

Abuse at Certain Educational Institutions: Statements

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Norma Foley

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley)

I welcome the opportunity to provide a statement on the deeply shocking and disturbing accounts of abuse in certain schools. I know that all in this House and right across the country will have felt the same sense of shock and revulsion at the revelations made in recent weeks about the extent of sexual abuse in Spiritan schools. I have engaged with survivors over recent days and will continue to do so over the coming days.

At the outset, I commend the courage of those who have come forward and indeed all of those who have been living with the impact of this abuse for many years. Their courage has given voice to a deep hurt that is shared, I am sure, by many others who continue to suffer in silence as a consequence of similar experiences. These revelations of abuse in several schools are deeply disturbing and heartbreaking. Like the rest of the Government, I am very conscious of the enormous trauma that has been endured by all survivors of abuse. The sexual abuse of a child is repugnant to the whole of society and is a reprehensible abuse of power and trust. Parents entrust their children to the care of schools and staff, and should be confident that their children will be cared for, protected and cherished in school.

The Government takes the issue of sexual abuse very seriously. These crimes are abhorrent and I am fully aware of the devastating impact they can have on the lives of people affected. As Members will appreciate, I cannot comment on a specific case, but I wish to reassure the House that there is comprehensive legislation in place to deal with these offences. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act was enacted in early 2017. It is wide-ranging legislation that significantly enhances laws to combat the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.

I have been informed that since the broadcast of the documentary "Blackrock Boys" on 6 November last and as of 22 November last, 32 contacts have been received by An Garda Síochána regarding sexual abuse at six schools run by the Spiritan Education Trust: Blackrock College, Willow Park, Rockwell College, St. Mary's College, St. Michael's College and Templeogue College. Of these contacts, I am informed 27 are from survivors, three from witnesses and two from people acting on behalf of survivors. The reports relate to alleged incidents dating from 1954 until 1991.

I would like to encourage all who have been subjected to or witnessed clerical sexual abuse to contact An Garda Síochána. The sexual crime management unit at the Garda National Protective Services Bureau, GNPSB, is the central point of contact for all reports of clerical sexual abuse. A dedicated email address has been set up to support the reporting of such crimes. People who wish to report such crimes can also contact their local Garda station, the sexual crime management unit, at 01 6663430, or the Garda child sexual abuse reporting line, at 1800 555 222. This is a confidential and free service available to the public on a 24-7 basis.

It is vital that survivors of child sexual abuse have the opportunity to be heard in full and with appropriate respect and sensitivity. They need to know there will be a serious response from the Government. Right across the House, I know we are united in calling for a survivor-led response.

My urgent priority in recent days was to listen to survivors and this will also be the case in the coming days. This is to allow them to share their experiences with me personally should they so wish and for me to begin to get a sense of what they would like to see happen. I would like to express my sincere thanks to those survivors who have engaged with me to date and have done so in the spirit of openly sharing their experiences. They are telling me what they would like to see happen. As I hear a different perspective from each individual, I hope a thread of commonality in terms of an approach or approaches will come through so I can work further with the Government, all in this House and primarily with survivors to arrive at a consensus on the most appropriate way forward.

I acknowledge the calls for an inquiry. I am cognisant that the Government owes it to the survivors to ensure any process of inquiry is the right one and will best deliver the outcomes they feel are most important. To ensure any such response will indeed be effective and survivor led, it is important at this stage to consider carefully the range of options open to achieve these outcomes while acknowledging and analysing the strengths and challenges inherent in any single approach.

On foot of the launch of the updated child protection procedures for primary and post-primary schools in 2017, the Department of Education has funded the delivery of continuing professional development, CPD, support and training for teachers, school leaders and staff to outline the statutory obligations that apply to organisations such as schools under the Children First Act. The CPD also provides guidance and directions to school leaders and teachers in regard to meeting their new statutory obligations under the Act. The Professional Development Service for Teachers, PDST, also has a role in providing in-school support for schools who require additional guidance.

Roderic O'Gorman

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman)

I was deeply shocked to hear the harrowing allegations about children who were sexually abused in Blackrock College from the 1960s to the 1980s. I want to commend all those who have come forward on their bravery. It takes incredible bravery for people to relive such traumatic events in their lives, and in particular to do so in the public domain. Their bravery is important not only in the context of achieving a criminal conviction against those who committed these offences, but also in terms of encouraging others to come forward because once one person comes forward, it makes it a tiny bit easier for the next person to do so. That bravery needs to be acknowledged.

I would like to speak to the House about the legislative measures and policies in place to keep children safe. Over the past 25 years, significant progress has been made by successive governments to strengthen provisions to protect children in Ireland. This programme of reform was embarked on partly to address past failings, but also to achieve better outcomes in the delivery of services to children and their families. This reform programme began with the establishment of a dedicated Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It was followed by the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which as we know is a dedicated State agency responsible for supporting and promoting the development, welfare and protection of children.

Tusla is aided in its child protection role by the Children First Act 2015, which provides for a number of key child protection measures, including raising awareness of child abuse and neglect, providing for the reporting and management of child protection concerns, and improving child protection arrangements in organisations providing services to children.

The third key element of the Children First Act was to place the Children First interdepartmental implementation group, CFIDIG, on a statutory footing. Each Department, as well as Tusla, the HSE and the Garda, is represented on this group. The CFIDIG is a high-level, cross-sectoral group with specific statutory functions relating to monitoring and promoting compliance by Departments with their obligations under the Act. These obligations include the requirement on each Department to prepare a sectoral implementation plan outlining the measures in place or planned to ensure compliance with Children First legislation and guidance. These plans apply not only to that Department, but also to any organisation providing a relevant service to children and receiving funding from the Department in that regard.

Implementation of the Barnahus model in Ireland is a significant initiative to improve services to children and families affected by sexual abuse. The aim of the model is to provide a timely assessment service to victims of sexual abuse and to reduce as far as possible the potential for retraumatisation by offering all services in one child-friendly location. The first Barnahus is operational in Galway city and a further two sites are under development in Dublin in the east and in Cork in the south. To support this, my Department chairs the interdepartmental group overseeing the model's implementation. This group brings together representatives from the Departments of Justice and Health, the Garda, the HSE, Children's Health Ireland and Tusla. I recently had the opportunity to visit the Barnahus in Galway and I was very impressed by the dedication of its staff and the model's insightfulness towards young people who had undergone the most traumatic experience of their lives. The model allows services such as Garda interviews and medical checks to be provided to them in one location.

I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, for leading the Government's response in addressing the allegations that have emerged from Blackrock. I recognise the great bravery of the survivors who have come forward, spoken publicly and sought to secure justice, and I hope they have opened the way for others to do so.

Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire

Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt leis na Teachtaí Martin Kenny agus Paul Donnelly.

Unfortunately, while the entire nation was shocked and disgusted by the revelations of recent weeks, it was perhaps not surprised, given that they followed the pattern of revelations about many similarly run institutions - horrific abuse, a failure to address that abuse, the ignoring of complaints, the moving of perpetrators and the failure to account properly for the wrongdoing that happened in the schools run by the Spiritan organisation, which is probably more commonly known by its former name, the Holy Ghost Fathers, in Blackrock, St. Michael's, Willow Park, Rockwell and Templeogue.

Like the Ministers, I wish to pay tribute to the incredible courage of the men who have come forward. I will name just a few who have spoken out - Mr. John Coulter, Mr. Corry McMahon, Mr. Louis Hoffman and Mr. Philip Feddis - but there are others. Given what has transpired since, it is clear that their courage has led to others who had never spoken to anyone about what happened to them coming forward. That is welcome.

It is vital that the Garda be at the heart of any response. It has been said correctly that many of the perpetrators are no longer with us, but there are some who may still be with us. There are also people in positions of responsibility who, if still alive, need to be held to account.

The price that the young boys paid was enormous. It was a price for which they were not responsible and about which they could do nothing. They were abused in the most horrific, violent and disgusting way. That trauma spilled into the rest of their lives and relationships, including addictions and thoughts of suicide and self-harm. The monsters who inflicted this abuse on them derailed the lives of some. I pay tribute to the extraordinary courage they have displayed.

