about how we can be innovative about that and how we can reach the maximum number of individuals. It is harder to think about how you might reach North America or Australasia, for example, outside of using social media. We know that some individuals, particularly those older individuals, will not be as active on social media, so we need to think about what media they use, such as which newspapers they might read. We are still developing that. We have two or three months before we need to get that planned and finalised.

Ms Egan: Thank you. Your written briefing mentions that May to September of this year are key months for that. We are towards the end of May. As was said previously in the Committee, victims and survivors feel that they have been waiting for a very long time. I totally understand that you want to get this right, but we want to get this started and engage with as many people as possible.

Do the budgetary issues that you mentioned come into the advertising campaign? Can you talk a bit more about some of the constraints that you have felt and any additional budgetary freedoms that you would like to have?

Professor O'Connell: We are looking at a £250,000 advertising budget. The money was there from the start — day 1. The issue is that we are an independent panel that operates under Civil Service procurement regulations and rules. We may well all agree on something and ask for it, but it can then take what, to us, seems like a long time before that ask is delivered on, and the length of the process that you have to go through depends on the size of the ask. In order to recruit testimony facilitators, for example, we had to recruit them, essentially, on a part-time basis, because that meant that we were asking for less money in the first instance and could access that pot of money more quickly than would

have been the case had we had a bigger ask. Our second ask for the testimony facilitator wage bill, so to speak, is much bigger, and we can do a lot more with it. Issues like that have been slightly frustrating. As co-chairs, it would have been great to arrive on day 1 and be told, "Here's a £2 million kitty. How do you want to start spending the money?", rather than, "That will take three months before the answer is yes; that'll take four months; and that'll take five months". That aspect has been frustrating.

Ms Egan: On that point, £250,000 for an advertising campaign that you hope will reach across a diaspora, using various forms of media, is quite limited. Hopefully, the Committee can follow up on that. Thank you.

Mr Delargy: Thank you for your presentation. The session has been really informative, especially on the back of the previous evidence session.

What is the relationship between the consultative forum and the independent panel? How do you feel that that relationship is working?

Professor McCormick: When the independent panel was established, the consultative forum had already been established and had been consulting and working with the wider truth recovery programme. We have regularly attended the consultative forum, and, as we said, there are three victims and survivors on the independent panel who also attend the consultative forum. We have tried, as much as possible, to consult the consultative forum, particularly in relation to testimony. That is where that relationship has been incredibly useful.

The information forms and various forms designed for testimony went to the consultative forum, and the feedback from that really changed quite a lot of the way in which the forms were written. We have been able to draw on a lot of the concerns expressed. We had one really useful face-to-face meeting in PRONI. Members of the consultative forum came along to that meeting and were taken around PRONI to see the process, to see where records were held and stored and to talk to the members of the team that is working on digitising the records — how they are conserved and how they are looked at. That was a particularly successful event in enabling them to see the care and attention that was being given to those records. It also enabled members of the consultative forum to ask any questions that they had directly of PRONI. The engagement has been close in that regard.

We also have an additional mailing list of people who get the information. We have a regular newsletter about the independent panel, so there is communication there as well, and small group sessions have been developed with victims and survivors. They are waiting to see what the process of the consultative forum will be. Avila, the chair, and members of the consultative forum will talk more about that, I am sure, in the next session. Again, it is key that the independent panel is as closely involved as possible in that and is also as closely involved as possible with as wide a group of victims and survivors as possible, because getting their involvement is completely key in our process.

Mr Delargy: You mentioned PRONI and its record-keeping, and we have continuously raised that issue at this Committee. Questions and queries were brought up that day. Are there any outstanding issues that we need to flag that could be improved on? What is your view on that?

Professor McCormick: On records? It is an ongoing process. Our interim report goes into that. I would like to flag that a number of organisations have been incredibly cooperative. There is a very positive aspect to this as well, in that a lot of organisations and institutions have engaged with PRONI, which is where records are being digitised. That is really important; I want to stress that.

The point came up about the preservation of records and the possibility of destroying them. A lot of records are very fragile, and they are not necessarily held in archival conditions by institutions and organisations. They are in a filing cabinet or a cardboard box. They are not being held in proper conditions. It is really important to ensure that there is a good digital copy. The process of digitisation is slow. It is sometimes about the fraying of pages, making sure that they are all preserved properly and having a quality assurance process to make sure that every page has been captured. Seeing that process was really useful for everybody, including members of the independent panel.

