



Truth Recovery Independent Panel Access to Records Survey: Detailed Analysis Report



Detailed Analysis Report: Contents

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Introduction – The importance of access to records

In March 2021, the Minister of Health set up the Truth Recovery Design Panel (TRDP), tasked with working alongside victims-survivors to shape proposals for an independent investigation and a broader process addressing Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses.

By October 2021, the TRDP released its report, 'Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses in Northern Ireland: Truth, Acknowledgement and Accountability', which outlined five key recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Adoption of Guiding Principles**
- **Recommendation 2: Responsibilities of The Executive Office**
- **Recommendation 3: An Integrated Truth Investigation**
- **Recommendation 4: Access to Records**
- **Recommendation 5: Redress, Reparation and Compensation**

The TRDP Report stated that a key priority for victims-survivors (Guiding Principle C) was: Securing full access for victims-survivors and inter-generational relatives of the deceased to information regarding their personal and family histories and the work of future investigations is a fundamental priority (TRDP Report, 2021, p.11). It further noted that denial and obstruction of access by State, Church and agencies has caused ongoing harm, compounded the original trauma and left people without essential information about identity, family, and medical history. The TRDP made it clear that the denial of information to victims-survivors about their experiences and their identity is an ongoing injustice.

In November 2021, the Executive accepted the TRDP Report and its recommendations in full. To implement them, the Executive Office created the Truth Recovery Programme, and in April 2023, a 10-member non-statutory Independent Panel was appointed. The Panel will make recommendations to the forthcoming Public Inquiry regarding its scope and focus. The focus of this report is access to records.

The Panel established a Working Group to take forward its work relating to Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy and Legal Services (ARAGLS Working Group).

For the Working Group to take forward the TRDP Recommendation 4: Access to Records, and from listening to victims-survivors (please see pages 10 - 12 below for a discussion about the complexities of terminology) through the Consultative Forum,

and those affected outside the Forum and the wider Truth Recovery process, it was clear that access to records was a matter of critical importance.

One of the priorities of the Working Group was to research and develop a comprehensive guidance document on 'Access to Records' for victims-survivors to assist people in locating their records and navigating the process.

Another component of the Independent Panel's work was to provide victims- survivors with an opportunity to give testimony in a setting less formal than a Statutory Inquiry. Central to these narratives, and to the act of giving testimony, was the crucial issue of individuals gaining access to records of their own and their family members' life events, held across a wide range of institutions and agencies. Without access to information, victims-survivors and relatives would be unable to participate fully in the truth investigation.

However, even apart from the need for those affected to give testimony to the Panel, access to records is fundamentally important for every individual affected by these issues, institutions and agencies and their pathways and practices. This includes those affected personally and their family members, and this can often be after a family member's death.

We believe that access to personal records and data is a fundamental form of redress for those who have been so profoundly affected by these matters under consideration.

To ensure that the experiences of affected individuals was highlighted and able to inform any future recommendations that the Independent Panel would make to the Public Inquiry, the Working Group decided to collate these valuable experiences through a comprehensive survey of victims-survivors' efforts to access their records. We believed that it was important to gain insights into any challenges, difficulties, blockages and information gaps in accessing records and that we investigate these on behalf of those impacted. We envisaged that this empirical evidence based on victims-survivors first-hand experiences could inform any future policies and practices in accessing records. This resulted in a survey being developed and distributed to those involved in the Truth Recovery process and further afield. This research complemented the previous survey carried out by the Panel into the drafting and implementation of legislation to establish a permanent archive for victims-survivors. See [here](#) for the outcome of that survey.

Summary of survey and methodology

Building on the rationale outlined above, we developed a **22-question survey** with input from victims-survivors in June 2025, which received **78 responses**. The next section outlines the structure of this detailed analysis report:

Section 1. Responses

Questions 1- 10 gathered information about the respondents.

As well as information from respondents on their age, ethnicity, religion and sex, we also established if respondents wanted to remain anonymous and, if so, whether they permitted us to use quotes from their responses. We asked for information on both the institutions and pathways and practices which had affected them and how they described themselves in relation to the Truth Recovery process.

Section 2. Experience of applying for records

Questions 11- 14 focused on respondents' efforts to access their own and their families' records and their experience of that process. We were interested in finding out the range of agencies and institutions which victims-survivors were having to apply to in order to gain access to records of their own life events and those of their family members. We were also interested in whether respondents were satisfied with the records they received, if they believed the records were complete and if they had received all records held about them. We also asked how long it took from their first application to receiving records.

Section 3. Impact

Question 15 addressed what we considered to be a critical aspect of our survey, namely how the process or system of accessing records, as it is designed, has impacted upon the victims-survivors who responded to our survey.

Section 4. Advocacy/advice

Questions 16- 20 were designed to gather information on the advocacy and support that was available to respondents while accessing their records. Where we were aware of existing advice and guidance, we asked whether respondents had used these resources and, if so, whether they had found them to be helpful in their search. These resources included the Independent Panel's own guidance, DoH guidelines and legal advice.

Section 5. Suggested improvements

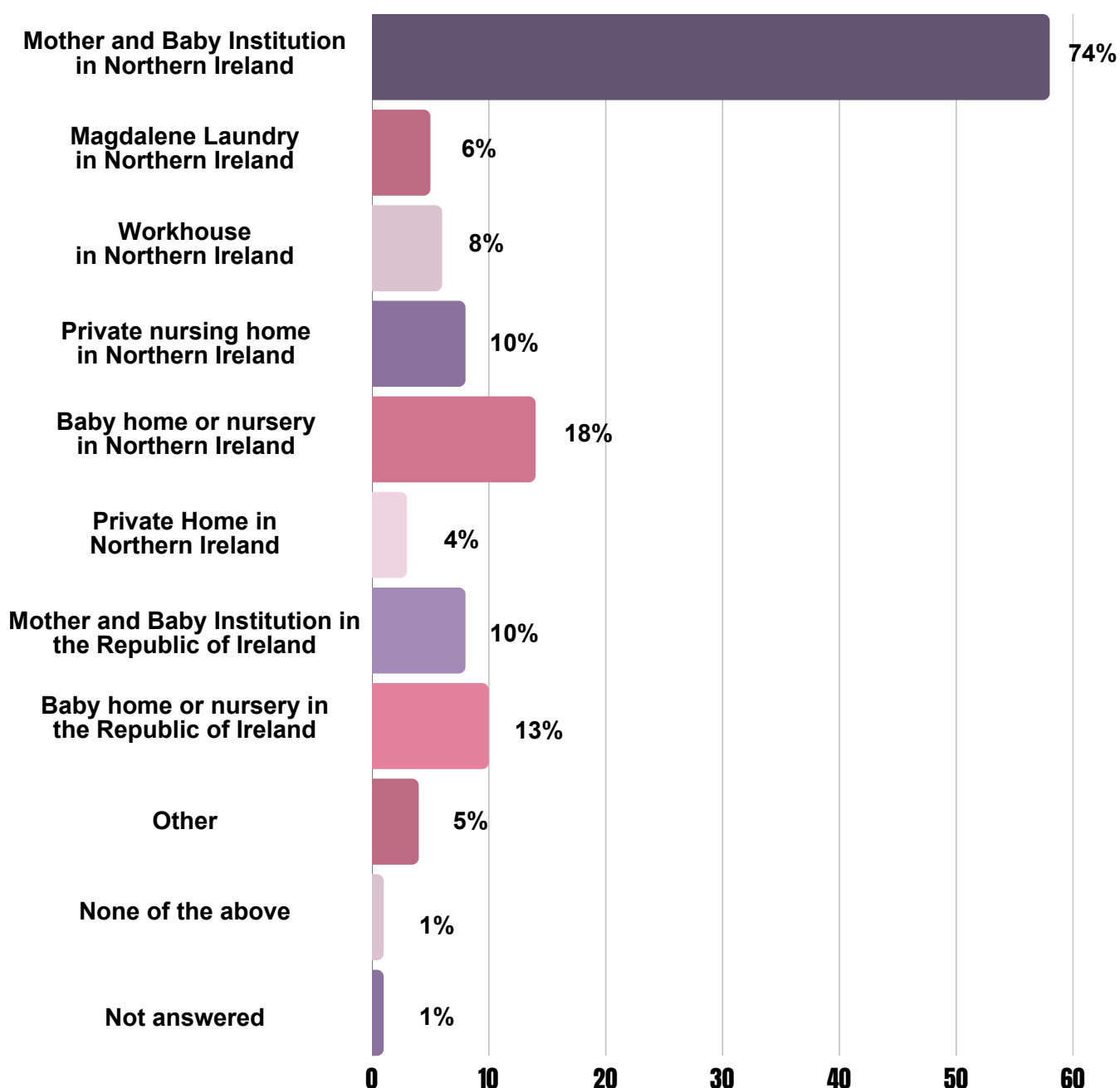
In the final section of our survey, we wished to hear what those with direct experience of the current practices of applying to agencies and institutions for records suggested as improvements to the process. Our aim was to identify measures that could make it easier for victims-survivors to access records relating to their own and their family's life events.

