



**Independent Panel In-Person
Meeting in February 2024**

Truth Recovery Independent Panel Newsletter

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Seeking the Truth

Welcome to the Jan / Feb 2024 edition of the Truth Recovery Independent Panel Newsletter.

We would like to thank you for engaging with us and we hope you will be encouraged to participate further as we move through our complex evidence gathering process.

Our aim is to share regular updates on aspects of the important work we are focused on. This newsletter will be issued bi-monthly to all those registered with us.

Working alongside Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI)

Why is this work so important?

One of the Independent Panel's primary responsibilities is to gather, preserve, catalogue and digitise relevant records and archives, engaging with relevant authorities, institutions, organisations and individuals. The Independent Panel has been working closely with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) to achieve these objectives.




Concerns were raised in the 2021 Research Report about the condition of some of the records held by institutions/organisations. Victims and survivors also expressed concern that records could be destroyed or damaged due to poor record-keeping practices and they lobbied on this issue with both the NI Executive Office and MLAs.

In March 2022, a Private Members' Bill was put before the Northern Ireland Assembly:

“
‘A Bill to make provision for the preservation of documents relating to certain institutions and residents of those institutions between 1922 and 1995, and to certain children of those resident.’
”

On the 12th May 2022, the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, was given Royal Assent and passed into law.

This Act means that a person who has in their custody or under their control a relevant document:

-  Must not alter, destroy, or otherwise dispose of a relevant document.
-  Must not remove or transfer the document to a place outside Northern Ireland.
-  Must take appropriate measures to ensure that the document is not stolen, lost, destroyed or otherwise damaged.

Surveys & Site Visits

As the Panel commenced its work, PRONI conducted a survey of records held by relevant institutions / organisations. This involved a physical inspection of the relevant records, an assessment of how and where they are stored, and provision of advice and guidance regarding the storage and handling of the records. These site visits took place throughout Northern Ireland, the Republic and London, to ascertain institutional compliance with the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

In addition to establishing what records exist, the site visits also identified potential risks and assessed what level of resources would be required to safeguard, catalogue, and digitise the records and make them accessible to the Panel and the future Public Inquiry. Discussions were also held, and are ongoing, with a view to establishing other potential sources of records and archives which may be relevant to the Panel's work.

Conserving, Cataloguing & Digitising

The process of acquiring, conserving, cataloguing, and digitising the collections identified during the survey is underway and will continue on a phased basis over the coming months.

PRONI staff are undertaking the meticulous tasks of rehousing records which may have been subject to poor storage conditions over many years in acid-free archival enclosures. They are also removing metal staples or clips which can rust and cause damage to paper documents and numbering each file and page in preparation for digital imaging.

Some records are fragile and require careful handling and specialised repair prior to digitising. The records are also catalogued which requires detailed reading and assessment of the contents of the records, and compiling entries in a searchable database according to recognized cataloguing standards.

Physical records are held in PRONI's dedicated archival storage areas which have particular requirements in terms of temperature and humidity controls, ensuring that all records are protected from physical deterioration. Access to the records is strictly limited to those PRONI staff directly involved in cataloguing and digitising the records.

