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‘Serious review needed’ of redress scheme for survivors of institutional abuse

Gerry McCann from Rosetta Trust told an oversight committee that the current system is ‘not victim focused’ and ‘not working’.

A “serious review” is needed of a redress process for survivors of historic institutional abuse, a Stormont committee has heard.

Compensation has been paid out to those harmed in residential homes run by religious orders and the state since the fund was opened last year.

However, the process for applying this redress has been criticised as “not victim centred” and “not working”.

The Stormont oversight committee for the Executive Office heard several hours of evidence on Wednesday from abuse survivors as well as representatives of the redress board.

Gerry McCann of the Rosetta Trust gives evidence to the Stormont Executive Committee (NI Assembly/PA)

Gerry McCann from the Rosetta Trust said survivors have gone through a “very, very difficult journey” in terms of the “legalistic process” which he said has “retraumatised, revictimised applicants”.

“The redress board is doing the best they can within the constraints that they have, but I think in terms of survivors, this process should be centred on survivors,” he told MLAs.

He urged that survivors should have a choice over whether they give an oral or a written submission to the board, and that a redress helpline be set up.

“The system is not working and it’s not centred on survivors, there needs to be a serious review... an independent body coming in,” he said.

Jon McCourt of Survivors North West said some are content with the process after receiving redress offers, following the “long journey” of campaigning before the Historical Institutional

Abuse Inquiry started in 2014 and acknowledgement of what they had experienced, but he said others have had a negative experience.

He said applicants have to rely on solicitors, many are elderly, and some find it hard to talk about what they had experienced even with their own family.

He said some survivors “almost feel they have to prove and continue to prove” what they went through, and in the absence of records, their accounts in some cases being challenged by the former institution.

Members of the redress board, including president of the board Mr Justice Ian Huddleston as well as secretary Jim Coffey and Patrick Butler and Beverley Clarke gave evidence to the committee.

Mr Huddleston, who has been in post since January 2021, said he accepted the process could be improved but said the redress team has worked very hard to “ensure the efficient and effective progression of applications... so that applicants receive the compensation to which they are entitled as soon as reasonably practicable”.

He said he could “perfectly well understand some of the criticisms”, but urged that the legislation by which they are bound be acknowledged.

“We are not perfect, I don’t think anyone is, I accept that we can improve but I would say that improvement has to be on an informed basis and as things stand, the legislative basis that we have has got to be acknowledged,” he told MLAs.

He said the board was launched in March 2020 at the “height of the pandemic”, which he said presented challenging circumstances for all.

Mr Huddleston told the committee that to date approximately £19 million has been distributed.

He also told MLAs that the legislation suggests the intention of paper applications was that it would be less traumatising to applicants than oral hearings.

Committee chair Colin McGrath paid tribute to the abuse survivors for giving “powerful testimony” and thanked the redress board for giving evidence.

“It’s a very sensitive and difficult issue and it’s one that we need to get right,” he said.

“I think we can determine after all of our meetings today that we’re all in the space of wanting to get things right, it’s just how we achieve that.”

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/serious-review-needed-of-redress-scheme-for-survivors-of-institutional-abuse-40573548.html>