

Scoping inquiry announced into abuse at schools run by religious orders

By Carl O'Brien

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Minister for Education Norma Foley has announced details of a “scoping inquiry” into allegations of historical sexual abuse in schools run by religious orders.

It follows a series of abuse allegations at schools run by the religious congregations including the Spiritans, formerly the Holy Ghost Fathers, which run Blackrock College, Rockwell College and St Mary’s College. The abuse allegations in many cases extend back to the 1960s and 1970s.

The scoping inquiry, likely to take eight months, will be led by senior council Mary O’Toole and will involve engagement with survivors and experts across a range of areas including child protection, restorative justice. It will also analyse lessons learned from previous inquiries including the Ferns Report, the child abuse inquiry or commission and the Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation. The question of compensation is also likely to feature in the report.

The scoping inquiry will culminate in a report, including recommendations for next steps, to the Minister for Education.

Ms Foley said the revelations of abuse in a number of schools were “deeply disturbing and heartbreaking” and that it was “vitally important that survivors of historical child sexual abuse have the opportunity to be heard in full, and with appropriate respect and sensitivity”. “I have said that survivors need to know that there will be a serious response from Government. Today, with the support of Government, I am announcing the first stage of this response,” she said.

Latest abuse allegations have followed the airing of an RTÉ radio documentary last November into the story of two brothers, Mark and David Ryan, who were sexually abused by priests at the school in the 1970s, unbeknown to each other. Gardaí have since recorded a total of more than 130 allegations from victims and individuals who say they witnessed abuse or were aware of allegations. It prompted an apology to victims from the Spiritans last year and the establishment of a restorative justice programme.

Ms Foley said scoping inquiry provides an appropriate way of enabling survivors to give their input, along with the views of experts in areas such as restorative justice and child protection.

She said the main purpose of the survivor engagement process was to identify what survivors would like to see happen next and no one will be asked to provide an account of their experiences at this time. “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.” The process will be conducted by facilitators trained in trauma-informed practice and is likely to involve questionnaires, facilitated workshops and individual engagement.

Survivors who wish to register their interest in the process can find details of how to do so online or by phone (090-6483610) by April 17th, 2023. The Government, meanwhile, has requested that the Spiritan order retain all its assets and maintain all records related to sex abuse allegations in its schools, which have been at the centre of recent allegations of abuse by former pupils. The move was thought to be in anticipation of the inquiry and a potential compensation scheme for victims.

Ms Foley said on Tuesday that the question of compensation was likely to one to be considered by Mary O’Toole in the context of the scoping inquiry.

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.