

Victims and Survivors Forum - Cardiff - 24 November 2016

Thank you very much to everyone who attended and participated in the Victims and Survivors' Forum in Cardiff on November 24 2016.

We are grateful to everyone who took the trouble to contribute comments and ideas on how the Inquiry can progress. Your suggestions have been taken on board and are being carefully considered by the Inquiry. Some suggestions have already been actioned.

Lots of suggestions and comments were made on a wide range of subjects at the Forum. We collated everything that was raised in the general discussions, question and answer sessions and table (small group) discussions.

Here is a record of what was discussed.

Independence of the Inquiry

Questions were raised about the status of the Inquiry and its independence from Government and Parliament (in particular, from Select Committees). It was explained that the Inquiry is not Government or ministerially led and that we are not accountable to Select Committees.

It was confirmed that although the Inquiry was established by the then Government in 2015, we are completely independent of the Government.

Operation Hydrant

There was discussion about how and when information is passed to Operation Hydrant and the extent to which they then pass that information to local Police forces. The Inquiry is bound by its terms of reference in this area, which state that 'any allegation of child abuse will be referred to the Police'. This means that we are bound to pass on any allegations that we receive. However, all allegations that are referred are anonymised, unless there is express consent by the participant to disclose their name. The only exception to this is where there is an immediate safeguarding risk.

It was confirmed that the Police are not exempt from being investigated by the Inquiry. No organisation is exempt from investigation, if deemed necessary.

Destruction of records

Participants explained their concerns about the potential for records to 'disappear' from within Institutions. The Inquiry Panel members present made clear that relevant institutions had been issued with an Order to retain records together with guidance about what needed

to be done. It was also made clear that under Section 21 of the Inquiries Act 2005, the Inquiry has the power to order the production of documents.

Where an institution fails to comply with this order, this is an offence punishable by imprisonment. It is also an offence for a person, during the course of an Inquiry, to destroy, alter or tamper with evidence that may be relevant to an Inquiry, or deliberately to do an act with the intention of suppressing evidence or preventing it being disclosed to the Inquiry.

Investigations, scope and relevant information

A clear message to the Inquiry was that we need to clarify how far reaching the Inquiry will be and how the Investigations have been selected. Particular reference was made to the need to investigate the Freemasons.

It was stated that, from a practical point of view, it is impossible to have public hearings for every allegation of child sexual abuse. The Inquiry was seeking to examine a broad range of institutions but it will not be able to examine every institution.

The Inquiry needs to be clearer about the definition of 'institution'. Our communications need to go further and to openly state that the Inquiry extends to organisations such as the Scouts and sports organisations. We also need to be more open about who we want to hear from. It was suggested that there are a lot of organisations (e.g. the Child Sexual Abuse Safeguarding lawyers) who have relevant information. We want to hear from these organisations.

Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP)

Questions were asked about the VSCP recruitment process and the advertisement of the roles. Inquiry Panel members committed to providing a response to these questions in this document and this appears below. The Inquiry is very grateful for all the work undertaken by the VSCP.

Advertisement and recruitment

The VSCP were appointed through fair and open competition.

Following an open call for applications (on the Inquiry website), individuals either applied directly or were nominated by others. These applications included a statement setting out their suitability for the post, as well as how they met the following criteria:

- a) Experience of issues associated with institutional responses to child sexual abuse;
- b) Experience of working collectively and collaboratively as part of a team, and

c) Holds a current mandate to represent the interests of a defined group of victims or survivors of child sexual abuse.

The Inquiry received a wide number of applications in response to the advert. The Chair and Panel conducted a sift of the applications, and short listed candidates were invited for interview.

It is accepted that the adverts for the VSCP roles could have been advertised more widely and should have been more prominent on our website. We believe that our work to communicate with victims and survivors has improved over time and we continue to look to improve this further.

The Inquiry was asked to consider whether there should be elected victims committees in each region.

Truth Project and communications

Calls were made to raise awareness about the Truth Project and improve some of the ways in which it operates. We also gathered some really helpful comments about the way in which we communicate about the Truth Project. Suggestions for improvement included:

- Actively reaching out to all victims and survivors, from all ethnic backgrounds, communities and abilities, including people without computers and people with learning difficulties, and ensuring that the process is as inclusive as possible;
- Reassuring victims and survivors of the step-by-step Truth Project process, including making sure people know about the support that will be provided (possibly a role play session of a Truth Project private session would be helpful in this regard);
- Using trusted intermediaries to promote the Truth Project;
- Making it clear that the process is open, honest and is completely confidential;
- Being upfront about the purpose of the Truth Project and how it will help to feed into our recommendations;
- Ensuring that there is a communication strategy which:
 - Puts victims and survivors at the centre of the communications
 - Uses television, radio, magazines and newspapers to advertise the Truth Project
 - Separates the Truth Project from the rest of the Inquiry
 - Makes clear what the purpose of the Truth Project is
 - Uses sensitive wording and visuals
 - Uses trusted intermediaries to promote the Truth Project
 - Utilises local media and local organisations, e.g GP surgeries

- Puts the Inquiry Panel Members' passion at the centre of communications
- Clearly counteracts the negativity in the press
- Is more personal and not as formalistic as what we have done previously.

Research Project

The role of the Research Project within the Inquiry was discussed and an open invitation was issued to participants to suggest what the team should be looking at in the course of its work. Suggestions received included the relationships between the Government and Charities.

Recommendations for the protection of children

Participants were clear that they wanted the Inquiry to make recommendations sooner rather than later. It was agreed that there is no desire within the Inquiry to wait until the end to make recommendations. We will aim to be making practical interim recommendations in 2018.

We will not compromise on our recommendations, and we will ensure that they serve to better protect children in the future, by learning the lessons of the past.

Thank you

We remain very grateful for the input and participation of all members of the Victims and Survivors Forum. Your views are valued and help inform our work. We look forward to seeing you again at future Forum events.

This note will be published on our website.