

COMMISSIONER UPDATE: DECEMBER 2023

I would like to begin December's update by thanking all the victims and survivors, individuals, representative groups, and families of survivors who have continued to engage with myself and my Office. I also want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the victims and survivors that we have lost throughout the course of the year.

As an Office, we have now supported 881 individual survivors with 1294 enquiries and cases since we started in December 2020. I remain conscious that there are survivors in Northern Ireland and elsewhere who may be unsure or unaware of their entitlements to apply for financial redress compensation and access dedicated specialist support services.

As we move into 2024, I will continue to work to ensure that victims and survivors are aware of their entitlements.

Raising Awareness of Victims and Survivors' Entitlements

My Office's work on raising awareness has been a consistent theme throughout 2023. I added my voice to those of victims and survivor group representatives in calling on Government to honour its commitments regarding the need for a sustained awareness campaign. I was glad to support the Executive Office's campaign in Northern Ireland. My Office was privileged as a team to be the first point of contact for many survivors. For some survivors, it was the first time they had disclosed their experiences of abuse outside of their families.

I have been conscious since I began as Commissioner of the risk that victims and survivors no longer living in Northern Ireland would potentially not know of their entitlements. Therefore, in parallel to the TEO's Northern Ireland campaign, my Office undertook an awareness initiative outside of Northern Ireland focussing primarily on Great Britain as well as the Republic of Ireland, Canada and Australia. As a result, we have engaged and supported individual victims and survivors as well as community-based agencies.

My intention is that we build on what we have done in this year so that in 2024 we reach more victims and survivors.

Throughout this period, I have also undertaken continued and sustained engagement with MLAs, service providers and public organisations.

Memorial Guidance

In August 2023, I published advice concerning a memorial for victims and survivors of institutional childhood abuse. The memorial is one of the last outstanding recommendations of the 2017 Historical Abuse Inquiry report, led by the late Sir Anthony Hart. I recommended that this outstanding recommendation should be implemented without delay, alongside continued engagement with victims and survivors. Finally, I recommended that consideration be given to establishing a memorial programme in recognition of the diversity of views among victims and survivors with regards to a memorial and a wider range of broader outcomes. I recommended a memorial programme in respect of the diversity of views as well as reflecting best international practice.

Prevalence Paper

My Office and other agencies have noted the lack of crucial data in relation to the prevalence, extent, nature, and experience of serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. This lack of data presents a challenge for statutory agencies, service providers and policymakers in meeting the wider needs of victims and survivors. It is a key reason why my Office submitted a paper to the Ending Violence against Women and Girls consultation calling for a survey of the prevalence of sexual violence and abuse, including historical/non-recent child sexual abuse to be considered in Northern Ireland.

Services Development

As set out in legislation, I have a responsibility to encourage the provision and co-ordination of services for victims and survivors. I was heartened this year to be able to develop a Monitoring Framework with the Victims and Survivors Service to provide additional assurance to victims and survivors.

We could not do our work without the goodwill and co-operation of other agencies, and I hope to further develop work in this area in the coming months and throughout 2024.

I began this update with thanking victims and survivors and their families, and I would like to end it with the same thanks. Wishing everyone the best in 2024.