Section 1. Responses

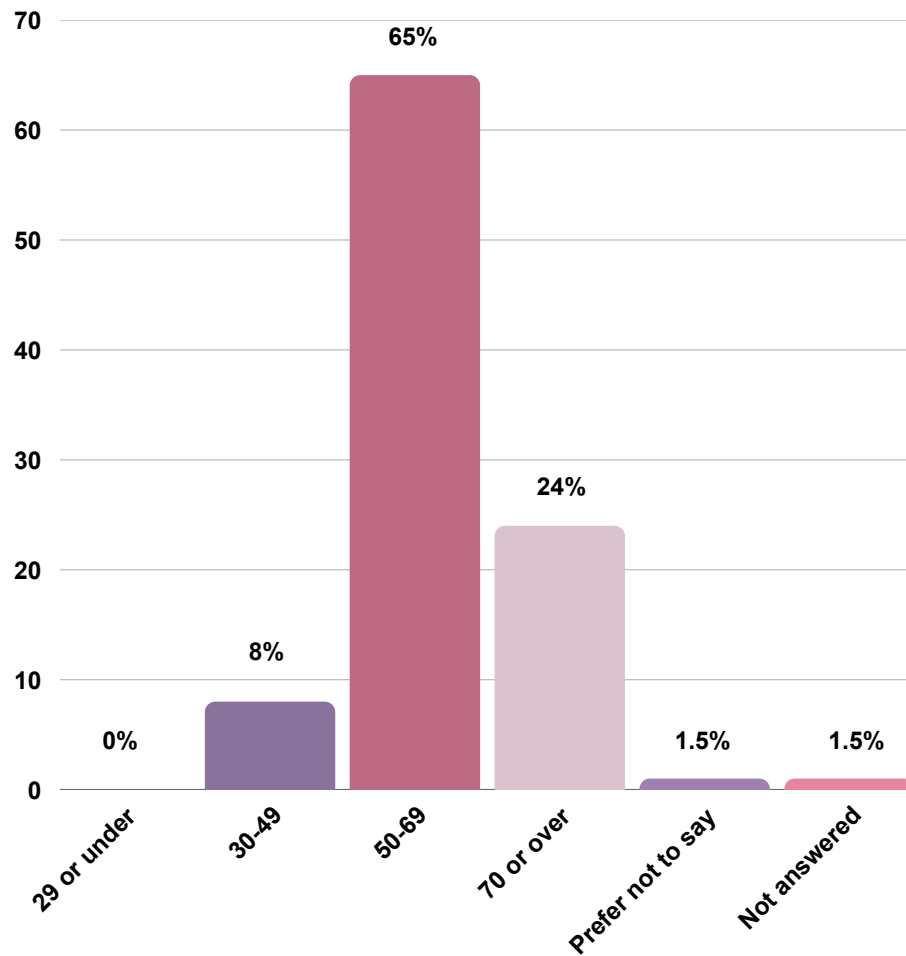
We were greatly encouraged by the number, range and generosity of those who responded to our survey. In total, 78 individuals took the time to take part in this research. We ensured that respondents who wished to remain anonymous were able to do so and confirmed their consent for the use of information and comments from their responses.

The breakdown of those who responded is as follows:

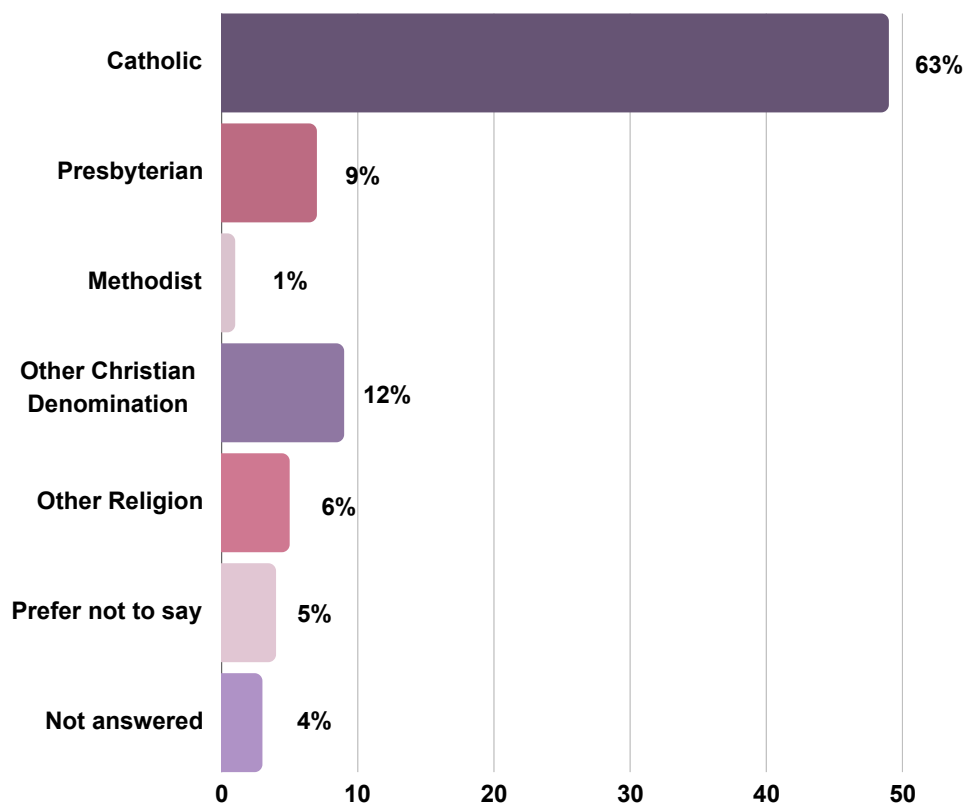
Question 4: Which of the following institutions, or their pathways and practices, is your experience connected to? (please select all that apply):



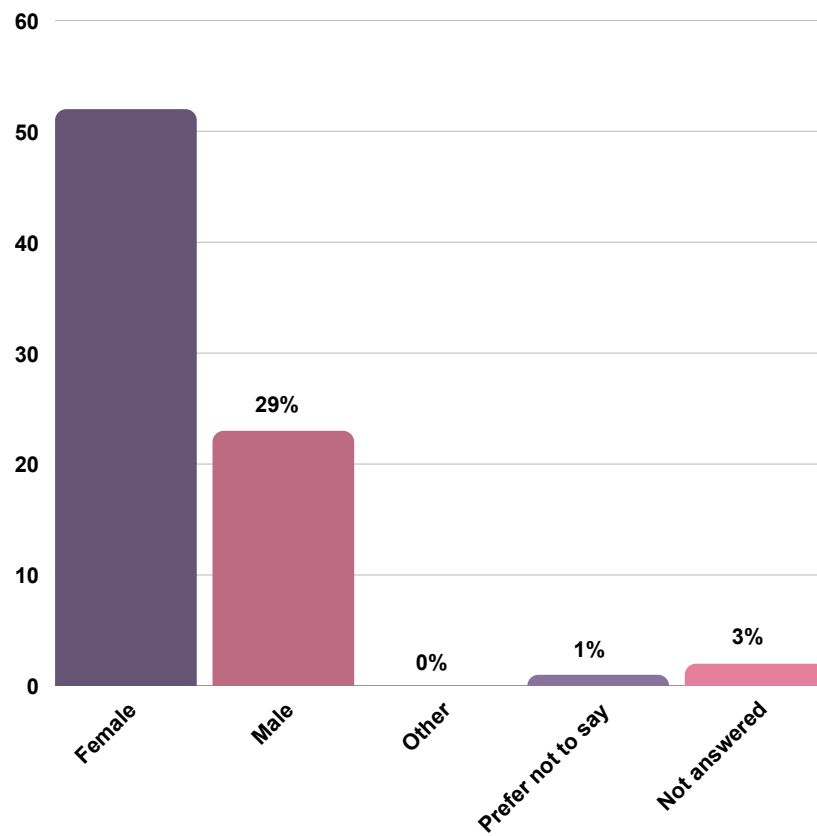
Question 6: Please select your current age range: (optional)



