

HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE INQUIRY
STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN
SIR ANTHONY HART

1 October 2012

My appointment as Chairman of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, and that of the four members of the Acknowledgement Forum component of the Inquiry, was announced by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 31 May 2012, and as the Inquiry is embarking on the next stage of its work today by advertising to invite those who wish to relate their experiences to contact us, it is appropriate that I take this opportunity to say something about the nature of our task, what we have been doing to set up the Inquiry since 31 May, and what we will be doing during the remainder of 2102.

First of all, I want to welcome the appointment of two more panel members of the Inquiry. Since the announcement of 31 May, Geraldine Doherty and David Lane have been appointed to act as panel members with me in the public inquiry component of the Inquiry. Both have very considerable experience in the practice, management and regulation of social work and social care services in Great Britain, including residential child care services, and I am delighted that they have agreed to devote their time and talents to the Inquiry.

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”. Although funded by the Northern Ireland Executive, the Inquiry is independent of government, and I want to emphasise that the matters within its remit will be thoroughly and rigorously investigated without fear or favour by me and by those who have been 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 those who experienced life as children in those institutions, some of whom may wish to describe their experiences going back more than 60 years. A major challenge for the Inquiry over this summer has been to discover how many institutions will come within our remit, and how many children went through those institutions in the 50 years from 1945 to 1990. There is no central database to which we can turn to answer either of these questions, and so it has been necessary to try and identify those institutions, and this has not been an easy task.

The initial work that has been done suggests that there were over 100 separate locations that provided such residential care at different times, and so far we have identified

- 88 children’s homes
- 14 children’s hostels
- 14 industrial schools/training schools/young offenders centres/Borstals
- 14 schools/homes for people with disabilities
- 14 hospitals for children with mental illness/learning disabilities
- 6 holiday homes
- 9 mother and children’s homes
- 14 workhouses and their infirmaries which were in operation for a period after 1945.

On further investigation it may be that some of these fall outside our remit, but I hope these numbers convey something of the potential scale of our task. Nor do we know how many children were in these institutions. Various estimates have been given as to how many children may have been in such institutions during the 50 years

covered by the Inquiry's remit, but until those who are still alive and wish to recount their experiences come forward to contact us, and we can obtain more information from the records of these institutions, these estimates are only estimates.

Both the public inquiry and the Acknowledgement Forum components of 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, are very anxious that it should start its work as soon as possible. I want to assure them in particular, and the public in general, that all the panel members, the staff of the Inquiry and myself are fully aware of such concerns, and that over the summer we have been doing everything within our power to put in place the necessary procedures and equipment to allow us to carry out our task effectively, expeditiously and sensitively. Whilst the public inquiry component of the Inquiry will not be able to start some of its work until the draft legislation which is presently before the Northern Ireland Assembly becomes law, during the rest of this year we will be doing as much as we can in the interim to prepare for the next stage of the Inquiry once the legislation is passed.

As the Terms of Reference make clear, an equally important part of the Inquiry is the Acknowledgement Forum. Unlike the public inquiry component, it will not investigate whether there were systemic failings in the manner in which children were treated in those institutions within our remit. The Forum has a separate team of very experienced panel members, and it provides an opportunity for individuals who were children in such institutions to recount their experiences to its panel members in private and on confidential basis.

A great deal of detailed preparatory work has been essential before we could be ready to provide a proper service to those who wish to recount their experiences to

us, but I am pleased that we are now able to invite members of the public who wish to recount their experiences to the Inquiry, and to the Acknowledgement Forum in particular, to contact us, either by going to our website at www.hiainquiry.org, or by ringing Freephone 08000684935. We will then send them a leaflet explaining how the various parts of the Inquiry will operate, and a form for them to fill in and return to us stating whether they wish to speak only to the public inquiry, or only to the Acknowledgement Forum, or to both. All applications will be treated in confidence. Once we receive completed application forms we will be able to plan who we should contact first, and when. Depending upon how many people wish to contact us this process may take a little time, but we plan to offer the first appointments for the Acknowledgement Forum starting in a few weeks' time. We intend to give priority to those who are eldest or in poor health.