In how the State addresses this situation, it is important that we listen to their needs and to what they want. It is clear that the State needs to address it. It is long established that the State has a moral responsibility, but it has now been established through the Louise O'Keefe case relating to a national school in west Cork that the State had a legal responsibility to ensure that abuse, including sexual abuse, did not happen in institutions. As such, there needs to be a response from the State. An inquiry is required and what the survivors want needs to be listened to carefully. Given the week that is in it, it is appropriate that we acknowledge that the Scally inquiry provides a good model of flexibility, cost effectiveness and, most importantly, reaching clear conclusions within a reasonable time. The Scally inquiry achieved results for, and generally provided a degree of satisfaction to, survivors. Ultimately, the wishes of the survivors need to be listened to carefully.

It is well for us to speak about this situation and to express our shock and horror, but it is important that there be follow-up. In some comparable situations, the follow-up has not been great. I am thinking of the survivors of institutional abuse in particular. It is some time since that survivors' group was established with the Department. Yes, Covid happened in the middle of the process, but the survivors are still waiting to find out what the situation is with the medical cards and so on that they were supposed to be awarded. Will the Minister, Deputy Foley, look into this matter?

The State's response cannot stop at us just expressing our horror and disgust.

I acknowledge the very fulsome statements in that regard from the Ministers. There needs to be a full follow-up. It needs to be followed right to its conclusion to ensure that people get truth, justice, ongoing support and whatever else we as a society believe they are entitled to, because that is crucial.

Martin Kenny

Deputy Martin Kenny

We all agree that the reports about the goings-on in the Spiritan order that have been played out over the airwaves in recent weeks are shocking. In recent weeks, I have had the chance to tune in to some of the coverage, both on the

radio and in many newspapers, and to say the least, it is horrifying. I want to use this time to put on record my sympathy and solidarity with those who were let down by the system that should have protected them. Their bravery in coming forward to raise awareness, with the hope of supporting others also to make a disclosure, is a heroic effort. However, I return to the point that none of this should have happened in the first place.

Those in leadership positions within the order, and the educational institutions in which they operated, had multiple opportunities to investigate and indeed to prevent these criminals from even being in the vicinity of children. However, as with other clerical abuse scandals before this, there was a failure to intercede and protect the children. The only action taken by the order was to move the order members once it became clear they could not remain in situ, such was the extent of their offending. The only move taken by the order was to protect itself, not the children within its care. That is despicable, deplorable and criminal.

The entire lives of the survivors were turned upside down as a result of what was done to them. This particular type of crime is an insidious one. It has a monumental effect on the life of survivors and those around them. A trauma of that magnitude at such a young age can often change the entire trajectory of a life. Approximately two years ago a young man, Tom, rang me one evening. I had spoken to him previously. He said that he was in shock having heard that a school colleague who had been at boarding school with him had been abused while he was there and he had died by suicide. He was full of grief, horror and guilt that he had not come forward sooner. He spoke to me about what to do and where to go. I directed him to go first to An Garda Síochána and I rang the Garda myself about it afterwards. We were probably on the phone for three quarters of an hour. He went through the traumatic effect the abuse had on his life. He told his wife some years previously and it had an effect on their relationship. It also affected the relationship he had with his children. He was super-protective of them and afraid for them everywhere they went in case the same would happen to them as had happened to him. It brought home to me the horror of this crime, not just on the unfortunate person directly affected but on all of the other victims that spiral out from it. What affected him most is that when he first approached the management of the boarding school he had been in, he was met with denial and a refusal to accept or talk about it. The response was to bury it and push it away. That has been the initial response from all these organisations to date.

The Minister made a lengthy speech about the safeguarding measures that are now in place. They are all needed because of the type of carry-on we have had in the past, which would happen again if they were not there. However, even with our best efforts, abuse still happens. There is a lesson for all of us in this. We must use our position to make sure that people know they will be supported and cared for in respect of all of this.

In terms of what the Government must do now, as my colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire mentioned, an inquiry is the very minimum. An inquiry such as the one carried out by Dr. Gabriel Scally into CervicalCheck is an option the Government should seriously consider. It is the most recent inquiry where at least at the end of it people expressed some sense of satisfaction. We have had so many inquiries and debacles in the past where everybody has come out of it saying it did not work and that it is was not acceptable. The old chestnut that is trotted out is that it would cost too much. I go back to the young man to whom I spoke on the phone, Tom. Anyone who speaks to people like him would realise the impact it had on their lives and that cost is not the first or only consideration. In fact, it is the last.

All of us have work to do in this regard but the Government has the primary responsibility to ensure a full and adequate inquiry takes place into all of this, not just for the children affected but for their families, wider society and to ensure it does not happen again.

Paul Donnelly

Deputy Paul Donnelly

Here we find another horrific story of abuse repeating itself again. It is another legacy of abuse from a religious order in Ireland. In Ireland, from the foundation of the State and possibly until the 1980s and 1990s, there was an omerta and fear connected to criticising a religious person, and such situations arise again and again in institutions - in mother and baby homes, schools and across a range of places where children were put into the care of religious orders. In some settings, Christian Brothers had carte blanche to carry out the abuse of young boys and girls.

I commend the brave survivors of abuse at the hands of the Spiritan priests in Blackrock College and other institutions. Their bravery in speaking out has given others the courage to do so. The sheer fear of speaking out allowed the abuse to continue until some brave people eventually had the courage to speak out. We can only

wonder how many people who were continually abused were affected by mental health, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide and are no longer here to speak out. I suggest that the number is significant. We think of them also today.

The culture of silence within religious orders also aided and abetted the abusers, who were moved to other areas or schools where in many cases they continued their evil abuse of children. It has come to light in the case of the Spiritans that some of those involved in abuse continued to live on the campuses in Blackrock, Templeogue and Rockwell in Tipperary. I would like to know if that is still the case. Is anyone connected to cases of abuse still living in any of those places? If so, they must be dealt with straight away. The Spiritan order also operated overseas on missions in Nigeria, west Africa, North Africa, and Brazil. Is this a worldwide legacy? If so, the Spiritans must extend support to anyone affected by the horrific actions of their priests.

At least 233 men have made allegations of abuse against 77 Irish priests from the Spiritans, some of whom were serial abusers and had unchecked access to children. Meanwhile, a man who is believed to be the first person publicly to allege sexual assault at Castleknock College has said that any fresh inquiry or review into historical abuse in schools should be extended until each member of a religious order who is still alive, who abused or facilitated the abuse of children, faces justice. I commend the Minister on acknowledging the calls for an inquiry. We must ensure that any inquiry process is the right one for survivors and will deliver the outcomes they feel are most important. We must keep the victims at the core of our thinking and actions. People in the order must be held to account and the religious orders must pay for their crimes of covering up the sexual abuse of children in their care. That is the least the survivors deserve, and those victims who are no longer with us today.

Ivana Bacik

Deputy Ivana Bacik

I welcome this important debate which I sought last week from the Taoiseach following the broadcast of the powerful "Blackrock Boys" radio documentary. I commend the immense courage of those who have come forward in recent weeks to disclose abuse that they suffered at Blackrock College, in the other five schools run by the Spiritans, and in other schools too. I acknowledge the horror of the abuse perpetrated upon children in this way and the immense harm caused to survivors, their families and communities as a result. I stress the importance of the Garda continuing to investigate where alleged perpetrators are still alive.

Last week, the Spiritans issued a public apology to victims and announced the initiation of a restorative justice process. It is welcome to see this constructive engagement given restorative justice is a non-adversarial, victim-centred approach, but it requires acknowledgment of wrongdoing as a pre-requisite for participation by the offender or institution. Given the tone of correspondence I have received from the Spiritan Education Trust in recent days following my comments in this House last week, I have concerns about whether sufficient acknowledgement will be forthcoming. Indeed, in the past, institutions and religious orders have failed to offer sufficient acknowledgment of wrongdoing.

In any case, while I think we are all conscious that restorative justice can be a welcome process, it is clearly also necessary that an independent inquiry be established to run in parallel. It is welcome that the Minister for Education and the Government have committed to establishing an inquiry and to hear she has started meeting survivors, meetings which I have heard from survivors have been very constructive. It is also welcome to hear she is engaging with Opposition party spokespersons and Deputy Ó Ríordáin, our party's education spokesperson, will engage on this with her and other party spokespersons next week. All of us are agreed that the first principle in establishing the inquiry should be that it be survivor led and, therefore, meaningful consultation with survivors must take place before any final decision on the format of the inquiry can be made.