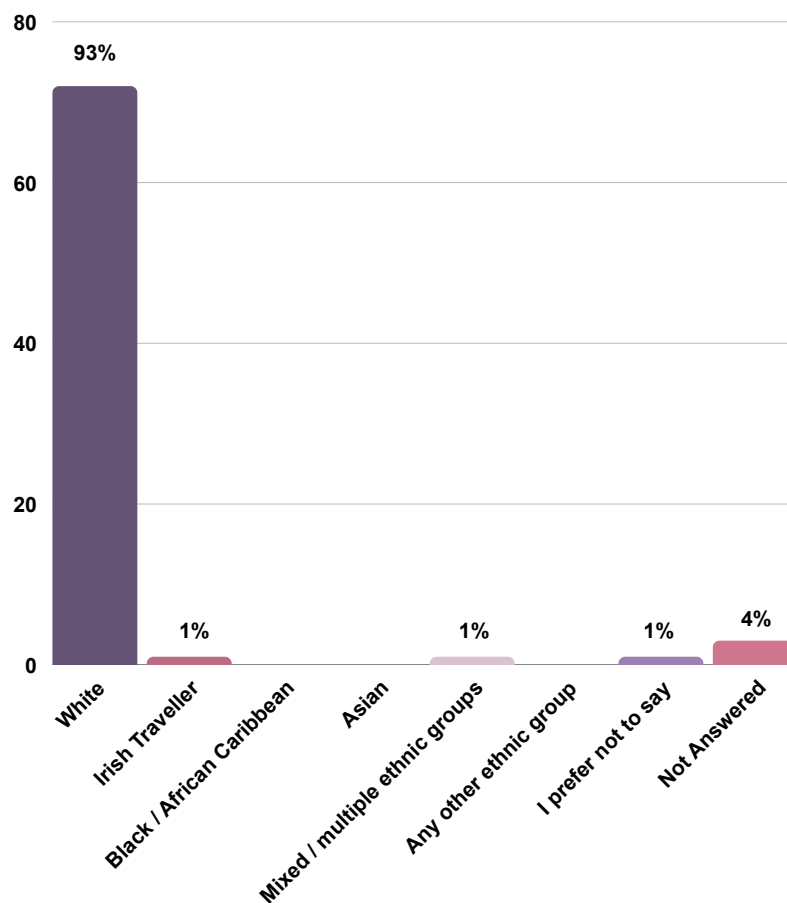
Question 7: What is your religious background? (optional)



Question 8: What is your sex? (optional)



Question 9: What is your ethnic group?



We asked respondents in the context of the Truth Recovery process, how they would describe themselves. It was important to us that respondents had agency to define themselves in their own terms. While many used terms that are common within the Truth Recovery process and some identified with more than one description, a significant number of respondents chose alternative ways to define themselves. In the interests of inclusivity, and to reflect the complexity of identity, we have listed the respondents' self-descriptions in the table below.

PREFERRED DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Adopted Adult	26
Adoptee	2
Adopted	3
Adopted when 10 years old	1
Adult Adoptee	1
Birth Mother	8
Mother and baby home inmate	1
Unmarried Mother	1
Mother of adopted baby	1
Magdalene Laundry victim	1
Fostered	3
Foster Child	2
Fostered 2000 - then disowned	1
Long term fostered	1

Table continued below.

PREFERRED DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Foster family	1
Fostered then adopted	1
A trafficked child who is now an adopted adult	1
Trafficked as a baby from Northern Ireland to south of Ireland	1
An unwanted child	1
I'm an adult with dyslexia	1
Adopted adult from childbirth	1
Orphan adult	1
Born in a mother and baby home and adopted adult	1
Sibling of adopted adult & acting on behalf of a birth Mother, Birth Father & deceased adopted adult.	1
Cousin of an adopted adult	1
Sibling of a baby who died in institutional care	1

The following quotes from the survey illustrate further both the complexity of identity and the limitations of some of the current terminology used to describe victims-survivors. They also highlight the potential harm that such labels can cause.

"Illegitimate child adult. Un-wanted B_____ person."

"Institutional survivor - Workhouse 7 months- Baby Home 2 years 2 months- Large Institution 15 years"

"I am the daughter of someone who spent time in one of the homes. My sister was adopted a few days after her birth"

"I was adopted just after birth and only recently discovered my Birth Mother...I am 64"

"I was adopted at about 3, now I am an adult age 76 so probably adopted adult is the best choice."

"I am the eldest son of my father who was born in a mother and baby institution in Belfast."

"Non-adopted/"kept" daughter of unmarried mother from the Workhouse and half-sister to her baby born there and subsequently adopted"

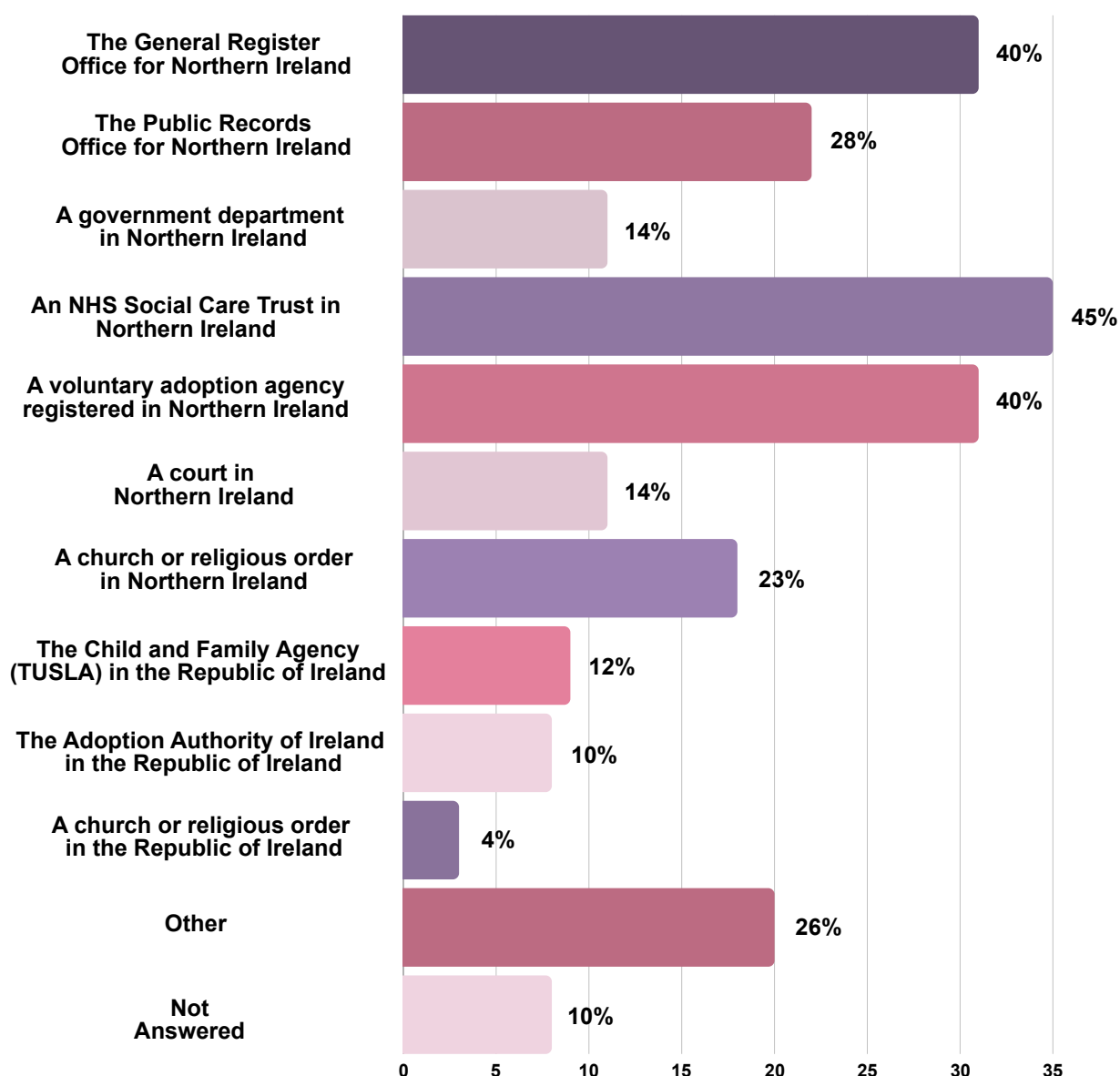
"I was an unmarried mother who had a baby boy. Thirty years later, I found out he was adopted."