Discussions are ongoing with other institutions and organisations, and we hope that those will be speedily resolved. People have genuine reasons and concerns. That process is moving forward, and, hopefully, we will get to a situation where we can tick the box to say that all organisations and institutions have cooperated in ensuring the protection and digitisation of those records.

Mr Delargy: Thanks for that. It comes back to the points that Carál and others made earlier. It is about not only preserving those records but ensuring that they are not destroyed and that people can access those records, because people must have access to the records that they need to get the answers that they want. Thank you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: One of my questions is probably for Sean or Leanne. I know of women who left these shores to go to Scotland to have their babies. I did not see any record of them here. Is there any consideration of that? I think that they are dead now, to be honest. I know of at least two who are dead, and their families found out about their situation after their death. Is there anything on that? That is my first question.

Secondly, I am very anxious about public records, because I had an awful experience when I was responsible for PRONI. The state tried to prevent me — a Minister — from disclosing records. No disrespect to the religious orders, but they are behaving in the same way as the state did when it comes to lack of disclosure. That is why Paula and many others have lost patience with some of those orders. To be honest, I am trying to think of the journey, Roisin, for which you said that you are trying to provide a guide. If someone who is putting themselves forward to go through that journey meets opposition, I do not know how they will get through it, despite all of the excellent support that they would have. How can we ensure that those responsible provide the records? What can we do to help people who, years — decades — later, are still going through shame and guilt? How can we get them to the place where they want to get to? When you are taking a trauma-informed approach, you have to assure people that any public inquiry cannot be adversarial. It almost needs to come from a truth recovery process, rather than what we saw with the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry or whatever. I ask those questions because, to be frank, I am worried that some of the institutions will be happy for those records to lie in a damp box in an attic somewhere.

Professor McCormick: I will take that last point first. On that engagement and making sure that we have access, there may well be —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We will never know.

Professor McCormick: Of course, we will never know. I can say that, in the previous research that we carried out, we saw records. A wider survey has been undertaken, and we have gone out to meet the institutions and to access the records. You can never know. I can never say that we have everything, but, from what we have seen, I would say that we are aware of all of the records that are available and that those records are being brought into PRONI. There is a process that will have to happen after the public inquiry. Roisin might want to speak more about this, but the truth recovery report covered the idea of an independent archive at the end of this. We, as a panel, are discussing what our recommendations will be for that, but its purpose will very much be to ensure —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It needs to be independent —

Professor McCormick: Exactly.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — because the Irish Government closed the files, which is an absolute disgrace, frankly.

Professor McCormick: Absolutely, yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It needs to be independent of the state.

Professor McCormick: Yes, and it is about looking at best practice elsewhere. There are lots of examples in other countries that have gone through similar processes. They have done different things with regard to allowing access to records or guiding people towards this. I will let Roisin speak. Would you like to speak about the process?

Ms McGlone: There are two things in what you are saying, Carál. It is not enough to put out a guide and say, "Here are the legal requirements", which could be around GDPR or whatever. It is not good enough to do that, and we recognise that. There is also the whole thing about when people get their records and the fact that the terminology used can be re-traumatising, because it may be from 50 years ago, for instance. There has to be an advocacy service. There have to be advocates who will take people through that journey, first of all, and then help them to interpret what they get and be there

for them when they get those records. Our access to records group is working hard on that. We have the first phase, which is the guide. It has taken us a while to get there, because we wanted it to be accurate, legal and proper.

There are also issues around advocacy. The Executive Office has worked with VSS to look at providing an advocacy service — I do not know whether its representatives mentioned that today — and it will be up and running soon. We would like to have an input into that, as an independent panel, because, in some senses, our remit is very narrow. It goes back to some of the questions about the consultation forum, which is here today and will speak for itself. Certain things are not in our remit, and this is one of them. The advocacy is really important. It is important that people feel that somebody has their back and is on their side. The permanent archive will not answer the question that you asked about shame and whatever, but it goes to us saying, "There's going to be a permanent archive to show what never to do again".

Ms Ní Chuilín: Exactly.

Ms McGlone: A few of my colleagues and I have got together. We are looking at the need to talk to victims and survivors about that. We need to look at the world and find best practice. Can we provide a showcase for people and say, "Here's what could be best practice"? We need a vision. It needs to be something that is really different and innovative. It is not just about saying, "Here's the room that you'll go to if you want to get a ledger out", or whatever. It needs to be an exhibition, maybe. There are lots of things. Where legacy issues in particular are concerned, people in other countries have gone through that process. We can take examples from that, which we are doing.