Even so, a few points can be accepted by everyone, because whatever format is accepted or adopted, an inquiry should be capable of going beyond the six schools run by the Spiritans. If necessary, a modular format could be adopted to ensure an overall framework for the inquiry can be established for the Spiritan schools, on which the focus is currently placed, but that framework could be adapted to cover other institutions because we are all conscious that others have come forward in recent days to disclose abuse perpetrated in institutions that have not yet been the subject of any State inquiry. Such a framework could seek to review the extent of abuse perpetrated in each institution, building on previous reports published by, for example, the national safeguarding board. The framework should look at the existing culture of impunity, of turning a blind eye and of institutional cover-ups within specific religious orders. Crucially, a State inquiry should examine what the State could and should have done to prevent such abuse. In the context of the Spiritans in particular, as I said last week, any inquiry must address issues

relating to the knowledge of those who are still in key decision-making roles at Blackrock College. We are all conscious that while systems have changed and both Ministers outlined those welcome improvements in child protection, key personnel may well be still in place despite the system changes and that has to be addressed by any inquiry.

I greatly appreciate the engagement I have had from survivors in recent days. Those who have contacted me want to see all these issues addressed. They want to see significant and robust outcomes as a result of any inquiry and cultural change in various institutions and orders and, crucially, they want to ensure no other children will ever have to endure such horrific abuse.

Turning to the format of the inquiry, for survivors it is about seeing outcomes. I acknowledge the Minister, Deputy Foley, will engage with survivors and that we cannot decide on the format of the inquiry until that engagement has taken place. Nevertheless, on reviewing the experience of inquiries and speaking from experience having represented the survivors of abuse in industrial schools before the residential institutions redress board, I offer the following observations about this format of inquiry. As the Minister noted, we should learn from pre-existing reports. Shamefully, these recent disclosures follow a long line of disclosures relating to the abuse of children in various institutions. Next year will see the 30th anniversary of the Kilkenny incest investigation report. I believe that, in total, 17 reports into child abuse in different settings have been produced since 1993, and we can learn from them.

Second, as we know from experience, such as in the Ryan report process, statutory inquiries can be protracted and lengthy, but they come with significant powers of compellability. Some statutory inquiries, such as the Dublin and Cloyne reports, were much more swiftly carried out. While a non-statutory inquiry may have weaker powers, those powers may not be needed where an order or institution is fully co-operative. The Ferns inquiry, which was swiftly conducted, was a non-statutory inquiry and there are certain advantages to that.

Finally, whatever format is adopted, clearly it should not in any way preclude live Garda investigations.

I again express my gratitude and appreciation to the many survivors who have come forward to me and others in recent days and who have expressed their wish to see specific outcomes from an independent inquiry. We look forward to engaging with the Minister on the shape of that inquiry.

Gerald Nash

Deputy Ged Nash

The first time I ever spoke in this House, I called for justice for the survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of the former surgeon **Michael Shine. That was 12 years ago, and the survivors still await justice. Shine is the most prolific paedophile to have stalked the corridors of an Irish hospital. The number of boys he abused between the early 1960s and the 1990s is the hundreds. Many of them are friends and constituents of mine. Some are my age. It could have been me or any one of us.**

Shine was imprisoned in 2019 for four years for the indecent assault of seven boys, but he was released early this year. The Court of Appeal ruled last year that a separate trial could not proceed due to his age, his health and the historical nature of the allegations before the court. Last August, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions indicated it would not pursue a series of additional cases. This news was utterly devastating for the survivors. The Smith review, commissioned in 2009, was an utter waste of time. It is locked away, sealed off from the survivors. Justice has been repeatedly and continuously denied to these men and their families, who have suffered enough.

Michael Shine is still alive. His conduct, and the system that allowed him to do what he did with impunity, need to be investigated in a formal, survivor-led commission of investigation, as do the activities of the Spiritans and others. This is not a new call - I have made it time and again in this House and in every other forum available to me - but it is a request to which the Government should finally accede.

Jennifer Carroll MacNeill

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill

It is with tremendous sadness that I again contribute to deeply important statements on abuse at certain education institutions, specifically Willow Park Junior School and Blackrock College, which are located in the geographic heart of my constituency. I will speak about four issues, namely, first and foremost, the survivors, as well as the broader

school community in my constituency, the institutional and State response and clerical abuse more generally in Ireland.

Like every other Deputy who has spoken has done, I offer my deepest concern and sympathies to each of the survivors of this abuse for the physical and emotional pain they suffered as children, for the damaged memories and damaged relationships, for the secrecy forced on them, for the totally unjustified but often described "shame" put on them through absolutely no fault of their young innocent selves, for the burden they have had to carry through their adult lives, for the ways they have found to cope and to manage and for the bravery they have found to highlight the abuse done to them by vicious, vile men for whom no punishment can ever be sufficient.

I acknowledge the role of RTÉ's "Documentary on One" and Joe Duffy's "Liveline" in bringing this story into the bright light, but it had already begun with victims speaking to one another on social media, connecting and sharing and amplifying one another's experience. The many survivors who have so bravely made their experience public - I pay tribute to Mark and David Ryan, Aidan Moore, Edward Herron, John Coulter, Corry McMahon, Louis Hoffman and Philip Feddis, to name but some of them - have given the freedom to others to recollect and disclose if they have wished to do so, to talk or not to talk, and they have pulled back a most distasteful veil that lay over a violent and viscous past.

As they have said and has been noted in the House, what is needed now is a victim or survivor-centred, survivor-led process that will enable the best of reparation and healing available. I acknowledge, as the Minister did, that that will be different for different people, and I urge the Government, in its communication with survivors, to continue to reflect on what model may best meet those needs, which she has indicated she is doing. My view is that a strong scoping exercise and a strengthening of the impact of the confidential committee within the inquiry model may - I stress "may" - help give much greater weight to the stories told by the survivors than was the case in previous inquest models, survivors who were voiceless in their abuse but need not be voiceless anymore. Their voices are the ones that should direct the next stages, and I was pleased to hear that approach expressed by the Minister.

There is a broader school community that is hurting deeply. Willow Park and Blackrock College are located in my constituency. I have spoken to parents of students who attend the school today, to parents who attended the school 20 and 30 years ago and whose children attend today, and to people who left the school many years ago. My son attends the school, and my nephews and members of my husband's family either attend or once attended the school. Families throughout my constituency, from Booterstown and Blackrock to Shankill, have a connection with the school, whether a brother, uncle or other family member. The school is embedded throughout the community through many families, and so many people have a connection to it now or did so in the past. Everybody in that community has been impacted by these revelations of abuse.

There are people, of course, who knew directly already through personal or family experience. Some people knew less. They knew of things that had happened to friends or family but had no idea of the broader scale. Other people knew nothing, yet voiced suspicions about this priest or that in the past. Let us not forget, most importantly, that some on the school campus knew quite a lot and did and said nothing.

From my interactions as a constituency representative for Dún Laoghaire and as a member of that school community, I have witnessed the high volume of communication that has happened over the past number of weeks in Blackrock in the most direct way through email and in the most innocuous way by children running to their parents at the edge of the pitch during rugby or soccer games. It seems that most of the broader school community genuinely did not know. People are coming to terms with the fact that this happened, perhaps even while they were there. They are only understanding now the real pain their peers went through and what they experienced. This community is hurting, appropriately so, but hurting, nonetheless.

I acknowledge the response of the Blackrock past pupils' union, which appears to have tried to take steps to offer total solidarity to those survivors and the community. It might seem like a small thing in the round, but its immediate cancellation of its annual lunch was an important gesture available to it and a symbol of solidarity. Ironically, there was some criticism of having cancelled the lunch because people wanted to come together to discuss this openly as a community, which I understand. Overall, however, the decision was the correct one. People simply cannot carry on as normal when something of this nature comes out. It was an appropriate reaction. I took heart from the fact that the criticism was there and people really wanted to come together to talk.

Part of the school community, of course, are the boys and young men who are in the school today. Boys aged from eight to 18, and younger, are certainly well able to discern what is being discussed about their own school in the media and other places. First and foremost, there is an essential need to protect all the boys from harm from any source. I will come back to that. However, there is also a measure of care needed by the school community broadly about how this is discussed with them, particularly the younger boys, to ensure that they manage this news about their own community well and that, crucially, everybody learns from it for the future.