"Adopted Adult. Son of an unmarried Mother who was placed in a Northern Ireland Mother and Baby Home at Marianvale, Newry, Co. Down and was then removed from her at 3 weeks old and taken into the Irish Republic and placed in the Nazareth House Baby Home at Fahan, Co. Donegal."

Section 2. Experience of applying for records

Who did you apply to for records?

Most respondents who answered this question had submitted records requests to multiple agencies as shown in the graph below. The majority of these searches (140 in total) were directed to the Social Care Trusts, General Register Office NI (GRONI) Voluntary Adoption agencies, Public Records Office NI (PRONI) and various church and religious orders in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI).



However, of the 20 respondents who selected 'Other', most can be grouped within the agencies already listed. In this category, respondents named specific agencies, individual trusts, or support organisations they had contacted. In some cases, there was insufficient information to classify these responses. These have been presented as written.

Department / Agency Contacted	Number of Respondents
Adopt NI	7
Family Care	3
Salvation Army	2
Magdalene Laundry	1
Dungannon District Council	1
DNA Testing	1
Named Social Care Trusts	4
NHS	1

Our research shows that when applying for records, respondents were faced with an enormous challenge. Many of the institutions who should have held their records no longer exist. Some had amalgamated with other institutions or evolved into entirely new agencies and organisations. Some respondents had experiences involving multiple institutions and even those connected to a single institution had to contact multiple agencies to locate information about their time there or what others had recorded about them whilst they had been there. In total, respondents indicated 199 different searches or requests for information.

Those who were searching for records of deceased family members faced additional challenges as they could not draw on personal recollections or ask their family member about their life experiences. Many of these life experiences had been shrouded in secrecy, stigma and shame. The determination and investigative effort shown by respondents was remarkable, indeed breathtaking. From the data presented above we

can see the wide range of agencies, organisations, government departments and institutions that respondents engaged with, had contact with and/or initiated searches with.

What was your experience of applying for records and are you satisfied that you have been provided with all the records to which you are entitled?

All 78 respondents answered the question above, with 58 giving further detailed answers about their experiences. Many also detailed the impact this experience had on them. We were grateful for the wide range of experiences victims-survivors shared with us across multiple agencies with detailed examples of their repeated attempts, successful and otherwise, and the efforts and challenges they had faced in accessing records. At the end of this section, we include some examples illustrating respondent's persistence, tenacity and investigative efforts, and the impact these searches had on them. From our analysis of the data, 6 broad categories of experience emerged. We will discuss each in turn.

- **Records wrong or incomplete / difficulty obtaining records**
- **Uncertainty about entitlement and rights**
- **Accessing Court records**
- **Support received / success in getting information**
- **Lack of support – challenges faced**
- **Length of time taken to receive records**

Records wrong or incomplete / difficulty obtaining records

Respondents provided details of files and records they received which had the following incorrect or incomplete data.

- *Incorrect date of birth on Baptism Certificate*
- *Misspelled location on Birth Certificate*
- *Incomplete record from Institution*
- *Different dates on some records to others*
- *Records are not correct dob wrong 3 times*
- *Admission registers belonging to Dungannon Workhouse were never deposited with PRONI. They say it's unlikely that these registers still exist*
- *I still don't have a birth certificate, unfortunately, they were unable to find it giving the information I'd supplied*
- *Haven't received records that I've applied for from my stay and my daughter's birth in Daisy Hill Hospital Newry*
- *No info at all obtained from Fahan in Co. Donegal. I was there from 4 months old until 1 year old*

- *Gaps in information - Records are incomplete, leaving unanswered questions about my past.*
- *Would like to know more about birth details as conflicting information in records I currently have*
- *Missing Baby Home records - No documentation of my time in care.*
- *I have 6 years missing from my file*
- *Trying to see an actual signature that my mum signed consent, but no-one seems to know although there is reference to a consent signed*
- *Details of how and when I was taken from my mother (against her will) and passed to foster parents don't exist.*

In addition, as the following quotes illustrate, some respondents gave examples where no records could be located for them:

"Social Services in Derry have no record of my adoption, no info from birth. Medical record starts when I am 3 years old and adopted - nothing from before then. Yet, my adoption file is in Derry Court House, and I have seen it."

"I have paperwork from 'Derry Welfare' dated 1963-64, yet social services say they have nothing about my adoption..."

"I never got any records about my past from anyone. I wrote to the Salvation Army, Thorndale House, Antrim Road, Belfast away back 20+ years ago. They could not give me any information. They told me I would have to contact Headquarters in England for information, but I was unable to get in contact with them. I did try to contact by letter the Rountrees in Omagh, but I got little or no help or information."

"For 30 years I got nothing at all and told they had been destroyed in a fire which turned out to be lies. After 30 years I got 7 years records and still trying to get the rest."

"I contacted my local Adoption Service. They didn't have the resources to help nor could they point me in the right direction."

Uncertainty about entitlement or rights.

This broad theme of entitlement or rights generated the most responses that we received in this section. Most respondents explained that, since no one has ever clarified what the various records and files should contain, it is almost impossible for them to know whether they have received all the information they are entitled to. Indeed, questions about what they were entitled to emerged as an ongoing theme, with respondents expressing that

they did not 'know', 'believe' or 'trust' that they had received all their files.

Here is what some respondents said:

"The Trust worker asked me what information I was looking for, and at the time I didn't even know what records were held to ask for so I'm not sure if I've retrieved everything. A large portion was redacted."

"I don't know what information I'm entitled to. Initially I was told I was entitled to nothing and there was no information about me. However, my son has been given information about me which I'm not sure is accurate but don't feel I can ask him to reveal what he has been told."

"I just don't know as they my social services file is gone and the mother and baby home file about me was destroyed. I don't know what is the truth."

"It has been acknowledged that there are records relating to myself however I am not sure if I received all the information I am entitled to."

Furthermore, many respondents were disappointed in the limited detail in their records and files:

"Limited documentation - only admission and discharge records from workhouse and baby home exist."

"Minimal Institutional Records - No records exist for me 15-year stay in a large institution. Only my Name, D.O.B., Admission Date, and my Mother's Name, with no details of her whereabouts."

Accessing Court Records

The issue of court records was raised by 9 respondents, and we have summarised the responses as follows:

"I keep asking about my court records and both [agency] and trust I have hit a brick wall trying to get those released."

"I want all the information that is held in the adoption file all parties are now dead."

"I also want to have and see my court records which I believe are held at Laganside. I would like legal advice to get what I feel is rightly my records."

"I do not have access to all documents ie, third party or the Court records I have tried but await as social worker cannot help me access them, they belong to the Court and not to me."

"Extremely difficult to locate where records are held, difficult to access and for instance had to rely on a social worker transcribing from court documents what they felt relevant whereas I would rather have seen the full documents myself."

"I have had to apply separately for my court records and I still waiting for this information."

Two respondents had positive experiences in searching/applying for court records:

"I applied to the Court for my adoption records and had excellent service."

"The court was the only place that went above and beyond to help me with access to my court records and treated me with respect and dignity."

Support received / success in getting information

As mentioned earlier in this report, one of our priorities as a Working Group was to research and develop comprehensive guidance on 'Access to Records' for victims-survivors. To assist us, we engaged and collaborated with relevant agencies to discover the challenges they faced in providing advocacy support to victims-survivors accessing records.

This section provides insights into victims-survivors support and success in getting access to information. The quotes below suggest that, for many respondents, when they did receive support, it was generally positive and helpful. Advocacy organisations who guided individuals through often complex processes were frequently described as knowledgeable, patient, sensitive and proactive. Social workers and staff from adoption services in trusts and official record offices were often cited by name by respondents or specific examples given of positive experiences. Below are those responses:

"They were helpful and friendly. They were very quick also. I expected to wait a lot longer but that wasn't the case. Couldn't recommend them enough..."

"AdoptNI were great in helping me continue my journey of discovery!"

"In 2021 I applied to [agency] for any records associated with my adoption. I was hoping to find out more about my birth mother, the mother and baby home and the process of

adoption. Even during the pandemic, my social worker from [agency] did a sensitive, flexible and excellent job leading through the process. I was able to access notes from Marianville, St Joseph's and the local authority in England who formalised my adoption."

"I got access to my adoption records and original Birth Certificate alright. Contact was made to my Birth Mother was made by social services and a few questions were answered."

