

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

Speaking to the Acknowledgement Forum and the Statutory Inquiry

I have returned my application form, what happens now?

Some people have told us that they only wish to speak to the Acknowledgement Forum, or they only want to speak to the Statutory Inquiry, but many have said that they want to speak to both. We know that you may find it very stressful and upsetting to describe your experience of abuse whilst you were living in an institution, and we will do as much as we can to keep any upset and stress to a minimum.

The Acknowledgement Forum and the Statutory Inquiry are there to enable people who experienced abuse themselves to describe their experiences. The Statutory Inquiry also wants to hear from people who can give first hand descriptions of abuse inflicted on others, for example something they saw or heard as a child or a member of staff, even if they did not suffer abuse themselves.

One of the things we will do to minimize any upset and stress will be to ask you to speak to the Acknowledgement Forum first if you want to speak to both the Acknowledgement Forum and to the Statutory Inquiry. If the Statutory Inquiry legal team need to speak to you as well we will usually ask you to come back on a later day. This is because we believe that to ask people to describe their experiences twice on the same day may be too upsetting for many of them.

However, there may be some exceptions to this. One would be if you prefer to get both meetings over on the same day. However, we would advise you to think very carefully whether you want to do that, because experience elsewhere has shown that many people do not realise just how much speaking about their experiences will take out of them. Another exception may be if you have to travel a

long way to speak to us, and you have to stay overnight. In that case it may suit you better to speak to the Acknowledgement Forum on one day, and then speak to the Inquiry legal team on the next day before you start your return journey. We will discuss with you what is most suitable for you, and we will try to accommodate your wishes as best we can.

How and when will I be contacted by the Acknowledgement Forum?

A member of the Inquiry staff called a Witness Support Officer will contact you to give you the location, date and time of your meeting. The Witness Support Officer will welcome you when you arrive, and then explain to you again what will happen during the meeting. We will try to make sure that the same Witness Support Officer deals with all the arrangements for your meeting, but this may not always be possible. You will be sent details explaining what travel and accommodation expenses we will pay, who we will pay for and how any expenses will be paid.

Can I ask someone to sit in on the meeting with me?

You can choose anyone you wish to accompany you, **except for someone under the age of 18, or someone who is also going to speak to the Acknowledgement Forum or to the Statutory Inquiry.** The reason why we do not allow anyone who will describe their own experience of abuse to accompany another person whilst that person describes their experience is to protect both individuals, and the Inquiry, from allegations that each has been influenced in what they say by hearing the account given by the other.

Some people have said that they want their solicitor to accompany them, and that is permitted. You should tell your solicitor that she or he will not be paid by the Inquiry for:

- advising you,
- coming with you to speak to the Acknowledgement Forum,
- coming with you to speak to the Inquiry legal team, or

- coming with you to speak at the Statutory Inquiry if you are asked by the Inquiry legal team to give evidence.

What will happen at the Acknowledgement Forum?

Whoever accompanies you will not be allowed to describe your experiences for you because it is your account that the Acknowledgement Forum members wish to hear. However, if you need to, and with the agreement of the panel members, you may ask your companion to assist you in giving your account.

There will be two Acknowledgement Forum panel members present, one of whom will take notes. If you agree, an audio recording will also be made of the meeting so that the panel members can have as full an account as possible to assist them in preparing their report.

If you have also asked to speak to the Statutory Inquiry, the Acknowledgement Forum panel members will ask you if you agree to the recording being made available to the Inquiry legal team. Apart from the Acknowledgement Forum panel members and the Inquiry legal team, no one else will have access to the recording unless the Chairman permits this, and he will only do so in very limited circumstances.

The law requires everyone, including the Inquiry and its staff, to notify the police of information relating to certain crimes. If what you say contains allegations of criminal offences against individuals who may still be alive, or who are still working with children and vulnerable adults, then the Acknowledgement Forum or the Statutory Inquiry will suggest to you that you contact the PSNI (or the appropriate social services), and will explain how you can do that. Even if you do not wish to report the matter yourself, by law the Acknowledgement Forum or the Statutory Inquiry has to report it. It will then be for the police or the relevant social services to investigate further. Even if the matter is reported to the police you can still speak about your experiences to the Acknowledgement

Forum. The Statutory Inquiry will still consider your experiences unless this would interfere with a police investigation.

What will speaking to the Statutory Inquiry involve?

Once you have spoken to the Acknowledgement Forum, and if you have told us that you also want to speak to the Statutory Inquiry, the Inquiry legal team will try to meet everyone who wishes to speak to the Statutory Inquiry.

If you said that you only want to speak to the Statutory Inquiry, the Inquiry legal team will contact you to come and speak to them.

It may not be necessary, or indeed possible, for the Inquiry legal team to speak to everyone who contacts the Statutory Inquiry or the Acknowledgement Forum because by law the Inquiry has to produce its report by 18 January 2016 (although in exceptional circumstances it may ask to have the time extended). That may mean that it will not be necessary or possible to consider, and if necessary to investigate, every allegation in the same way. That will depend upon how many people come forward, and on the type of allegation.

You will be able to bring someone with you when you speak to the Inquiry legal team in the same way as we have explained above when someone speaks to the Acknowledgement Forum. That means you may bring your solicitor with you, but the Inquiry will not pay your solicitor for advising you, coming with you to speak to the Inquiry legal team, or at the Statutory Inquiry if you are asked to give evidence by the Inquiry legal team.

Travel Expenses

Reasonable travel and other necessary expenses incurred in meeting with the Acknowledgement Forum, or with the Statutory Inquiry, or with the Inquiry legal team, will be reimbursed at public service rates on receipt and will be processed by the Witness Support Officers.

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