Next Steps and how the Independent Panel will use these records in our work

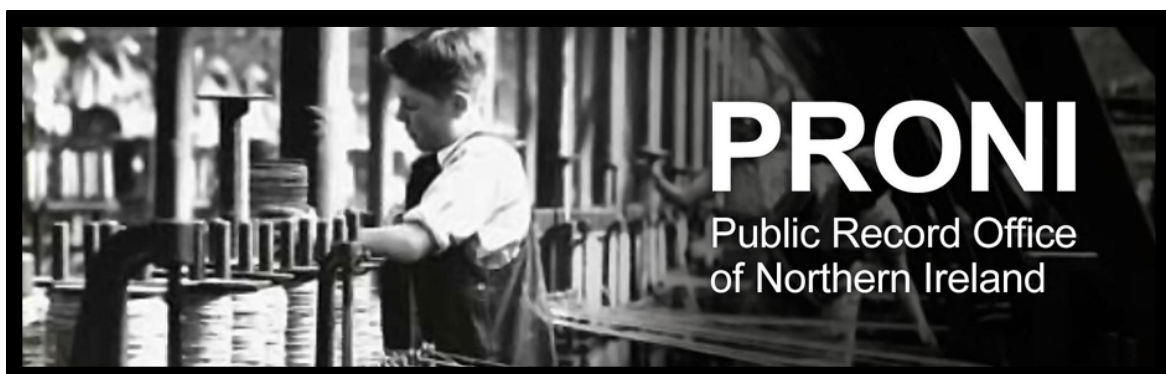
When cataloguing and digitising has progressed sufficiently, certain members of the Panel will have access to the records. The Independent Panel members who will have access are Leanne McCormick & Sean O'Connell (Co-Chairs & Social and Oral History), Patricia Canning (Sociology of Discrimination and Gender-based Violence), Mark Farrell (Archiving) and Steven Smyrl (Genealogy).

If these Panel members are accessing original records, they will do so only within the secure environs of the PRONI building itself. If consulting digitised records, the relevant Panel members will view digital copies which have been securely stored on the Panel's information management system, which is known as Box.

A series of folders have been set up on Box, with strict access controls so that sensitive personal information is accessible only by specified Panel members, not by the Panel as a whole, and according to UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act (2018) principles.

The Panel's Records and Archives Working Group meets regularly with the PRONI Truth Recovery Team to review progress and to discuss issues arising from the conservation, cataloguing and digitisation process.

The Panel is very conscious of the core importance of records and archives as part of the truth recovery process, and the difficulties which people have faced in securing access to relevant information. We are very appreciative of the level of co-operation and dedication from PRONI over recent months and we are looking forward to further discussions with the relevant institutions / organisations and to the ongoing work of securing, cataloguing, digitising and accessing records to assist with our work.



Introducing Testimony Facilitators, Lorraine and Megan

The Independent Panel have appointed two experienced Testimony Facilitators, Lorraine Dennis and Megan Kelly, who will assist with gathering testimony from those who wish to engage with the Truth Recovery Independent Panel.

Over the last couple of months Lorraine and Megan have undergone extensive safeguarding and trauma informed training and have been working closely with the Testimony Gathering and Analysis Working Group to develop documentation and processes to create a safe and person-centered focus for those giving testimony.



Dr Lorraine Dennis

I am an experienced project manager, facilitator, and researcher, currently working with the Independent Panel to engage with victims and survivors to gather testimony.

I have been involved with projects exploring everyday lived experiences and how they have been impacted by policies and practices for over two decades.

I have seen a real shift during that time in the role and impact that voices previously silenced now have.

I have always felt that working with people to have their voice heard is a privilege. I helped to develop the ethical framework for the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA), ensuring participants felt comfortable to have their stories recorded. As producer on 'Unheard Voices', in partnership with Wave Trauma Centre I ensured participants were involved at each stage. This provided some control and reassurance to those who with consent placed themselves in the vulnerable position of being recorded when telling their painful stories to an unknown public.

It was on the PMA that I first worked with Dr Megan Kelly. We both look forward to combining our skills and experience, under the guidance of the Independent Panel, to collecting testimony from all of you who wish to.



Dr Megan Kelly

Dr Megan Kelly is an Oral Historian and Testimony Facilitator with the Truth Recovery Independent Panel and will be involved in collecting testimony. Megan is also a Research Assistant at Queen's University Belfast's School of Nursing & Midwifery, specialising in exploring the holistic experiences of dialysis patients.

Megan received her PhD from Queen's University Belfast in 2022. Her thesis, 'Nursing the Troubles,' delves into the emotional labour of acute nursing during the 'Troubles', where she experienced working in sensitive research.

