

Opening Statement by Mary Higgins, CEO, Caranua, to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, 30th May 2017

I thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the invitation to attend this meeting to discuss the work of Caranua and to make an opening statement. I would like to introduce my colleagues here with me today, Mr. David O'Callaghan, Chair of the Caranua Board and Mr. David Yeomans, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs.

Caranua is delighted to have the opportunity to engage with and account to the Committee. We work in a way that is open, transparent and accountable to all stakeholders. We have sought to keep the Committee informed of our work since 2013 through the submission of successive Annual Reports and requests to present to it. We respond to queries from members of the Oireachtas in relation to individual applications and our general operations, and we publish information on Board meetings and all other activities regularly on our website.

Given its purpose of managing a Fund for the benefit of some survivors of institutional abuse, Caranua may be an unusual fit with the Committee and indeed with the Department of Education and Skills. Its location here arises from the historical oversight role that the Department has had in the funding, management and inspection of industrial schools and some other institutions for children and I am going to provide a brief background to our establishment by way of context.

The use of large institutions to take care of children and adults who were unwanted by their families, their communities and their churches was a well-established practice in Ireland until quite recent times. We now know that these institutions were very often not caring but downright abusive and damaging to the people who were consigned into their care. Children whose only crime was to have been orphaned, abandoned or poor. Industrial schools were originally designed to provide children with skills development that would enable them to transfer into employment, thereby enabling them out of the cycle of unemployment and consequent poverty.

We now know that some children did receive education in these institutions, and support into employment and that many have had successful lives, strong affection and continued links with members of the religious congregations who managed them. But many more of them had horrendous experiences in environments that were of themselves brutalising and within which children were, subject to endemic and systematic neglect and psychological, physical and sexual abuse, according to the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, published in 2009.

Following a period of concerted campaigning for justice by survivors and the showing of the television documentary “States of Fear” the Taoiseach of the time issued a formal apology on behalf of the State and established the Commission which went on to hear evidence from more than 1,000 survivors through its confidential and investigation committees. At the same time, three counselling services for survivors and their relatives were established, followed by a scheme of financial redress in 2002 and an education fund in 2006.

The Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Act was passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas in 2012, providing for the establishment of a Statutory Fund, to be financed by religious congregations, to support the needs of those survivors who had received awards of compensation. The Board of the Fund first met in March 2013 and began its work of designing and planning the services it would provide.

I took up my role as Chief Executive in April 2013 bringing a strong commitment to ensuring that the Fund would operate in a way that was effective in addressing the needs of a group of people which all evidence indicated were extremely disadvantaged as a direct result of their childhood experiences. My professional background includes significant experience campaigning for the rights of people who are socially excluded, particularly single parents, children and people who are homeless and in the design, delivery, management and evaluation of services for them and leading change across service and voluntary and statutory sectors.

The establishment of the Statutory Fund was controversial and the approach agreed by the Houses of the Oireachtas was opposed by some survivors, many of them arguing for the division of the Fund among all those who were eligible to apply

Others were dissatisfied with the eligibility criteria advocating for the inclusion of people who had not received redress and the relatives of survivors. In response to this latter point, a commitment was given in the course of the adoption of the Bill to reviewing the eligibility criteria after two years of operation. This is the review that Minister Bruton is about to begin.

We were very conscious of this in the context of setting out to design a service and are deeply committed to ensuring that it was informed by the needs and expressed preferences of survivors. This approach was helped by having four survivors on the Board and carrying out an extensive consultation with potential applicants.

The majority of potential applicants were ageing and many of them would clearly find it difficult to engage with a service that was in any way bureaucratic or rigid. It was with these survivors in mind that we designed our application process on the principle that if it worked for the most vulnerable, it would work for everyone. Our central aim was, and continues to be, to put survivors at the heart of everything we do.

Our application process is values-based, needs-led and person-centred. It is broken into different stages. When an applicant is ready to apply for services, he or she is appointed a dedicated adviser to provide support, advice and information in making an application to Caranua and, as necessary, make referrals to and/or advocate with other organisations for other services.

We try to ensure there are no barriers for someone in applying to us and we pay particular attention to ensuring our application and other information materials are accessible. Plain English is used in all documents explaining how to make an application, using “easy to read” versions that are available as videos on our website.

We organise a number of outreach events every year at which applicants and potential applicants can come to meet advisers and other staff face to face. We hold a monthly clinic with interpreting services in Dublin for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and offer online face-to-face assessments to them through the Irish Remote Interpreting Service.

By the end of April 2017 just 5,209 people were eligible to apply to us for services, 350 were waiting assignment, 2,833 were in process and 2,376 had been completed. Payments had been made to 4,504 individuals and spend on services to the end of March was €60 million.

The average value of assistance is €13,000, the average number of payments to each applicant is eight and the average number of interactions for an application is thirty. We have hundreds of thousands of contacts to and from applicants since we opened in 2014 and have received 192 complaints. Just 4% of our decisions have been overturned by the Independent Appeals Officer.

Before finishing my statement I want to refer again to the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. Many of the people who testified to the Commission did so to ensure that such abuse would be prevented in the future and this is reflected in the recommendations made by the Commission.

In the coming couple of years, as Caranua prepares to wind down its operations, it plans to make its contribution to prevention by learning from the past – by an independent evaluation of its impact, by capturing the experiences of survivors and using them to inform practices and build the capacity of service providers to recognise and respond to effects of childhood trauma. We look forward to the support of the Committee in this work

Thank you for your time and attention. We will now respond to any questions that you may have.

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