

Programme for Government Statement

“It is imperative that specialist and general services are available, resourced and accessible to victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse in recognition of the ongoing lifelong impact and trauma of child abuse.”

- Fiona Ryan, Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

The Office of the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse welcomes the draft Programme for Government. The Commissioner would note the following:

- While there is no explicit reference to victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse, The Executive’s stated mission in the draft Programme for Government ***People: Working to support everyone at all stages of their life to ensure they have the chance to succeed by improving life opportunities***, has a direct applicability to victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse.
- As citizens of Northern Ireland, victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse are impacted by the general challenges faced by citizens in relation to health, social care and housing outlined in the draft Programme for Government. Due to the intersecting legacy of abuse in childhood, victims and survivors are potentially disproportionately impacted and their expected life opportunities reduced.
- Victims and survivors have experienced abuse as children and continue to carry the legacy of that abuse in their everyday lives to varying degrees. The legacy of this abuse – physical, sexual, emotional and neglect - can and does intersect with health and wellbeing risks associated with aging. We know from victims and survivors that there are additional support needs in relation to physical and mental health services including addiction support services. We know from listening to victims and survivors how important services, both specialist and general, are to their health and wellbeing.
- Therefore, the named priorities: **Cutting Health Waiting Times; Providing More Affordable and Sustainable Housing** and **Safer Communities** will have particular relevance to victims and survivors as they may well be disproportionately impacted by the issues. The Office of the Commissioner is currently consulting with victims and survivors about their experiences of services and expectations of services in the future
- **It is imperative that specialist and general services are available, resourced and accessible to victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse in recognition of the ongoing lifelong impact and trauma of child abuse. A**

trauma-informed approach should be recognised, rolled-out and resourced in the context of the Programme for Government priority: *Reform and Transformation of Public Services*

- The Commissioner would also note that 1 in 5 individuals contacting the Office of the Commissioner are victims and survivors of non-recent/historical child abuse not within the remit of the Office of the Commissioner. Due regard should be given to their needs and the appropriate resources put in place to provide supports for these victims and survivors as well.
- Specifically, in relation to the **Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Programme for Government** priority, the Commissioner would note that in the specific context of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse, both boys and girls were physically and sexually abused in institutions. She notes that overall, the evidence recognises that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by abuse in childhood and adulthood. This priority which is forward looking also has the potential to positively impact adult victims and survivors who are affected by gender-based violence.
- The Commissioner therefore welcomes Ending Violence Against Women and Girls priority, noting that the priority will need to achieve across: prevention; protection; prosecution and policy co-ordination. Many of the recommendations of the Gillen Review (2019), *‘Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland’* have yet to be realised including: *“The Department of Justice should commission individual research projects to gather knowledge and data in Northern Ireland on the prevalence, extent, nature and experiences of serious sexual offences.”*
- The Commissioner has recommended,¹ that a survey into the prevalence of sexual violence and abuse, including non-recent/historical child sexual abuse, be considered in Northern Ireland. Prevalence research will enable government, statutory agencies and service providers to more effectively plan, resource and implement responses and services for victims and survivors of sexual violence and non-recent/historical child sexual abuse.
- Separately, the Commissioner welcomes the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to provide access to justice for those affected by Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses through the Truth Recovery Programme.

¹ <https://www.cosica-ni.org/files/cosicani/2023-10/Prevalence%20paper%20submitted%20to%20EVAWG%20final%20PDF.pdf>

- The Commissioner welcomes the Wellbeing Framework for monitoring and measuring progress under the proposed priority areas: Equal Society; Healthier Lives; Safe Communities; Better Homes; Caring Society and Brighter Futures have all been referenced in previous comments.
- The Office of the Commissioner would note relevance of each wellbeing area to the lives of victims and survivors of non-recent/historical institutional child abuse. The Commissioner would further note that while victims and survivors have pasts; pasts that for many continue to impact on their present. Victims and survivors also have futures and are deserving of hope. Many of the priorities here if achieved could deliver hope and improvements to quality of life for victims and survivors.