Carál, you asked what more needs to be done. The independent panel has not discussed that, so I say this as an individual: this is not like my work in the voluntary sector, where you have an issue or a group of people in a geographical area, so it is very natural to bring people together. This work is very different. There is no agency. You have the consultation forum, which will speak for itself; I do need to speak for it. It speaks directly to government. Many of its members are there as individuals. There is not anywhere for people to caucus or to say, "Is that your issue? Do you really think that's an important issue?", or whatever so that they can work it out. There is nowhere to interface in that way. As I said, I am speaking personally. That is critical. If you look at the Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) inquiry and all the others, you will see that they had commissioners or other things. I am not advocating that; I am just saying that there needs to be an agency or a branch. When I say "agency", I do not mean an agency; I mean that people need to have agency. That needs to be acknowledged at a government level. That is the beginning of that peeling off —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Recognition.

Ms McGlone: Yes, recognition. That is what it is; it is a recognition, where people say, "We know this wasn't your fault".

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, 100%.

Ms McGlone: For me, the permanent archive and the notion that people acknowledge what happened and that it was not people's fault are really important. However, as I said, the independent panel has not discussed that, and I am very clear about that. I have spoken to the consultation forum, and I have reached out to other birth mothers through our database. I have spoken to some people who have come forward but who have never been involved. People are not always automatically drawn to groups like those. I have reached out and spoken to people from other countries, including England. Interestingly, Carál, you mentioned the Scotland thing. Some people feel that, culturally, they went through adoption processes even though it was in another country, because the same —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Religious orders.

Ms McGlone: Yes. There were the same conditions around what people thought of them. I have spoken to women from other jurisdictions and other places who would love to have somewhere to focus, where they could have confidentiality and know that their identity would not need to be talked about and where they could get good advice and support.

Mr Harvey: Roisin, this question is similar to Carál's. You mentioned the go-to guide and birth certificates. Is getting the information a straightforward enough process, or is it very complicated? It seems that the information is there; it is just that not everyone has access to it. Is that right?

Ms McGlone: You are right. The information is out there. We do not have a culture of helping people through the process. I should say that that is a personal opinion as well. We have done the go-to guide, but colleagues in the group and I are going to start looking at the next stage of our strategy. What is the best way? It is very bitty. Where do you go for court reports? Which court? It is sort of straightforward in some ways if you want a birth certificate. You talked earlier about the trusts, but it concerns not just the trusts; there are independent adoption agencies to consider. Although they would go on the guidance that you have seen, their processes may be different. It strikes me that it is not that easy. It is also very difficult, for example, to find your medical records, particularly when they go back quite a bit, such as when you get to my age. You are absolutely right: it is not straightforward. Some people may be able to look at a guide and say, "Oh, yeah, that's what I need to do", but others may need support to get through that maze.

Ms McLaughlin: I asked the previous panel, which was from the Department, about the advocacy role and about an interim advocate perhaps being appointed. What is the formal position on that? Have you got a position yet from the Truth Recovery Independent Panel on considering a dedicated person or a small panel? I am not being prescriptive at all, but where is the Fiona Ryan-type advocate for those who are engaged in the Truth Recovery Independent Panel? Do you think that that is required at this point in time, or is there more work for you to do before you bring a final report? Is that the action that will be required afterwards? Do you have any thoughts about that? Roisin has told us her thoughts, but she said that those were personal.

Ms McGlone: They are my personal opinion.

Ms McLaughlin: I really want to know what the Truth Recovery Independent Panel feels about that at this stage.

Professor O'Connell: We do not have a formal position on it, partly because it came up relatively recently. Fiona Ryan visited us at one of our meetings recently, and we asked her whether she thought that it was a good idea for us to suggest that, potentially, in this report. However, we have not come to a final decision about it.

If we are giving our personal opinions, my view is that it is already quite a complicated space. There is the consultative forum; TEO; the truth recovery design panel, which is still in the background; the independent panel; and public inquiries coming down the line. A chair for that will need to be found at some point. If you then threw an interim advocate into the mix, you could confuse people. That is one of my arguments. I am not saying that I am against the idea, and, clearly, if the panel decides that we are going for it and wants us to recommend it in our final report, we will do that, but we have not had a full discussion of all the pros and cons.