Megan's research extends to trade unions' roles in peacekeeping and examining conflict memory within the Prison Memory Archives (PMA) where she was an intern between 2018-2019. Megan also presented her unique PhD methodology at the Qualitative Research Forum at Cambridge University, showcasing her expertise in oral history and qualitative methodologies.

Megan has been extensively involved in preparations for all aspects of the testimony giving process and enjoys working with Dr Lorraine Dennis (who she worked with at the PMA). Megan is looking forward to exploring trauma informed research and working alongside the other Truth Recovery Facilitators on the Independent Panel.

The Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy and Legal Services Working Group

Membership

The Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy and Legal Services Working Group is comprised of Colin Smith (chair), Maria Cogley, Róisín McGlone and Steven Smyrl.

Access to Records

People affected by the issues under investigation may want information about their experiences, their past and identity, or family members.

Looking for access to records can be a complicated and emotional process. Records can be in many different places. Access to them can be different depending on what the records are and who holds them, and the levels of detail they contain can vary.

Individuals or organisations that ran institutions people had dealings with, or in which they spent time, hold a variety of records containing different types of information and it is not always straightforward to identify where records are or who holds them. Not everyone affected by the issues under investigation will have records in all or any of these locations.

The Working Group is developing guidance for those who are beginning their search, and for those who would like assistance on that journey. The intention is to provide up-to date and clear information about what records exist, what they contain, where they are, who controls them and how they can be accessed.

The Working Group's current priority is to prepare guidance for people affected by the issues under investigation on the following subjects, among others, as part of the Panel's legal information service mandate:

- Guidance on accessing records in Northern Ireland
- Types of records in Northern Ireland.
- Where to look for records in Northern Ireland.
- How to make an application for civil and religious registration records, including birth, baptism, death and marriage certificates, in Northern Ireland.
- How to access legal advice and assistance in relation to access to records in Northern Ireland.

- How to make an application for access to records in Northern Ireland under the United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation.
- How to request an internal review if your application for access to records in Northern Ireland under the United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation is completely or partially refused.
- How to make a complaint to the United Kingdom Information Commissioner's Office if your application for an internal review is unsuccessful.
- How to challenge a decision of the Information Commission if your complaint is unsuccessful.
- How to make an application for adoption records as a birth mother under the Adoption Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989.
- Making an application for adoption records as an adopted person under the Adoption Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989.
- How to challenge a decision to refuse access to records under the Adoption Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989.

2. Guidance on accessing records in Ireland

- Why records relating to you could be in Ireland rather than in Northern Ireland
- Types of records in Ireland
- Where to look for records in Ireland.
- Accessing legal advice and assistance in relation to access to records in Ireland.
- How to make an application for access to records in Ireland under the General Data Protection Regulation.

- How to request an internal review if your application for access to records in Ireland under the General Data Protection Regulation is completely or partially refused.
- How to make a complaint to the Irish Data Protection Commissioner if your application for an internal review is unsuccessful.
- How to challenge a decision of the Data Protection Commissioner if your complaint is unsuccessful.
- How to access records in Ireland under the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.

Advocacy

The Working Group is looking at ways to advocate on behalf of people affected by the issues under investigation to assist them in accessing information and support and in participating in the Panel's work. The Panel has already agreed pathways for referral of participants to the independent advocacy services provided by Adopt NI and the Victims and Survivors Service. The Working Group is considering how best to identify issues within the Panel's mandate on which direct advocacy with decision-makers is necessary.

Genealogy

Genealogy is the study of families and family history, both personal and social. Genealogical research techniques can be useful in understanding and analysing historical records to help people understand their family history, trace their lineage or find family members. It can also help to set events in their historical context. The Working Group will incorporate expert knowledge and experience of genealogical research methodologies in all of its guidance.

**KNOW SOMEONE ELSE WHO WOULD
LIKE TO RECEIVE UPDATES?**

If you are aware of anyone else who would like to receive updates on our progress and receive further newsletters, please ask them to register their interest and be added to our mailing list by emailing:

secretariat@independentpanel.org.uk