How do we respond? What is the future? First, we need to do is ensure the protection of the boys in school today in Willow Park, Blackrock and, indeed, every school throughout Ireland. On this, I have deeply interrogated the current principal of Willow Park, who has been there since just 2016. I did so initially as a parent, through the Willow Park parents' association, with which there has been deep engagement on behalf of the parents and extensive information made available but also, of course, as a local representative with a deep concern for the school and school community. I deeply interrogated him in person, and I believe that the boys there are well protected and cared for today. The principal has made himself available to any parent who wants to talk in more detail. I am confident that any information in his hands will be made available to any inquiry or model established by the Government and that his approach is one of total openness.

It is important to say that the boys today are protected because of a genuine cultural shift from secrecy to transparency generally in Ireland, however, and in particular the response of Government. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, specifically referenced the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Ms Frances Fitzgerald. Ms Fitzgerald stood up to the Catholic Church in 2011 and told the authorities she was legislating for mandatory sexual abuse reporting, no matter what. That followed the publication of the Cloyne report, which documented abuse in that diocese up to 2007.

I was there with the former Minister. As recently as 2011, the Catholic Church tried to resist mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, using the completely useless legal and even more morally bankrupt argument, that the value of the seal of the confessional somehow competed with the reporting of child sexual abuse. I was Frances Fitzgerald's special adviser at the time. It is to her eternal credit, supported by the then Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny, that she faced down the men of the church in those weeks and went ahead in no uncertain terms thereafter to put the Children First principles, which had hitherto been guidelines only, into a statutory mandatory reporting space. That was among the first cultural shifts in Government that mattered. The measures outlined by the Minister, Deputy Foley, in her contribution and indeed, by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, the Children First Act and other various processes follow that cultural shift away from what children knew then. In the words of a Willow Park graduate, which appeared in an article on The Irish Times on 20 November, "Like every one of that generation, I knew instinctively that any complaints against a priest would be futile and that they would likely assume it was my fault."

The real measure of response now is how we atone for the secrecy and hurt of the past. The only acceptable response now from every school involved and, indeed, every congregation and order, whatever the structures - I am past caring about the distinctions - is, as Deputy Bacik said, acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and a new openness, honesty, humility and accuracy. Every record should be made proactively available. Powers of compellability should not be necessary in respect of institutions that are proactively falling over themselves offering to help. These are the basic respects that are needed. This is what survivors and the school community deserve. This is the standard of protection children of the future deserve. Irrespective of the model agreed by Government next, that is the way for schools and congregations to genuinely lead now into the future, where their past has been such a sorry shame.

The rape and torture by grown men of young boys that happened in Willow Park and Blackrock was not limited to those schools, nor any of the schools discussed here today. It was a feature of Ireland of that time, and we hope it will never, ever be repeated. There can be nothing worse than a person having that secret hanging over his or whole life into adult life. Much of this happened in a different time, in a different culture. We were affected by this terrible evilness right across Ireland. It was so hurtful and damaging for the children who, as adults, are naturally still affected by it. My heart goes out to them and their families; their parents, siblings and friends. As we move to the future, however, we must do so in a way that shows absolutely no remnants of the tragedy and violence of the past.

Réada Cronin

Deputy Réada Cronin

I approach the debate with the desire and need to tread carefully and sensitively. The debate is about abuse at certain institutions but all Members present should be aware that if the number of people who have been sexually abused is one in four, then there are at least 40 survivors in this Dáil, 15 in the Seanad and at least 200 among the Oireachtas staff and media who work in Leinster House. Child sexual abuse is a disgusting and abhorrent thing but is not a rare thing by any measure.

My heart goes out to all of them, especially to the men who are coming forward now and who in the past were ignored, disbelieved or sent for psychiatric evaluation. My heart goes out, too, to all those who have chosen not to come forward and who will never do so. Some live with the story of what happened to them leaking out of them in all kinds of ways - we spoke about alcoholism. Others are doing the excruciating work of therapy privately or on their own terms. Still more have reached an accommodation with what was done to them and have been able to recover. The people who are coming forward now are just the barest tip of the iceberg.

I spoke to someone in north Kildare this week who was abused in their teens. This person told me how, unexpectedly, they find these current stories very triggering. The Minister can be sure that this constituent is not the only one feeling like this when it comes up. They are doing therapeutic work that will probably go on for a long time, and they are doing so privately. This person told me that it is not just young ears that need to be protected, as the radio warnings go; it is also the old ears of people who were young when they were assailed. I was not shocked, because who can be shocked now? However, this person is so solid and capable that I was surprised. Then, given how there could be 40 of us in this Chamber, why should I be surprised? We, therefore, need to be careful about how we talk and to whom we talk. We never know the terror or sorrow another person might be carrying, including a sizeable proportion of our colleagues.

As legislators, we have a particular duty to recognise that while today we are rightly and necessarily scrutinising abuse at certain institutions, it does not let us off the hook. Our huge task is to keep examining abuse in broader society and safeguard this to prevent it happening to new people.

We know that most child sexual abuse happens within the trusted family. There are many mummies and daddies and uncles and aunts - we saw a case just this week - who are relieved that political and media attention is falling away from them and their homes and who are now on the prowl.

We also need to face up to how many teens are abusing each other and children younger than them.

The 2009 annual report of the committee appointed to monitor the effectiveness of the Garda diversion programme found that out of 74 sexual offences, including 17 rapes and 40 sexual assaults, many were committed by under 18-year-olds. What is the number now in 2022? I dread to think.

The task we undertake today in addressing the issues of Blackrock College and elsewhere does not lessen or relieve us of our broader task of protecting our children. What would be the point in weeping with the victims and being outraged at the church unless we take our work as legislators as seriously as possible on an issue that can break a young life and damage it forever. I feel for the men who are coming out now in our still macho society. I say to them and to people in my constituency - those I have spoken to and those I have not spoken to but have had contact with - and especially our children that while these stories come and go in the media, their pain endures.

That is why our response must be victim-led. They must have full Garda and Tusla investigations because in their excruciating pain and often broken lives, the victims know what to do. We will be adding insult to serious injury if we treat them like the Women of Honour, who were treated with no honour at all. Their story is not just a headline or spectacle. It is not just a segment on a radio show or a debate in the Dáil but something they lived.

To the people who have come forward, the people who are dead and the people who cannot bring themselves to speak out, I say it is okay. We are a society and sometimes it is our turn to lead out and sometimes it is our turn to lean on. We in the Oireachtas, as legislators, should be here for all of them.

Catherine Murphy

Deputy Catherine Murphy

The revelations in recent weeks about the extent of the gross sexual abuse inflicted on children in Blackrock College over decades are horrifying but we have come to the stage now that they are no longer surprising. How many times

must be go through this process, order by order and diocese by diocese? We discovered the extent of the absolute destruction that paedophiles in the Catholic Church have wreaked on the lives of children. How many times must victims of these violent, powerful men be forced to sit down in front of a camera or microphone and relive the worst moments of their lives and retraumatise themselves in the public sphere out of sheer desperation for justice? I encourage everyone, especially those who are making decisions in respect of the next steps in this case, to go back and to listen to Colm O'Gorman on the radio last Sunday. One particular line that really stood out for me was when he said that we have to start talking about the cowardice of society and not the courage of victims. We need to have the courage as a nation to look our history in the eye and to do so now. We still have no concept of the true scale of the damage and hurt, and the deaths, the Catholic Church has inflicted. We have had glimpses of it and the scale of it has probably terrified the State.

Many victims want justice. They want those who destroyed their lives to face up to what they did and be held to account and, of course, they want redress. Any inquiry should not be dragged out for a long time but it should take the time it needs to be comprehensive. There must be a full public inquiry with powers of discovery and it must be tasked with scoping out where other investigations in the education system, or elsewhere, must happen. Is it essential that the inquiry is public. The Spiritans cannot lead this process. The redress system run by the order is all well and good but it is a poor substitute for a true public investigation into what has happened in these schools and for an apology, convictions, if that is possible, transparency, accountability and redress. We know that at least 233 men have made allegations of child sexual abuse against 78 Irish priests from the Spiritans, with 57 of those cases having taken place at Blackrock College.

Only three of the priests accused of sexual abuse against children were convicted and only one of those has been removed from the priesthood, and that was at his own request. Some €5 million was paid out in settlements to victims and the men who destroyed their childhood were left to retire in comfort on Spiritan property. We need to properly come to terms with the systems at play which allowed these men to prey on vulnerable children with impunity. We know the ingredients - access to children by a trusted adult above reproach - but we also know that these people abused that trust and stole the innocence of children.