"I've had a mixture,[agency] worker [named Case Worker] was fantastic, explained everything to me and what my options were. I've got the majority of my files from her. [named Case Worker] offered a lot of support and followed up by directing me to the post adoption and tracing team, my caseworker there is [named Case Worker] again a real help and a lovely person."

"The people involved could not have been more positive, caring or helpful towards me in my interactions with them."

"The most positive and most genuine response came from the guy who issued my birth certificate at the registry in Belfast he said 'there you go mate, I'm sorry it took so long for you to know this (so much paperwork), I'm not going to charge you for accessing this ' - that was the first time someone else confirmed I really had no idea who I was. Who my mother was."

We had 7 respondents who had positive or partially positive experiences. We have detailed these below:

"The process was very straightforward, so it had a very positive effect on my search experience."

"With the help of the Truth Recovery Independent Panel I have been given all the help I think I will need to access my records. They have been very kind, thoughtful and patient."

"I looked for my records myself through one in four in Dublin where they were very helpful."

"Great with [agency]. I'm glad that was my starting point as the Trust don't give the same support."

"When I received my records, I was extremely happy to have information from my past."

“I want to tell and honour her experience in a new world where there is no more needless shame and censure, only love and compassion (at least in my lovely family, thank goodness).”

“I am SO grateful for the help which ended decades of wondering and false leads. I am also very touched by the kindness and sensitivity of the people who I have spoken with and who have helped... I only remember [named Social Worker], but there was another brilliant lady when I first called. I had no idea how strangely emotional this would be- after all we never knew [name redacted] in person. As my son said- we gained and lost a family member in one fell swoop and the people in the truth panel were beyond kind. I am hopeful the people at Nazareth House will release any records that might show where he is buried and where my mother was prior to his birth.”

What the data shows is that when victim-survivors are given adequate and meaningful advice and assistance, their experiences can be positive. The quotes highlight that respondents valued the personal attention, clear explanation and follow-up support which helped them obtain vital information about adoptions, birth records and family history.

Importantly, these accounts highlight the emotional significance of this support with respondents noting that compassionate guidance provided closure, resolved decades of uncertainty and facilitated meaningful connections with their past. However, a few comments indicate variability in experiences, with some information only being available years later, illustrating that access to records can remain incomplete and inconsistent.

Lack of support – challenges faced

We also received information from respondents about how, without support, they experienced years of self-directed ‘detective’ work to discover the most basic information about themselves and their family members. This often involved both independent research and personal appeals to multiple agencies, churches and archives. We were also given details from respondents of the necessity for them to get information about family members outside of the normal practices and agencies. However, this required developing expertise in complex aspects of archival research. With the passage of time, this lack of support had profound repercussions for victims-survivors and their families.

Below are quotes from respondents which provide important insights into these experiences:

“I googled the name of the informant on the birth certificate until I discovered through a newspaper clipping that he was the Workhouse Master.”

"I also contacted the Catholic Church where I guessed my sister had been baptised. They didn't answer but I got the baptism certificate anyway."

"I negotiated my way through the Human Tissue Act when the lab refused to analyse my mother's DNA sample. I got help from the Citizen's Advice website. The DNA results confirmed maternity."

"I filled in endless forms and scanned many documents in order to find out from the religious orders if my mother had also been in one of their institutions."

"I tracked down the social worker named in my adoption file (only because my birth mother had once told me his name was John, otherwise I would only have had a surname to work from). It was [named Social Worker] who has actually been able to give me the most helpful information from his own memory because he remembered me and my mother. It was only because I tracked him down that I realised that the information I really needed would be in my LAC file yet nobody in the Trust ever explained to me that such a file would exist and that it would contain the background information that I really want to know."

"I have been trying through various agencies, for a two-year period including [agency] and now the Southern Health and Social Services Care Trust and Belfast Health and Social Service Trust, (where the records are held), I found this out through the Southern Health Trust, but to no avail. The Belfast Health Trust are still considering after six months whether they can release the information or not. I have proven beyond any doubt, with the help of Birth, Adoption, Marriage and Death Certificates, that any family member attached to my father's Birth and Adoption are now deceased, between 30 and over 60 years ago. This I believe is beyond what the Adoption guidance given to the Health Trust states. even though I have supplied the above information to the two Health Trusts involved they still will not supply this vital information to a full blood relative !!! in my case the eldest son. I recently suffered a personal bereavement when my wife died from a short illness, the non-co-operation of the above Health Trusts, just adds to the suffering and anguish I am now currently going through. What more information do they need my Blood Group or DNA sample!!! This has to stop!!!"

"In 1998 I was shown a handwritten letter by one of the social workers (a nun) from my adopted father to the nuns detailing the progress of my twin brother and I after our adoption. When I asked to have a copy of this letter it had disappeared and was not included in my file. A Very personal letter written in very early 60s by my late father. It was so important for us to have this letter, and I do not understand how it had gone missing some years later."

Despite the fact that the adoption laws at the time of my birth required a medical examination prior to adoption this medical examination was not carried out in a timely fashion and it was blank in terms of my weight and health details. The only information provided has been a extract from the register i.e. date in and date out. I have no information from Social Services either which relates to the time I spent in the care of the Sisters of Nazareth. I was clearly in the "care" system from birth until I was adopted at 1 year and 10 months but despite 4 formal requests to social services over the years they have provided only information which relates to the period when I was fostered with my parents at 10 months old prior to my formal adoption by then at 1 year and 10 months. The sisters of Nazareth advise that the records from Nazareth Lodge, Portadown were handed over to social services when the home closed but social services can not locate them. I have again taken this issue up with [agency]."

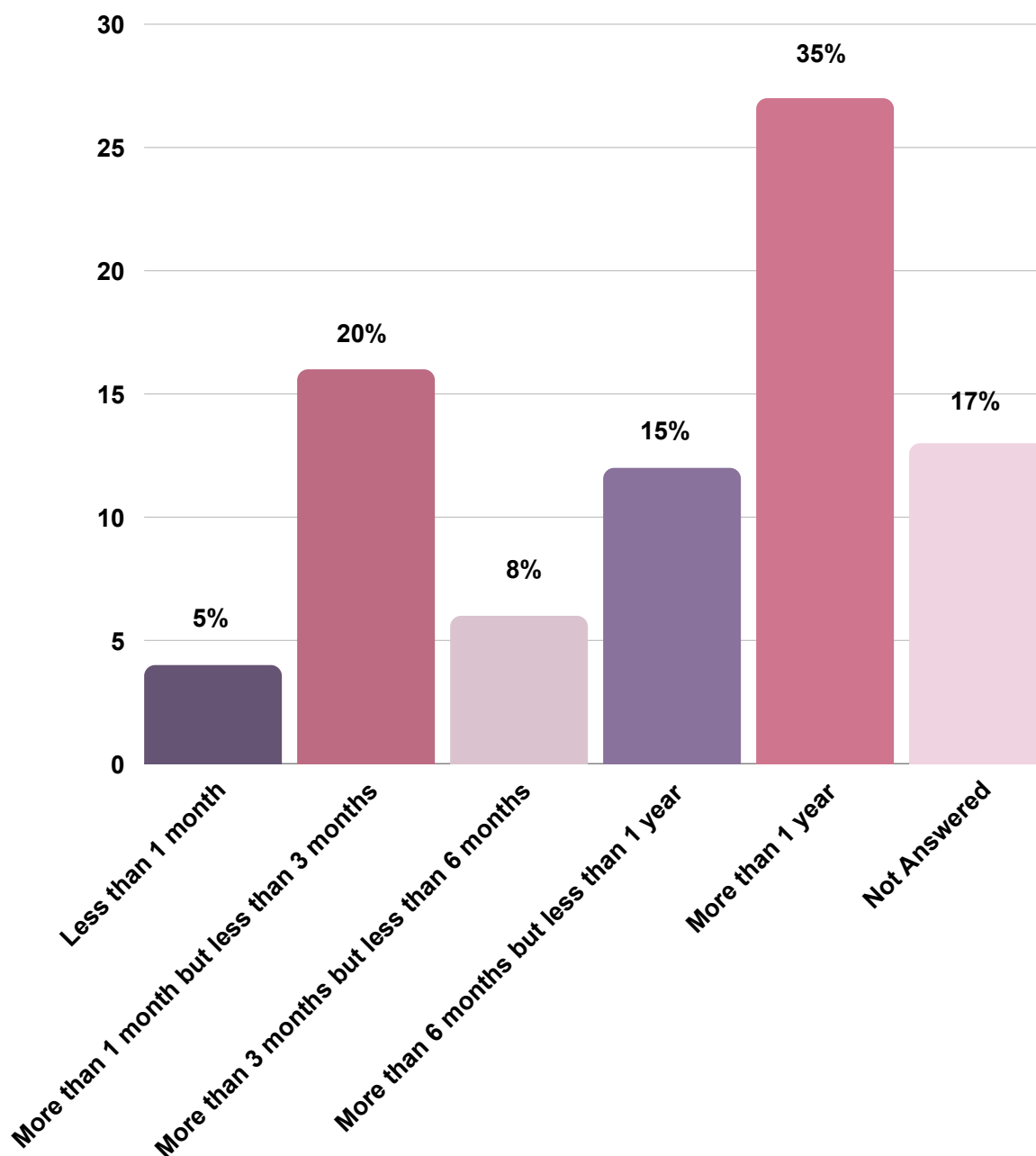
"I have used the WWW, made over half a dozen trips to Ireland and interviewed probably 20 people."