Ms McLaughlin: There is so much going on, and the victims and survivors group is not homogenous by any stretch of the imagination, given that there are adoptees and mothers. It is very complex, and there are times when people in that group ask, "Who do I turn to? Who is representing me and my voice?". Not everybody feels that they can use their own voice, but they want to use an advocate for their voice, if you understand what I mean.

Professor O'Connell: I can see exactly what you are saying. That is a brilliant point and a brilliant counterargument to what I just said.

One final point is that there is a recruitment exercise — I do not know where it is at the moment — for new staff who will be advocates and who will provide support services via WAVE and Adopt NI. You would be putting somebody else into the process before those individuals were bedded in and their role and what they were doing were fully defined, unless they were going to work alongside the new interim advocate. I am just talking off the top of my head; it is not something that the panel has had a full discussion about.

Ms McLaughlin: I am just looking at the recommendations to extend the panel's work remit for about six months. You outlined the reasons for that and talked about the procurement and how clunky it is. Is the message to the Committee that we should go back to the Department to see what it can do to

ensure that future work is not delayed because of the same processes? Where does it end? From an acting Chair's perspective, I think that we as a Committee should go back and see what support can be provided.

The assurances that both of you were given in 2018 that no records existed outside PRONI were inaccurate. That has obviously slowed things down again, and you spoke about that in some of your other responses. Are you assured now that there are no further records out of your reach that could slow the process down again? What kind of inbuilt assurances do you have now?

Professor McCormick: That is an ongoing process. Surveys took place on the private records that institutions or organisations held, and a similar process is taking place with public bodies and departmental records in order to ensure that things have not been missed or overlooked. It is a complicated process with records; often, it is not necessarily clear what is in a box somewhere. There is a process that involves making sure that everything has been looked at and that we are clear about what is there. That is an ongoing process. It is one of the factors that we mentioned in that the process had not been undertaken before we began our work. You are always, in a sense, hopeful not only that records will appear but that they have not been overlooked. You hope that people have done their job and have looked when they have been asked to look.

Ms McLaughlin: May I ask another quick question? Why was the anatomical issue not dealt with in the interim report?

Professor McCormick: It was simply timing. We recently met people from Queen's University Belfast to discuss that. None of the findings that we have discussed that came from a lot of the records that we looked at were included in the interim report. It is an ongoing process.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Before we go on, I will say that we will invite Queen's to come and talk about that later in the year.

Mr Kingston: I have a few points. First, Sean, you mentioned private nursing homes. I presume that you were referring to victims and survivors. It was not about expanding your remit but about where people are living now. Is that right?

Professor O'Connell: No.

Mr Kingston: Was there any suggestion of expanding your remit?

Professor O'Connell: Private nursing homes are an example of the all-embracing term "pathways and practices". We know that some victims and survivors went to private nursing homes. Let us say that a young woman became pregnant and her family wanted her child to be given up for adoption or somebody decided that her child would be given up for adoption. Instead of being sent to a mother-and-baby institution, she might have been sent to a private nursing home for the same purpose, which was to conceal the pregnancy.

Mr Kingston: Out of sight, out of mind.

Professor O'Connell: Out of sight, out of mind. We know that those institutions were also used for the same intent.

Mr Kingston: You are trying to capture some of that experience.

Professor O'Connell: We are trying to capture that experience, yes.

Mr Kingston: That is important. I am glad that I asked the question, because you made a later reference to nursing homes in the context of where people might be —.

Professor O'Connell: That is a different type of nursing home.

Mr Kingston: It is important to hear that. I appreciate that your interim report has just been published, but I presume that, effectively, it has been formally submitted to Ministers and to the Department and that we will have the opportunity to follow up on it, including your request for the early appointment of

a chair for the inquiry panel. I presume that you have not had any formal response to any of the requests, or have you?

Professor O'Connell: No.

Mr Kingston: Anyway, we will be able to follow up on that.

Roisin, you referred to the bit in our briefing report that I read out about the Magdalene laundries. That section talked about women "fleeing domestic violence" and women:

"with substance and mental health issues."

Those women deserved specialist support services, not to be sent away because they were seen as some sort of problem. How they were treated was utterly appalling — being sent away instead of being given that support.

It may be too early to ask you this. Sean, you talked about the testimonies that you have been gathering. I do not know whether you were personally involved directly in doing that. Without pre-empting your final report, can you give us any flavour of the testimonies that you have received about the experience that people had?