In the WhatsApp group for the Blackrock class of 1980, a man told his schoolmates that he had been abused by Father Senan Corry in Willow Park. "No one had a clue that he'd been interfered with", one of his classmates told The Sunday Times, but "at the same time I thought, did Corry not interfere with everybody?" In a book honouring deceased Spiritan members produced by the order, Corry, who died in 2004, was described as an entirely dedicated teacher, a man who would be remembered by generations of students for coaching junior rugby teams. Imagine a victim reading that?

There is no question that most priests in the school must have known what was going on and did nothing. There was no secrecy at play here. If clergy were not actively abusing children themselves, many were complicit in that abuse and should face consequences. We cannot continue with this piecemeal approach towards justice for victims of clerical abuse. The State has clear obligations to be proactive in uncovering human rights abuses and the provision of redress, and we are failing. We need a permanent office of investigation, not just for this issue but as an approach, with full legal powers to investigate these matters and others in the public interest. Such an office would retain vital expertise and knowledge, which are lost by the incremental approach to inquiries. Our current approach is not good enough at exposing the system at play, between individual audits, the State, the Vatican and within society as a whole. Even when we do expose historical abuse the State inflicts further damage to victims in the name of so-called redress.

In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights, ECHR, ruled that the State failed to protect Louise O'Keefe who was abused in her primary school in the 1970s. The State responded to that ruling with the most callous redress scheme one can imagine. This scheme required victims to prove to the State Claims Agency that the abuse inflicted upon them as children could not have been avoided and only made a paltry amount of redress available in the scheme to victims who had sued prior to an arbitrary date in 2021. Are the victims who do not sue less deserving of justice? We need to have a complete gear shift in how we treat survivors of abuse in this country. We have failed them from every angle and that needs to end. We need to see a different approach on this occasion.

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, went through a whole list of things that have been done and I acknowledge the comments made in respect of Frances Fitzgerald. Tusla, however, does not have the capacity to deal with many of these historical cases. There is not the number of social workers

that are needed and there are long delays. The Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, said that people felt entirely unsupported and that retraumatizes people. If we are going to do this, we need to provide the capacity and resources to deal with it in a comprehensive and timely manner when people make complaints. If convictions can be secured, that must happen.

I would welcome the Minister's comments on how she intends to proceed, the timeline she is working to and how she will engage with the Opposition.

Cormac Devlin

Deputy Cormac Devlin

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the recent revelations of abuse in schools by the Spiritan Order. The details of the abuse and its handling by the order are deeply disturbing. It is heart-breaking to see so many people impacted across all the order's schools and through so many generations. It is important to remember that crimes have been committed and should be investigated by the An Garda Síochána. This process must not be compromised. I am conscious of this while discussing this matter today. However, given that many of the individuals accused of abuse are deceased, it will be for another form of investigation to deliver transparency and accountability for the victims.

Earlier this month, the Spiritan congregation, formerly the Holy Ghost Fathers, disclosed that 233 men have made allegations of abuse against 77 Irish Spiritans in Ireland and overseas. Of that number, 57 men have alleged they were abused on the campus of Blackrock College and Willow Park in Dublin.

The number of people who have made allegations of abuse at Spiritans schools has since risen to almost 300. The Spiritans run three other colleges in Dublin, St. Mary's College in Rathmines, Templeogue College and St. Michael's College, as well as Rockwell College in Tipperary.

I have been struck by the courage of the survivors who have spoken out, particularly David and Mark Ryan, as well as John Coulter, Corry McMahon, Louis Hoffman and Philip Feddis. I thank the former pupils of Blackrock College and Willow Park for their engagement over the past few weeks. It has been extremely difficult for the individuals who have come forward, those who have yet to come forward and those who may never do so. This is traumatising for those who have been victims of abuse at any stage of their lives. I know they have been stunned by the extent of the abuse, with groups meeting up as far away as Sydney to discuss the situation. There is a deep sadness and outrage among these groups about what their fellow pupils have endured. They are clear there is a need for transparency and for the truth to come out. They have questions about how this could have gone on unabated for such a long period. There is concern about how individuals with a history of abuse could have been in positions of authority in Willow Park well into the 1990s. It is clear the Spiritans were aware of the situation. They need to provide transparency around their handling of the abuse and the perpetrators. Parents, equally, have been shocked by the extent of the abuse. Many worked hard to send their boys to Willow Park and Blackrock College.

It is important to identify the most effective way to conduct an inquiry while ensuring it is survivor-centred at every stage. I welcome the Minister's comments and the Taoiseach's assurances on this. It is also important to consider previous inquiries, statutory and non-statutory, and the lessons we can take from these, including in respect of length of time, findings and challenges.

We have seen a number of formats for inquiries into historical sexual abuse over the past 20 years in this country. The Ferns report, for example, was presented to the Government in October 2005 and was the result of a non-statutory inquiry established by the then Minister for Health and Children. The report identified over 100 allegations of child sexual abuse against 21 priests made in the period 1962 to 2002. It also set out a number of recommendations which have since been implemented. The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was a statutory inquiry that presented its report, known as the Ryan report, in 2009, after ten years of work. The commission consisted of two committees, a confidential committee for those who wished to tell their story and an investigative committee with powers to investigate. The confidential committee heard testimony from more than 1,000 people who had experienced sexual and other forms of abuse. The full implementation of the Ryan report's recommendations will be completed with the establishment of a national centre for remembrance and research, which will contain a national archive of historical records relating to institutional trauma in the 20th century.

The Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin was established on a statutory basis in 2006 and its report, the Murphy report, was published shortly after the Ryan report in 2009. It examined over 320

complaints of child sex abuse by Dublin clergy and how these allegations were handled by the church and State authorities. The Commission of Investigation into the Catholic diocese of Cloyne was established on a statutory basis in March 2009. Its report was published in July 2011 and examined how allegations of sexual abuse of children against 19 priests in the diocese of Cloyne were dealt with by the church and the State authorities. The report of the interdepartmental committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen laundries, also known as the McAleese report, was published in 2013. The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was established in 2015 to provide an account of what happened to women and children in mother and baby homes during the period 1922 to 1998. Its final report was published in January 2021. We are all aware of the difficulties with the report published by that commission.

The extended nature of some of the inquiries needs to be considered, as noted by colleagues across the House today. It is important that any inquiry would produce a report in a reasonable timeframe, giving consideration to the needs of victims. It is also important to note that very strong child safeguarding procedures exist in all schools, the Department of Education and the Garda. Reflecting on the revelations, I note the motto of Blackrock College, "Faith and Strength". It is clear the survivors of abuse at the college have shown great strength and courage in coming forward. It is imperative that the Government and authorities work with the survivors and their families to deliver truth, transparency and accountability. The staff, pupils and wider school community in Willow Park and Blackrock College have been there to support each other and discuss these horrific revelations but it is imperative that we try to establish a conclusive inquiry with the victims at the centre to ensure we uncover the truth, that justice is served and that this is done speedily.

Patricia Ryan

Deputy Patricia Ryan

Over 230 people have made allegations of abuse against 77 Irish Spiritans in ministries across the island and other countries where the order operates. A large proportion of the allegations were from pupils of Blackrock College. Further allegations of sexual abuse in schools run by religious orders, including Castleknock College, have emerged in recent days.

I commend the survivors on their courage and bravery in coming forward. Of course, others have not yet come forward. I urge anyone directly or indirectly affected by this abuse to come forward. In the past, they may have felt their experience should be hidden or that they would not be believed. Help is available. Groups like One in Four are doing great work in helping survivors.

We need an inquiry into this matter to ensure we learn lessons from the past. The Taoiseach and other relevant Ministers need to urgently meet with survivors. We need a victim-led approach to the inquiry. Truth and justice for them must be at the centre. The Scally inquiry provides an excellent model. It has provided a more efficient, flexible and cost-effective model than the traditional tribunal of inquiry and commission of investigation models and led to clear recommendations. Garda investigations are ongoing but there is nothing to stop an inquiry laying the foundations now. An indicative timetable for an inquiry needs to be published as soon as possible.