"I have done all the searching myself... I don't always trust the system. For me it's very much a personal journey that I control as far as I can..."

"Although the story has been sad, at last, we know what happened to [name redacted] and although heartbreaking have some insight into my mothers experience which we are all keen to honour and respect. We hope as a family that if [name redacted] burial place is disclosed we can visit and make a ceremony for us all. I was amazed how quickly you found where [name redacted] was born and who collected his body and where he had been living while awaiting adoption (he died in their care)."

"NHS Trust & [agency] claimed there were no records when I applied to them. [agency] were approached much later, months later, when another birth mother told me they had given her information about her and suggested I try again. This I did and they sent a summary of my time as a birth mother in a Good Shepherd institution. I don't have actual records just a summary they produced. At the time of the first inquiry, they were already in charge of the Good Shepherd records so cannot use that as an excuse."

Length of time taken to receive records



When we asked about how long it had taken to receive records, as can be seen from the graph above, 35% of respondents waited over a year to receive files. When respondents questioned the length of time it was taking, the response from agencies and institutions was not always supportive. Here is what one respondent said:

“When I chased my file, the reason I was given for the delay was because those responsible for double checking the information worked job share!”

However, these figures do not fully capture victims-survivors experiences, or convey what 'over a year' actually means in terms of how long they have waited. There were many examples of "over a year" answers indicating a much longer time frame, sometimes across decades. Neither do these figures reflect what respondents told us about the consequences and the devastating impact waiting for records can have on those who are searching for loved ones.

"I first applied for records in 1996 and received a page ripped out of a spiral notebook with two sentences handwritten on it. I tried again in 2022 and got no further."

"It has taken many years to access the information that I was eventually given."

"I started the process in 1997 and still am dissatisfied with the information provided."

"The process was long and not made easy. Some records although my records were held back even though the other parties involved were deceased. I challenged this and eventually got what I needed but was long and stressful time."

"If they had (told me) when I asked she would have still been alive, there may have been a chance I could have met her."

"Then in 1991, I made contact with Church of Ireland again. I was provided with base information. It wasn't until the law was changed I once again approached Church of Ireland Adoption Society in 2016., This was when my details were put on the Adoption Contact Register."

"The experience has not been so good with limited information available, and they failed to say my mum spent time in St Mary's Laundry straight after Marianville until I found a letter in my care file and approached them again."

"I and my 3 brothers were given very limited information regarding our birth mother and her extremely difficult life experiences during her spells in Institutions and hospital."

What the above first-hand insights and direct experience shows is that, despite new guidance and policies, access remains unequitable - with redactions, lost files and conflicting decisions across agencies and trusts. Importantly, it demonstrates how the process is emotionally draining for victims-survivors and highlights systemic failures in record-keeping, transparency and empathy toward those seeking truth about their files. The following section demonstrates this in greater detail.

Section 3 - Impact

We asked respondents how they felt about their experiences of accessing records and the impact it has had on their lives. In the 71 responses we received, overwhelmingly negative feelings were expressed. These feelings ranged from 'emotional and stressful and sad' to 'upsetting and distressing' and examples were given of how the process had impacted negatively on respondents' mental health and well-being. Respondents also detailed how emotional resilience is needed, noting that they often had to take breaks from the process to regain the necessary energy and commitment to continue their search.

Respondents spoke of 'powerlessness' and the emotional burden of the process and the impact that it has had on family dynamics. They also told us about the longer-term impact this had on their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. The following categories and quotes tell us about the emotions and impacts this process has had on respondents.

Stressful, Frustrating, Annoying

Fourteen respondents gave us details about how the process had impacted on them emotionally, evoking feelings of stress, annoyance and frustration:

"It has been very emotional. I find the process frustrating and annoying. I had to beg and jump through hoops to get the most basic information- information which is mine. I have taken a break in getting further records - I need to gather the emotional resilience to cope with the necessary energy and commitment to continue. It's soul destroying."

"I did attempt to complete Freedom of Information NI application. Found the process to be confusing and challenging. In the end I gave up, didn't complete it."

"Frustration and uncertainty - missing records have led to ongoing frustration and crucial unanswered questions."

"It has effected me a great deal. Very time consuming, extremely emotional and draining and I felt like it was not at all made easy. In fact, I'd go as far to say that if I didn't fight and challenge certain areas I would not have succeeded."

"It is frustrating for me but extremely distressing for my cousins who are desperate to know who their father's birth parents were. The more publicity there is about the appalling treatment of single mothers in the past, the more distressed they feel. They have no way of knowing if their birth grandmother was in an institution or not. It is the uncertainty. Where the truth is not known then fear takes a hold of emotions."

"I have been retraumatised by the experience. The reluctance to provide records has heightened my suspicion of a lack of trust in both state and church."

Negative impacts on mental Health

Twelve respondents described how the process to search for records had had a negative impact on their mental health:

"My mental health has been affected all the years I have been searching. It leaves you feeling worthless and invisible when you are told there is no records."

"It meant that I was deprived access to contact my birth parents for many years. My life was torture for many years."

"Receiving my sister's birth certificate, adoption certificate, baptism certificate, the results of DNA testing, and seeing in the court records that my mother had signed away her parental rights - all had a profound impact on me."

"It definitely affects your mental well being.. So many unanswered questions, so much mistrust. I have been at this for 40 years... It never stops."

"I think I finally gave up as was effecting my mental state and my partner. Like banging my head against the 'proverbial brick wall.'"

Sad/confused

Nine respondents told us how the process had made them sad and confused, here are examples of what they described.

"I feel very sad and upset for what my birth mother had to go through on her own without support moral or financial."

"Sad to find a brother did exist but dead."

"It has left me confused and annoyed that after 75 years I am still trying to access my records."

Upsetting/distressing

A further six respondents detailed how upsetting and distressing the process had been for them:

“It has been upsetting for all the family - being unable to piece together the full story because of missing information, and factually incorrect information.”

Despair

Two respondents wrote of their despair in the process.

“I don't think that anyone will ever experience the feeling of despair knowing that if only someone had told the truth a simple yes or no, giving access to a name, some help when originally asked for would have been the difference between looking at a person or a headstone.”

“We tell them how this impacts us and no matter how much we plead for detail about our own histories, those that could help us, simply do not care. It is beyond cruel, I would go and search through files myself if I was allowed to. Maybe that's what needs to happen?”

The Impact of these feelings on respondents' well-being.

Thirty-six respondents went on to document the longer-term impact that these feelings have had on their well-being. The most common impacts listed were depression, feeling inferior to others, humiliation, powerlessness, a lack of control in their lives and the emotional burden of shame. The following quotes provide an insight into these feelings:

“I feel as I'm not good enough that every day I feel I have to prove myself.”

“It has made me feel 'I don't matter'.”

“It has made me feel like a second class citizen.”

“It has left me very depressed, and no one cares.”

“Strangers know more about my past than I know myself, obviously that affects your sense of identity and self-esteem, how could it not?”

“Devastating! Humiliating! Confused! Angry! I remain a No-one! Unheard!”

“I remain a non-person. I have no identity. I have no voice, No rights to my own information. I have a great gap in my life and no answers. I have a broken history.”

” I still have no control over my life, even now. I have no rights. Everything of my life there remains the control of non-people, who do not know me, nor are interested in me and my wishes.”

“My life consisted of other people’s shame, so much so, I have told very few people of my past. the same shame given to my mother entering those institutions, and which is now being imposed onto me once more.”

“Emotional burden - The daunting search for the truth has led to feelings of defeat and isolation.”

“Shame, betrayal for the family who adopted me kept me from looking earlier at the end of the day I was led to believe by society I was someone to be hidden and ashamed of having.”

