

HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE INQUIRY
STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN
SIR ANTHONY HART
31 May 2012

I consider it a privilege to have been asked to conduct this inquiry into historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland between 1945 and 1995. As its Terms of Reference make clear, the remit of the Inquiry is to “examine if there were systemic failings by institutions or the state in their duties towards those children in their care between the years of 1945 and 1995”. The Inquiry is an independent body, and the matters within its remit will be thoroughly and rigorously investigated without fear or favour by myself and by those who will be appointed to assist the Inquiry in various capacities, whether as panel members or staff.

For the purpose of the inquiry a child is someone who was under the age of 18, and “institution means any body, society or organisation with responsibility for the care, health or welfare of children in Northern Ireland, other than a school (but including a training school or borstal) which, during the relevant period [which means between 1945 and 1995], provided residential accommodation and took decisions about and made provision for the day to day care of children.”

The Inquiry will have to investigate matters of the utmost sensitivity and importance for all of those who experienced life as children in those institutions, some of whom may wish to describe their experiences going back more than 60 years, and we recognise that recounting what had happened in the past can itself be very distressing. The initial work that has been done so far suggests that there were possibly over 100 separate locations where residential care was provided at different times, and various estimates have been given as to how many people may have been in such institutions during the 50 years covered by the Inquiry’s remit. The Inquiry will therefore have to consider what did or did not happen to many children, perhaps thousands, in a large number of institutions over many years. This will be a complex and demanding task, particularly given the time frame set by the Terms of Reference for the completion of its Report, and one that will involve a great deal of time and effort, because of the number of institutions, the number of children and the 50 year span of the Inquiry.

I have no doubt that many of those who will be affected by the decision to set up this Inquiry, some of whom may be well on in years, and are very anxious that it should start its work as soon as possible. I would like to assure them in particular, and the public in general, that I am fully aware of such concerns, as are those working with me. A good deal of detailed preparatory work has already been carried out in recent weeks to plan and set up the necessary procedures to enable it to carry out its task, but some further time will inevitably pass before the Inquiry will be able to put in place the necessary staff, premises and computer systems that are essential to allow the Inquiry to carry out its work efficiently and speedily once the necessary legislation has been passed by the Assembly.

Whilst the Inquiry will require such legislation to be in place to fully carry out its work, everything possible will be done in advance of the legislation being passed so that the Inquiry will be ready to move to the next stage as soon as the legislation is brought into force.

As the Terms of Reference make clear, an equally important part of the Inquiry is the Acknowledgement Forum. It will have a separate team of very experienced panel members, and will provide an opportunity for victims and survivors to recount their experiences to those panel members on a confidential basis. It is intended that the Acknowledgement Forum will start its work as soon as the necessary staff and procedures are in place, and whilst it is not yet possible to give a precise date by which the Acknowledgement Forum will start to hear from those who wish to speak to it, I hope that it will be possible to have the Acknowledgement Forum operational well before the end of this year.

The Inquiry will make every effort to have facilities in place as soon as possible, including a website, to allow anyone who wishes to contact the Inquiry or the Forum to do so on a confidential basis.

Further press releases will be issued in due course explaining in greater detail how the Inquiry and the Acknowledgement Forum will operate.