The voice of survivors is paramount. The Government must listen to their views, take them on board and act to ensure they receive justice. In recent days, I read an account of the experiences of Peter, who was a pupil of Newbridge College in the 1970s. According to Peter, child sex abuse was rife at the college. It did not seem to be a secret. On his second night at the boarding school, boys in years ahead of him warned him who the dangerous priests were, who never to be alone with, who just stared in the showers and who was predatory in the dorms and, especially, the infirmary. The infirmary, he said, was connected directly to the priory accommodation where the priests lived. He was fortunate to avoid direct sexual abuse. He had a few close encounters that could have turned nasty but he ran, having been forewarned. He was fortunate but some others were not and the abuse went far beyond feeling and staring in the showers. He has attended two funerals of classmates who later tragically took their own lives, having hidden the abuse they suffered from their wives and families but having carried trauma, shame and misplaced guilt for decades in their tortured minds. He goes on to say they never told their parents for a variety of complex reasons, fear and shame being top of the list, along with not being believed. He cannot stomach the other priests who clearly knew what was going on and did nothing about it.

Unfortunately, stories like Peter's are not unfamiliar to anyone in this House. It is a pattern that has been unravelling for many years. Victims must have justice. They deserve it. The families of those who died deserve it. Justice must be done and be seen to be done. Those who cannot yet bring themselves to tell of their experience need to see a

process that takes their views into account. So-called pillars of society have been involved in these heinous crimes for too long and have felt untouchable. That has to end now. As the old saying goes, let justice be done, though the heavens fall.

Brid Smith

Deputy Brid Smith

On behalf of People Before Profit I express our solidarity to the victims. I thank those who came forward to raise this issue and brought it into the public eye. We owe them a deep debt of gratitude. There was something different about this particular revelation. We have been heaped with revelations of abuse of men, women and children by clerics and the churches over recent decades. What was different about this was the sense of shock across society that it involves a school such as Blackrock College in a middle class area where the parents had to pay hefty fees to have their boys educated. We might have assumed that children there would have the confidence to be able to articulate how they feel about what was going on and would prevent any sort of abuse in their lives. However, we saw horrifically that that was not the case.

A very good friend of mine, a wonderful articulate intelligent man, took his own life a few years ago and subsequently his brother took his life. Both of them attended Blackrock College. I will never know and their families will never know. If it was the case, they did not speak out about it.

The call from the victims for a full inquiry must be supported but the issue facing us in the Oireachtas is about the type of inquiry. As has been said, 233 men have come forward and the order has paid out €5 million in compensation. One of the most important things we can do for the victims is to conduct a criminal inquiry. It needs to be a criminal inquiry that has teeth and will also use Interpol to track down what happened throughout the lifetime of the record of abuse by this order.

A victim of the Jesuit Order in Belvedere College visited my clinic during the week as a consequence of the revelations. He said they want to see a criminal investigation of paedophiles. As we have seen, if a drug dealer travelled across the world dealing drugs and accumulating money from it, Interpol would help the Irish police to follow them around and to build a case against them.

Blackrock and the Spiritans showed, just as the mother and baby homes did, that the effects of abuse are not historical artefacts of a bygone era but that the trauma and suffering continue today. Making a statement and offering apologies is fine. However, we in the Dáil need to decide on the proper response of the State to the systemic and widespread abuse of women and children, and indeed of men by religious orders. To date we have failed miserably. We debated the redress scheme for mother and baby homes and all of the wrongs done to women. We have looked back at how inadequate the deal done by the former Minister, Dr. Michael Woods, was. We estimate that millions of euro are outstanding in restitution to the State from the church and the redress schemes have been totally inadequate.

The elephant in the room remains the control and dominance that the Catholic Church has over the education system and, in particular, over our health and other vital public services. Years after the Ryan inquiry and decades after the scale of abuse in our church and institutions came to light, we have failed miserably to take the one action that would, more than any apology or compensation scheme, say that we have truly learned the lessons of the past. We have failed to separate church and State. We doubled down on it recently with the move of the National Maternity Hospital from Holles Street to St. Vincent's. Many of our hospitals are still under the control of religious orders on land owned by those orders and are subject to Canon Law and Catholic ethos. In recent years, Catholic religious orders worldwide have transferred their assets into Vatican-approved charities but the ethos continues. This sort of transfer is common throughout Ireland.

Some 95% of primary schools are denominational and 89% of those are run by the Catholic Church. The patron, the Catholic Church and the archbishop, determines the ethos of the school. It appoints the board of management and the board of management manages the school. The board of management is the teachers' employer. That might be fine if it was a private arrangement, but it is not. The State pays the teachers' salaries. It pays for the running of the school. It covers the bulk of capital costs, etc. Therefore, we have a religious education that is dedicated to a faith.

We have a sex education system that is totally inadequate to give children the tools needed if they come across any attempt to abuse them in school, at home or in wider society.

In the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland schools remain exempt from employment equality legislation, meaning that teachers may be treated differently in the eyes of the law. The real honour that we can give the victims of abuse of any sort in the care of the State or the church is not to suggest that the State was blameless and compound the insult to those children and their families, but is actually to set about the real task of separating church and State. The State gained a lot by handing control of health and education over to the church back in the day, when the State was founded. It yielded in obedience and showed in a wider sense in society that people do speak up for themselves and that they must be humiliated and carry guilt. All of that has been expressed in the sort of society that Ireland has been up to now.

Thankfully, these people are speaking out. For many it is too late, including the young men across Ballyfermot who took their own lives having attended De la Salle College and other schools in the area. Many of them do not have a voice today but let us do the right thing by them all and end the legacy of the total connection of church and State in vital services, particularly in education and where children are concerned.

Ruairí Ó Murchú

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú

It seems we have been on a rollercoaster since the 1990s with these revelations of abuse involving the church and educational institutions, particularly those educational institutions where the church had control. We all remember how shocking it was when we first heard about Fr. Brendan Smith and it has just continued since then.

We have all spoken previously about the many failures of the State in how it looked after or failed to look after its young people and women, in particular, people who did not have power. Beyond that we have not put in place the tools that are necessary to look after the needs of people who have been utterly failed by us, who were abused and in some cases greatly damaged. At this point, we are dealing with the issue of the Irish Spiritans. A total of 233 people have made allegations against 77 Irish Spiritan priests. That 57 of those who have made allegations are former Blackrock College pupils is utterly horrendous. These numbers are expected to increase and we do not know where it will stop.

We know what has happened with commissions of investigation, commissions of inquiry and tribunals across the board. In some cases, the timeline was too long, thereby extending the length of time that justice was denied. In addition, they came at enormous cost. We have to put something in place that can actually deal with this issue in a timelier way. We need to ensure that those who have been abused get their right to be heard. The necessary investigations need to be carried out. We need to ensure that those who did wrong are held to account as much as possible. Obviously, some of these cases will relate to people who have died. We need to ensure we do right by those who have been abused, those who are not with us and those who need support.

We need the proper means of dealing with this. Many people have spoken about a Scally-type report. We need to follow best practice. We need to put it in play as quickly as possible and we need to lay out a timeline.

That is the least people deserve. I do not think any of us can put into words the hurt, pain and damage that was done in such a disgraceful, reprehensible and inhuman way. We all accept a significant amount of abuse happens in family settings, but the problem is that people, including priests, were protected and there was a continuity of abuse where it should have been stopped at the beginning, and that is something we must address.

A man in his 60s came to my office recently to talk about the abuse he suffered at the hands of the Christian Brothers. It is an issue he has probably dealt with from time to time, and he has got on with his life, but it is a pain that is always there. All we are trying to do when talking to him is to signpost him in the right direction, be it to An Garda Síochána and counsellor services. The fact is that his pain is still the pain of the young boy who was abused many years ago. We have to do whatever we can to give protection to all people who were put in a situation, in which they should never have been, by abusers and we have to make sure we do not add more pain to the pain of the abuse they suffered over many years.

Peadar Tóibín

Deputy Peadar Tóibín

It is absolutely incredible to hear of these types of abuse cases again. It is 30 years since the country was rocked by case after case of clerical abuse that came to light in such a devastating way for the victims. It is incredible that each decade that has passed since then, we have seen a repeat of such cases.

Survivors of what happened in Blackrock and Spiritans schools have displayed enormous courage in coming forward and shedding light on these horrendous crimes. I give the solidarity and support of my party to those survivors and I pay tribute to them for coming forward. It is a fact that the effects of these crimes last a lifetime. Many people are still struggling to cope with what happened to them. Incredibly, 38 people posted reports of abuse on a dedicated Facebook page over an eight-week-period. The scale of this is extremely significant. Some 25 men from the class of 1979 posted stories of abuse they suffered, which amounts to 21% of the class. There is no doubt in my mind that an extremely dangerous environment was created in these schools and there is no way that abuse was not within the knowledge of those who should have brought that information to light at the time. The abuse took on many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional and even spiritual.