“It was important to access many details that had been hidden from me. I felt that I could understand more of the environment my birth mother faced, and this created a great deal of sadness which I hope will be part of a healing process. I was a little bit angry at some of the untruths that were told and recorded, which reminds me of the powerlessness I have felt for so long, and which my birth mother must have felt.”

“It affects me. I never feel good enough, unimportant, a nobody. No rights, neglected, forgotten, excluded, different, not entitled to anything, not wanted, no real identity. I was the hidden secret.”

“I have been receiving counselling for the past two years, which is still on going. The anguish and suffering of this whole process, continues on a daily basis, while trying to obtain some sort of justice for a deceased father and grandmother who was incarcerated in the same Mother and Baby Institution twice in her life, dying at 35 years old.”

The above information and quotes clearly highlight the prolonged and distressing struggle victims-survivors have endured to access their records. They have told us how over many years they have faced bureaucratic obstruction from multiple agencies compounding their personal grief. This indicates that the withholding of information can damage their self-esteem and their mental well-being.”

Section 4 - Advocacy/advice

In previous sections of this report, we highlighted the range of organisations that respondents were applying to for their own records or their family members' records, and the diverse nature of their searches. Respondents told us that they were applying to a range of organisations, agencies, institutions and departments. Many of these entities have different application processes. They also have different retention policies and hold records in various formats and mediums. Many of their records have not been digitised or indexed and so are not searchable. The process of accessing records from these entities was very time-consuming, and had a burdensome, emotional toll on many respondents. The findings of this survey show that there is a clear need for well-publicised support and advocacy services.

In this report, we wished to reflect the wide range of experiences of respondents regarding the support available to them, both from within these agencies and externally, such as through advocacy or legal services.

To this end, we were aware that on 29 November 2023, the Department of Health published new guidance for Health and Social Care Trusts Social Workers, processing requests for access to records relating to adoption. We were interested to gather information from those who had applied under this guidance and what their experiences were. We were particularly interested in respondents who had applied previously to the trusts and may have applied under the new guidance, and whether there was a difference in the information they received.

As mentioned earlier in this report, the ARAGLS Working Group had researched, developed and published, both in hard copy and on the Panel's website, comprehensive 'Access to Records' guidance. We are keen to develop these guidelines further in response to feedback. These guidelines were only published this year (2025); however, we were interested to know if respondents were aware of these guidelines and, if so, had found them useful.

We were also interested to know if respondents had sought legal advice in relation to accessing records.

Did you have any advocacy support in accessing records?

Of the 73 respondents who answered this question, 31 indicated that they had availed of advocacy support and 42 indicated that they did not. Thirty-four respondents provided additional details about the advocacy support they had received whilst others who had not accessed such support provided us with some insight into the reasons behind this.

Among those who indicated that they had received advocacy support, there was a broad and wide definition of what advocacy meant to them. Amongst those who had not received any advocacy support, there was also a clear lack of awareness of what advocacy services were available to them.

Of those who indicated that they had received support; the source of this support was as follows:

- **Adopt NI - 14**
- **Social Services Trust - 5**
- **Family Care - 4**
- **PAC-UK – 1**
- **One in Four (Dublin) - 1**
- **Church of Ireland Adoption Society- 1**
- **Unidentified advocate - 1**

Responses indicated a broad level of support obtained from these various agencies which ranged from a single conversation with a staff member, to ongoing in-depth work with the respondent:

“Yes Adopt NI, they have been absolutely brilliant with helping me. Unfortunately even they can't speed up the Health Trust with accessing social services records.”

“Adopt NI were very co-operative this time to provide me with all the details about my mother and I's stay at both Mater Dei Hostel and my stay at an orphanage).”

“I received full support and empathy from [agency], but the search outcome was disappointing. The disclosed details revealed poor record-keeping by the relevant institutions, making it even harder to uncover the truth about my past.”

“I was appointed a social worker who gave me my adoption records. She was from the Western Trust and was lively and very helpful.”

“I had a social worker, who talked a lot, but said nothing, nor gave me anything. I later find out there was information, but she didn't even have the respect to say nor explain why I was not allowed access. she firmly stated there was nothing!”

Among those who indicated that they had not received any support, there were several who reported that they were not aware of such services.

Six respondents indicated that they were not sure as to what 'advocacy' meant in relation to the Truth Recovery process, or where to source it:

"I'm not entirely sure what is meant by advocacy in this instance. I've had help from various people and organisations, but I've also had to do a lot of digging myself."

"I've often felt quite bewildered about the various departments. I could have done with someone who could have advised where to go for everything I needed to know. There were times when it all felt very chaotic."

"It didn't even occur to me. After being told no I didn't see the point as I knew that the particular organisation were not going to budge on the matter."

Two respondents indicated that they did not need advocacy support and three indicated that they planned to use advocacy in the future.

Unfortunately, two respondents told us:

"Living overseas seems to work against me. I didn't feel I was eligible to access an advocacy service."

"I certainly couldn't apply for compensation due to my lack of ability to find the right records."

The above quotes highlight that the needs of victim-survivors in the diaspora should be researched and addressed.

Department of Health new guidance for Health and Social Care Trusts

In response to our question on whether respondents had applied under the Department of Health new guidance for Health and Social Care Trusts, 24 respondents indicated that they had reapplied under the new guidance and 44 had not.

For those who answered yes to the question 'Was previously redacted information unredacted?', 27 respondents provided more details.

There were 5 respondents who were still awaiting responses.

Seven respondents reported that they received new information that was previously redacted. They told us that even though this new information was difficult to read in some circumstances, it was still important to them and their right to receive this information was paramount.

The quotes below reflect this sentiment:

“Social worker very helpful to help with accessing recent records. Very disappointed that some information only received in current search about birth father than wasn't in records originally received when I searched 20 years ago. Birth father now deceased so missed opportunity to meet.”

“I have now received a file with just a couple of redactions. Previously I was given a synopsis of my file compiled by a social worker. The most recent file provides a clearer picture of social services records and information provided previously clearly shows that the adoption process was being led by Nazareth sisters rather than social services! The file includes a stern letter from the Mother Superior admonishing a senior social worker concerning the adoption process and his grovelling response.”

“Yes I got a lot more information under the new guidance. I would say it was hard reading the unredacted files as there were reasons, why the information was redacted in the first place, I'm not just talking about names being redacted I mean sensitive information... I have a paternity statement for example. That said I am glad I was able to see it all, and a SW didn't make a decision about what I could or could not see... It's my life, my lived experience... Hard to deal with for sure but I can make the decisions which is the way it should be.”

“When first applying for care and adoption files they were heavily redacted, but since the introduction of the new guidance I have received fully unredacted files from the Trusts.”

“The initial 2-page summary I received 15 years ago was actually 2 pages copied out of the file.. it was in no way representative of the full file again it felt just getting a job done rather than taking the time to summarise what the full file contained.”

“A few extra papers/documents appeared when I was issued the file apart from third party information relating to the Adopter's parents who raised me. Very little information relating to my birth mother.”

“yes - although some information that shouldn't have been redacted was still redacted.”

Not all respondents who applied under the new guidance had received records in the first place or they had received very limited records after their first request. They saw the introduction of the DoH new guidance as a potential opportunity to find out if the new guidance would provide them with any or more information. Of these respondents:

- Six who had previously received no records did reapply in the hope that they would receive information, however they still did not receive any records.
- Seven told us that after applying under the new guidance, they received minimal changes to the limited files they already had, with no new information.
- One respondent who had received records but was not aware that new guidance had been issued, raised the issue of access to that information:
“I was not aware of this and feel I should have been contacted to say more information may be available.”

Many respondents were dissatisfied with the information they received or felt that they had to return several times to get redactions removed. Several respondents also indicated that, through talking to other victims-survivors, they are aware of inconsistencies between different trusts.

“The ‘Access to Birth Records and Adoption Agency’ case records for adults impacted by Adoption to Health and Social Care Trusts and Adoption agencies - Practice Guidance in November 2023 ‘says that agencies ‘may’ be able to assist with enquiries for children/grandchildren of deceased adoptees, but we have been met with a blank refusal to help.”

“In 2024 I applied again for my adoption file under the new guidance. When received, months later, with no update regarding delay to the standard timeline, it only contained information relating to the actual adoption. There was no information regarding my birth family, interviews with them or anything about the circumstances leading up to my birth and subsequent adoption.”

“Refused access to any information from the moment I entered to leaving many years later.”