Professor O'Connell: People can look at the previous report from 2021. There is quite a lot of information and long excerpts from the testimonies in that. I have been involved in doing some of the collection this time. The testimonies reflect what we have been hearing and some of the same themes. One powerful thing that is emerging is the sense that we need the kind of thing that Roisin is maybe arguing for today. The term that is often used is a "one-stop shop". That is somewhere that individuals could go to have the system and the process for access to records explained to them; where they might even need to be told, "Unfortunately, in your case, those records don't exist, or they will be very limited"; and where they will be able to get any other helpful information. That has come through from quite a few testimonies so far.

Another issue that has come through strongly is adopted adults who do not know their medical history. They do not know their family medical histories, which has caused some individuals severe concerns and problems when health issues have arisen and doctors have not been able to rule out certain things. Those are some of the issues that have arisen early this time.

Mr Kingston: OK. Thank you.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you, panel, for your written briefing, your presentation and the answers that you have given so far. I will go back to support. I noticed in your report something that I had not even thought about, which was legal aid means testing for people in the North and the almost punitive impact that that could have on people who are seeking help. Roisin, you talked at the start about how an awful lot of people would not know where to begin, at their stage in life, trying to access records and get information, following what has happened to them. Will you speak to that? I am getting the sense that the support for victims and survivors is not what you would like it to be, and I suppose that that is an additional barrier. You said in your presentation that you had liaised with Departments about trying to eradicate that barrier, but is there anything that we as a Committee could do on that?

My other question follows on from everything that you said about ensuring that the women and young girls in particular who went through the institutions are told very clearly that we as a society know that what happened was wrong, that there was no wrongdoing on their part and that it was an ill that was inflicted upon them. It is about what that means in the current context for relationships and sexuality education (RSE) and for ending violence against women and girls and all the conversations that we are having about that. There are lessons to be learned from the past. What are your views on that?

Ms McGlone: Emma, thanks for those questions. Quite a good range of support is available from VSS and its partners, WAVE and Adopt NI. That support is based on a health and well-being model and a caseworker model. I was probably talking about a separate issue that is more about advocating on behalf of people. That is a different sort of support, I suppose. The health and well-being model seems to work well, and the feedback and the consultation forum will be able to speak to that much more than I will, but, from the conversations that I have had with victims and survivors, it seems to work very well.

I absolutely agree on your last point — I probably missed your middle one — that this is about the lessons that we learn for strategies for women and young girls and for ending violence against women. Thinking about it logically, if it was all right for the state, in some senses, to do what it did then, that gives out a message loud and clear. If, nowadays, we look to counter that message for women and young girls, it has to be about using that as an example to say, "Those were the dark days. That will not happen again". Did I miss something, Emma? I think that I did.

Ms Sheerin: No, you did not, but, on the support —

Ms McGlone: It was the legal aid.

Ms Sheerin: — I was asking about advocating for people and about getting to the people who do not *[Inaudible.]*

Ms McGlone: Some people want to go forward to get, for example, psychological counselling, talk therapy and help that VSS offers with a range of issues. Other people do not want that. They just want to go back and find out what happened to them, to find the records and to make sense of their life and of why this thing that happened to them, very early on in their life, in many cases, has had such an impact on their life. Some of that is about talk therapy and whatever.

A small scheme is available for legal aid. For example, if someone wants to get their file — say it is a care file from an adoption agency — and it is redacted or they are having difficulty getting it, they can go through a whole series of stages. They can go to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) or wherever else. Really, when you think about it, you find that a solicitor's letter arriving at somebody's door has a much bigger impact than me sending a letter to some agency. We know that from experience. It will have a bigger impact. At the moment, the difficulty is that people might want to go to a solicitor to help them through some of those hoops that they are having difficulties and problems with. Remember, some cases are much more complex. They are not straightforward, and it is not just about going to get your file. There have been cases where people have had different names in different jurisdictions. It may not be as straightforward as just finding your files through the normal ways. It is difficult because people are then means-tested. That means that they cannot get a solicitor. Our working group has written to the Department of Justice to ask it to look at that to see whether there is a way that people can get legal advice to specifically access records without means testing being applied.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Is that everybody? Emma, do you want to come back in on that?

Ms Sheerin: No, thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you so much. This is great work, and please keep us posted as you move forward. Thank you.