First and foremost, the survivors must be at the very centre of any investigations or truth process, how they are run and what happens afterwards. Investigations should find facts, take witness testimony, review evidence, make findings of fact into the systemic issues that caused these situations and, importantly, they must be time limited. I will come to that point later. It is also important that live Garda investigations should be allowed to run concurrently. All abusers and people who were complicit in cover ups should be held to account to the full extent of the law and punished for their crimes.

On the back of meetings with survivors and the Spiritans, a pilot restorative justice programme was set up and I welcome this. Uncertainties around general data protection regulation, GDPR, have been raised with me as it is causing difficulties for investigations. I ask the Minister to resolve this if she can.

The most important issue facing us as a result of all of this is to ensure these situations do not happen again. It is important to find justice and truth for what happened in the past, but we have a moral responsibility to make sure the children of this generation going through schools are 100% safe. Abuse happens where there is power, access and opportunity. We need to make sure there is not a confluence of those three conditions in the same manner ever again in the State.

Despite decades of such information coming to light, our country is extremely poorly equipped to investigate what happened. While we hear very strong and worthy words in measured tones in this Chamber, year after year, the truth of the matter is that we do not do survivors justice. I will give a number of examples of what I mean by that. There is a pattern in the way Governments have dealt with this. We have got an apology from the Government and a promise to survivors that they will be at the centre of any investigation or process. However, we usually had a prolonged process that sometimes did not get to the full truth and left survivors being wronged by the State again.

I refer to the situation involving the Women of Honour. The women got a fine apology from the Minister for Defence. They were told they would be at the centre of the terms and conditions of the investigation that would be established to find out what happened as a result of the grievous abuse they suffered at the hands of a State organisation. The terms of reference were then written without proper consultation with the Women of Honour and the process is now going ahead independent of their support. They are left out in the cold in respect of an investigation that should have been about what happened to them.

I am also reminded of what happened with CervicalCheck. We had apology after apology by Taoisigh in this Chamber and a tribunal. Those apologies promised that no woman would have to go to court again to achieve justice for what happened to them in regard to CervicalCheck. Yet the Government created a tribunal that forced women to go to court, over and again, to get to the truth and justice about what happened to them in the CervicalCheck programme, many of whom were involved right up to the days they were dying. This is an incredible situation.

I also raised the case of Louise O'Keeffe who did tremendous work bringing abuse that took place in the school system to light. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the State failed to protect Louise O'Keeffe. In 2019, it emerged the State system to deal with survivors was wronging those survivors. The independent review carried out by a judge of the High Court, Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill, found that the terms of

conditions were so stringent that nobody was able to be processed through that. The then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, said that the State failed them at the time, it failed them a second time and it did not live up to its responsibility. He said that they would not be failed a third time. Again, the new system that was created is still stopping survivors achieving justice in that process. There was also the situation in which a survivor who did not litigate before July 2021 was ruled out of the process. In the case of two survivors, one litigating before July 2021 and the other litigating after that time, and where both experienced the same level of abuse, the latter was ruled out of the process. This is absolutely wrong. The commission of investigation system is broken.

Obviously, the issue of Siteserv is of a different order, but it is an example in which 38 modules were to be investigated, starting in 2015. Just a few weeks in, that commission of investigation literally got to the bottom of what happened in the first module. Truth and justice have to be timely. If it is denied from people, it is not justice. If it is denied over time, it is not justice. We need to make sure there is reform of the system so that it will work far more efficiently.

I also raise the case of the 350 victims and survivors who were sexually abused by **Michael Shine** between 1964 and 1994, many of whom were in the hospital in Drogheda not far from me. I know many of those are still awaiting the truth, an apology and justice for the trauma caused to them. We cannot exclude victims. To be honest, we are getting to the stage where no one wants to see such a revelation happen in three, four, five or ten years' time again. Is it not time that we create a permanent commission of investigation, in the same way the Workplace Relations Court is a permanent organisation, that has the necessary skills and staff and can build a critical mass of competency to be able to deal with these investigations? Is it not time we investigate everything that happened to victims in all the institutions and schools, once and for all?

Can we not put a full stop over these situations and make sure that nobody else has to come through this same process?

Richard O'Donoghue

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue

On 19 November, some 13 years after the publication of the Ryan report, the Taoiseach confirmed that a further inquiry will now be set up to examine allegations of abuse at one of the country's leading private schools, Blackrock College. The inquiry should cover other schools about which allegations have emerged in recent weeks. Complaints have been made about abuses in other Spiritan-run schools including St. Mary's College and St. Michael's College in Dublin, Rockwell College in Tipperary and many more schools around the country. It is crucial that the Government engage with victims' and survivors' views and ensure that the approach is victim-led.

Over the last two weeks, following the documentary broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 on 9 November, the pressure for an inquiry to be announced has been building. In that documentary, two brothers spoke of having been sexually abused by a priest at Blackrock College in the 1970s. I believe 233 people have now made allegations in this regard. There can be little doubt that, when deciding on the model of the proposed inquiry, the Government must show it has learned from the previous public inquiries into clerical child abuse in Ireland, which have often taken longer than anticipated. If we have learned anything from decades of cases of abuse carried out by predatory paedophiles it is that, as long as they could hide or were concealed, they posed a danger. It is crucial that all of those crimes are now acknowledged and that the facts are put on record so that such things cannot happen again. Whatever investigation takes place, it is essential that it does not impede inquiries being carried out by An Garda Síochána.

This hits home for everyone in this room, across the House and in all parties. It hits home when you see people who entrusted their children to a school only for them to be abused by people they trusted. This is like déjà vu all over again. We have seen cover-ups in respect of the mother and baby homes and in respect of clerical abuse, including in these cases. These people have to be brought to justice. During Leaders' Questions today, I brought up the cover-ups in the HSE. Within our own hospitals, mistakes are being covered up and millions in taxpayers' money is being spent to hide things and silence staff rather than to tackle the issue at hand and protect vulnerable people, that is, the patients and staff within our hospital systems. This is my first term as a politician and it sickens me to see the bureaucracy that is in place. We are here as protectors of the people. We are seen as the protectors of Ireland and of everyone in it. Regardless of whether they are from the country or the city or whether they are of different nationalities, we are here as their protectors. It saddens me to see that, every time we try to do something to help, bureaucratic bull, legal measures and cover-ups are put in place and it takes years upon years before the people who have been abused can be dealt with.

That is also the fault of Government in trying to protect the coffers, the Catholic Church and those within the church who have done wrong. There are people within the Catholic Church who have done fantastic work but there are also people within it who have done serious wrong. We can see that here today. We can see it in everyone's faces as they talk about this. What we have seen can happen is cutting us in two. I would now like to see accountability and full transparency. I ask the churches and schools to fully disclose every bit of information they have to help the victims and to stop dragging it out for years while waiting for people to die, to commit suicide or to become mentally ill. It is now time to help the people who have been abused.

As I said earlier today, it is disheartening to see taxpayers' money being used to protect people who have done wrong, even within our hospital systems. People who have done wrong should put up their hands so that we can fix the problem to ensure it will not happen again. They should take accountability for their actions. Everyone can make a mistake. If you want to fix the mistake you have made, it can be fixed, but covering it up only shoves it down the road for decades, causing harm, mental health difficulties and serious injuries to people. I am delighted the Minister is at the helm. She is a good person. However, we need people to make full disclosures if we are to ensure that all victims of abuse are looked after and that the people who carried out the abuse are brought to justice swiftly, rather than being protected as part of efforts to protect property, funding or anything else. They have to be brought to justice now and there has to be accountability now. We need to get help for the people.

Catherine Connolly

Deputy Catherine Connolly

I fully support the calls for an inquiry. I hear what the Minister said in her speech. She acknowledges the need for an inquiry and is in the middle of taking steps to determine the best type of inquiry, to be led by the survivors. She points out on the first page that "The sexual abuse of a child is repugnant to the whole of society and is a reprehensible abuse of power and trust." I disagree with the Minister in the sense that the sexual abuse of a child was never repugnant to those who carried it out, to the Catholic Church or to the management of all of these schools. That is the problem and we have never faced it. I believe the ethos of Blackrock College is "Bold and fearless". That should be changed to "Brazen and shameless". That could also apply to many other institutions.

The Minister talks about listening to the survivors. If she does, I will welcome it. I will also welcome an inquiry if it is survivor-led. My experience to date does not give me confidence. Why do I say that? Let me look at a number of things, including the sexual abuse and violence in Ireland, SAVI, report from 2002, which confirmed that the prevalence of sexual abuse was incredibly high but about which we did nothing. Since I came in here in 2016, my colleagues and I have fought for a review of that SAVI report but we closed our ears and our eyes and did not want to know. If you look at the redress board we set up in parallel with the Ryan investigation that has been quoted so often here today, you will see that we made it an offence for people to open their mouths about what they got as an award. We made criminals of them. We then moved forward to the Magdalen laundries redress scheme, the operation of which the Ombudsman described as "maladministration". We also set up Caranua and I repeat how inappropriately named it was. It was called "new friend" when it was the old enemy. There are many other examples of absolute refusal on our part, the most recent being the mother and baby redress scheme, with which we are proceeding on the basis of saving money despite it being a completely and utterly discriminatory redress scheme.

With all of these shocking reports, we have had to rely not only on the courage of those who came forward, but also on RTÉ to give us a documentary, on Joe Duffy's show and on other shows. As a society that is learning, do we not have to ask why we have to rely on documentaries and victims having the courage to expose themselves all over again in the most traumatic way to make us aware of what is happening? On the allegations that have come forward, the current provincial has confirmed that 233 people have made allegations in writing against 77 priests in ministries throughout Ireland and overseas.

The Dominican order has received 97 complaints of alleged child sexual abuse. The bishop of Galway, who presided over a 40-year period of our morality, was a Dominican. Archbishop McQuaid in Dublin was a Holy Ghost priest, or Spiritan as they are now called. The Dominicans had 97 complaints against a large number of its order. The Carmelite order has confirmed that 56 people have made allegations against 21 members. I am racing through these facts. The Vincentians have disclosed that 46 people had previously reported being allegedly abused, and so on. I will not go into the details. The Jesuits, who we thought were above all of this, are aware of 149 allegations, which have taken 14 years to qualify. They come out as very educated priests and they are saying they are aware

of 149 allegations in total against 43 Jesuits. Just one case has led to criminal proceedings. There are 124 abuse claims against 26 Franciscan friars.

I am only mentioning some of them. That is the picture within which we discuss this matter today, on top of all the institutions that have been investigated. We are looking at small parts of the jigsaw when we have never looked at the overall picture. There was total control by the Catholic Church, as represented by their bishops, priests and archbishops, over public morality. There was also the political influence and control over public affairs, public morality and personal behaviour.

Various things jump out. I think of Joanne Hayes in the 1980s. The gardaí ended up investigating Joanne Hayes's sexual morality. This investigation was led by an all-male team of lawyers, an all-male team of gardaí, and a male judge. I wonder where they were educated and I wonder where they got that ability. They come up with a theory of superfecundation: that this woman had sex with two men within a short time. I also think of the little girl in Longford who thought that her only way out was to give birth at a grotto. I think of the 1980s and all of the changes to our Constitution to control women's health. I could go on. I think of the mother and baby scheme that was thrown out of this august building, at a time when Archbishop McQuaid was in full control. I also think of Louise O'Keefe. We never listened to children. We turned a deaf ear to them and then we put every possible obstacle in their way, including non-disclosures. I will take one second to come back in later on Dr. Michael Shine. I have referred to non-disclosure agreements and to Louise O'Keefe. The State took Louise O'Keefe all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, and to establish what? She had to establish that schoolchildren were entitled to be protected from sexual criminals in the classroom. This was in 2014. This is not historical, unless there is a new meaning of the word "historical".

We then have somebody like Fergus Finlay in the Irish Examiner asking why we still allow these religious orders to exist. He wants them to be shut down. This is the same man who thought it was okay to hand over the maternity hospital to the St. Vincent's Private Hospital Group, with its Catholic-controlled ethos.

It is important also to refer to the fact that we have all been in receipt of correspondence in relation to Dr. **Michael Shine**. This has been mentioned a few times. There are 350 victims of Dr. Shine, allegedly, and we have not had an inquiry into that. One could despair. I do not just want to stand in solidarity with the victims and survivors, who are asking for a statutory inquiry, but to do something and to broaden the discussion to cover what schools produced our leaders, our doctors and our consultants - the people who abused women, who refused to listen to them and who determined the discourse or the absence of discourse in this Dáil over all of the years. It has been 100 years of containment in institutions, which was eloquently captured by James M. Smith of Boston College when he spoke of the "architecture of containment" of men and women, but unfortunately mostly women.

Norma Foley

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley)

I acknowledge and express my thanks to colleagues for their contributions on this important issue. It is absolutely clear and it is equally unambiguous that this House considers the recent shocking revelations of abuse in certain schools to be deeply disturbing, and that the House is of the view that a strong and considerate response is required with the view of the survivors being absolutely central to that response. I look forward to engaging further with Opposition colleagues next week on this issue. I am confident that this engagement will help to ensure the State's response to this issue is appropriate and effective. It is important that it would be effective.

As I have already mentioned, my primary focus at this time is to listen to survivors, to listen to their experiences and to hear their views, their opinions, their thoughts and their vision of how we should proceed. As I have already confirmed to the House, I have met with a number survivors in recent days, and this will continue in the coming days so that I can hear from them at first hand. Ultimately, this will inform the path forward that the Government will pursue.

The experiences we have heard in recent weeks are deeply disturbing and heartbreaking. It is clear that the individuals who have come forward to tell of their experiences have been deeply affected and traumatised by their experiences, as have all survivors of abuse and indeed their families. This point is made consistently to me by survivors regarding the impact it had on them as individuals but also on their families.

I reiterate that sexual abuse of a child is abhorrent and is absolutely and truly an abuse of trust and power. With regard to where we stand presently in our schools, I confirm that there is a robust system of child protection in place in our schools. This system includes enhanced mechanisms for detection and reporting; mandatory reporting of child protection concerns, which is such a positive and important feature of child protection measures in schools; vetting; and greater overall awareness of better child protection. While we can never be complacent, it is clearly the case that our schools are giving the highest priority to child protection in our schools.

The system for child protection, as previously outlined, is underpinned by the Children First Act 2015, which is there to provide for the mandatory reporting of child protection concerns by key professionals, including school staff and management, and to improve the arrangements for child safeguarding in organisations that provide services to children, including schools. To support schools in meeting their responsibilities, the Department of Education has in place child protection procedures for primary and post-primary schools. As I have outlined previously, compliance with those procedures is overseen by the Department's inspectorate.

It is of utmost importance that survivors of child sex abuse will know that there will be a serious and significant response across the Government to this issue. I have already begun engaging with Government colleagues in this regard. The Government is currently considering the most appropriate and effective ways to progress this matter. As I have said, I look forward to the engagement that the Opposition and colleagues here in this House will provide as part of that engagement.

It is crucial to ensure that any process of inquiry will result in an outcome that is sought by survivors. To ensure this, as I have said, we will continue to engage with them. It is clear also that different individuals have different perspectives but it is my hope that with consistent and open engagement with survivors, and with colleagues, we will find an approach that will meet the needs, the demands and the visions of all involved.

I appreciate that it has already been pointed out in this House - and I have also referred to this - that we can learn from the strengths and challenges of previous inquiries that played an important role in highlighting the appalling legacy of child abuse in this country. It is also crucial that any steps taken by the Government, in consultation with survivors, do not in any way impact negatively on the ongoing or future investigations by An Garda Síochána. Sexual abuse is a criminal act and it is of the utmost importance that any crimes that have been committed are fully and effectively investigated by An Garda Síochána and the perpetrators of such heinous crimes are held to account. From listening to survivors over recent days, I am aware that very few have thus far had the opportunity to see their abuser face justice. I am equally conscious that it is critical we do nothing to jeopardise any future remaining opportunities to do so. I have been assured that those coming forward with allegations will be treated with the utmost sensitivity by An Garda Síochána.

Again, therefore, I urge anyone who has experienced abuse to consider coming forward using the contact details I mentioned earlier in order that action can be taken to hold those responsible for these terrible crimes fully accountable. The appalling acts perpetrated against children and young people merit and need a significant and strong response from the Government. I confirm to the House again that the Government is absolutely determined that such a response will be provided.

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If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, you can contact Dignity4Patients, whose helpline is open Monday to Thursday 10am to 4pm.