Moreover, as the following quotes illustrate, many were angry and distressed about what they felt were unnecessary redactions:

“The most distressing redaction failure in terms of my file was their attempt to redact the second preference adoptive family. This information was redacted under a section heading ‘second preference family’. I never realised that there would have been a second

preference, this was never explained to me or discussed with me, so much for the post adoption counselling that is supposed to be in place before files are released!"

This respondent continues:

"This question was however answered on two subsequent pages where the second preference family name and geographical location was noted in handwriting and not redacted. Obviously, whoever had completed the redaction did not read the file, there were simply looking for section headings of note. This is a serious data breach in terms of the specific family who would be easily identifiable. It has also left me eternally faced with that 'what if' scenario, with a name, place and family associated with it making it very real."

"The redaction of information was upsetting. They redacted information that was clearly already known to me (referee details) and withheld the guardian ad litem report on the basis that the court is the data processor of its own records. I however feel that if an organisation holds a copy of the records, they themselves are data processors and therefore are required to release them if in their possession. They withheld all information regarding the assessment of my adoptive parents even though I know other Trusts have released such information, some with the consent of adoptive parents and some without. The lack of consistency and the 'lottery' as to the information you receive based upon which Trust and even which Social Worker you are dealing with, is beyond unfair."

"Whilst adoption staff were pleasant and helpful, obtaining the full records meant several interactions and requests over the course of 3 years. When records arrived, some details were redacted when they shouldn't have been - this required further communication with social workers, and I had to prove that our family already were aware of the information that had been redacted - when the Trust involved should have known since they facilitated both the forced adoption and the eventual reunion. Some records included information that was factually untrue. Information was missing - the explanation given by a social worker was that when copying the files sometimes 'pages stick together'."

Have you used the Access to Records Guidance published by the Independent Panel?

We asked if respondents had used the Independent Panel's guidance and, if so, had they found it useful.

Of the 24 respondents who had used the guidance. 21 respondents found the guidance useful and 3 did not – one respondent said:

“New Truth Recovery guidelines very helpful as source of information and clearly defined sections.”

The information now available at Truth Recovery Independent Panel is excellent, though I'm not sure how well known this resource is England.”

“The guidelines are an excellent start but there is still more work required which will need to be funded and protected specifically ring fenced.”

“I think that the advice given by the Truth Recovery Independent Panel should be made widely available and that help should be given, where required, to applicants.”

Have you sought legal advice in relation to accessing records relating to your past experience or that of your family?

A total of 10 respondents indicated that they had sought legal advice, whereas 51 indicated that they had not.

Of those who had sought legal advice, 8 respondents provided details about the status of their inquiries.

- 4 respondents were awaiting the outcome.
- 2 respondents were registered with a law firm through a support group they were members of, but had not met a solicitor yet.
- 1 Law firm was unable to assist a respondent.
- 1 respondent contacted the original solicitor who was involved in their adoption who was unable to help.

Of the 51 respondents who had not sought legal advice, 39 gave us reasons as to why they had not. The most common reason, reported by 16 respondents, was cost. Some respondents believed that there would be prohibitive costs involved. Many respondents also believed that it should not be necessary for victims-survivors to meet the cost of a function that should be free and available to them. Others stressed the risk involved in costs incurred with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Respondents also mentioned the incumbent stress and emotional cost in taking that step. Others cited the following reasons:

- 8 indicated that either they did not need legal advice, or it was not necessary at the current stage of their journey
- 6 would consider seeking legal advice in future

- 5 believed that legal advice should not be necessary as the data controllers should provide the necessary information
- 4 were unaware that they could get legal advice or had not considered it

“I need to get to the end of the process before I decide if I need legal help. It’s a big step to engage a solicitor without an idea of the cost to obtain basic information. Surely this should not be necessary in the current climate of openness about these institutions!!! I may need to keep my money for legal costs until I absolutely cannot go any further by myself. It’s also an issue of confidentiality and ‘secrets’.”

“I could not afford to pay for legal advice, and I do not see why I should have to - the government should be making this as easy as possible, and they have failed spectacularly by tasking the Trusts with something that they are either unwilling or incapable of doing.”

“I’ve had ill health for some time and don’t feel up to fighting my way through all that again.”

One respondent told us that:

“I did not feel able to make an application to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board as this process seemed likely to impact my mental health. I wish I had been able and would have sought legal advice to do so.”

This section shows the persistent difficulties victims-survivors face in accessing personal and family records, even after repeated formal requests. It highlights how key information, such as medical details, early care histories and institutional records have been lost, withheld or selectively shared by agencies. Each person’s experience underscores the emotional toll of being denied basic knowledge about their own early life and their struggle to recover the truth, and highlights the prolonged and distressing struggle to access records. As noted earlier, many respondents have faced persistent bureaucratic obstruction from multiple agencies over several years, compounding their personal grief. This indicates that the continued withholding of information is a violation of rights and a perpetuation of the original injustices. Victims-survivors express deep frustration with health trusts and religious orders that “hide behind records”. It illustrates how the legacy of institutional abuse continues to inflict emotional and psychological harm through ongoing denial of access to personal and family histories. It also offers us a deeper understanding of what some victims-survivors have had to endure.

Section 5: Suggested Improvements

We were keen to get the views of victim-survivors on what they believed could be improvements to the processes around accessing records. We asked:

What steps do you think should be taken to ensure that victims and survivors and their families have an improved experience of accessing records?

We received 70 responses to this question. The overwhelming number of responses agreed that a better way needs to be found to give victims-survivors access to records of their life events. As one respondent succinctly put it:

“ANYTHING WOULD BE AN IMPROVEMENT.”

Another respondent summed up many of the issues that were raised by numerous respondents in their replies to this question.

“I think the whole experience should be revised and a better way found to help people who are struggling with finding their records and once found something put in place for a better experience whilst you are going through them... maybe someone you can ring or the person with you being a person who has gone through the process already... as social workers are not the best people to be there given their role in it all.”

Other responses fell into 6 broad categories:

- **Transparency - nothing should be hidden**
- **Independent access to records for victims-survivors**
- **Proactive support to those seeking access to records and aftercare provided**
- **One stop shop**
- **Time frames honoured**
- **Positive experiences**

Transparency - nothing should be hidden

Thirty-five respondents elaborated on this issue. The main responses involved the concept that ‘nothing should be hidden or kept from a victim or survivor.’

“No legal conditions or restrictions should be introduced and imposed which would support the prevention of any information being released. during the process, the investigation or the finally release.”

"I think everyone should be able to access their records no matter what they are searching for. I think years ago it was difficult, and everything was cloaked in secrecy, but now more accessible."

"It should be clearly identified where all records about you are held and access provided and copies of original documents seen rather than a social worker etc taking notes of what they feel relevant whereas, I would rather see all information about me."

"Just give them access to their family records. It's their family. Make counselling freely available but open the records. This long long-drawn-out process which treats us like children is worse than knowing the worst of any truth."

"There should be nothing withheld from anyone, nothing."

"Give the records, paper doesn't hurt people withholding information does, time cannot be turn back, people have genuine chances at knowing and meeting blood relations it really seems that there is a will to ignore the past and hope that people will either die off or give up trying."

"Treat us as the Adults we are that can be trusted with our own information. Involve us all the way please."

"Any institution or body should be legally made to give all and any information no matter how small."

"Even information which a social worker believes can be upsetting to a victim or survivor is important as most people want the truth and not a sanitised version."

"Wider understanding about the impact of social service decision making & all those affected, records need to be available to all."

One respondent summed up the emotional toll that this process can have on those searching for records:

"Seeking a meeting with birth parents is a life changing event and has to date been handled clumsily by state and church actors with little consideration of the impact on adult adoptees even though for many time is of the essence. I am 64 years old and had a life threatening illness so know that life is fragile. I need to know my place in this world and that means knowing my history, my family - not just my birth mother or birth father but also aunts, uncles, cousins etc. - people who look like me."

“[agency] have not come back with the Marianville records as yet, past attempts to get such information have resulted in a typed one sided page of information that they had clearly selected in terms of what they would and would not share - this is so upsetting and needs to stop - please just let me know as much about my past as the strangers reading my records do...!”

Independent access to records for victims-survivors

Twenty-one respondents stressed the importance and need for independence of records both in terms of who holds them but also who arbitrates the degree of access for victims-survivors. The following quotes reflect the lived experience of victims-survivors who have engaged in and navigated these complex processes:

“If the person is a victim or a survivor, they should be given immediate access to records as they should have ownership to them...”

“The retrieval, safe keeping and release of records should be outsourced to an independent professional agency that has the capacity, expertise and understanding to provide this service in a professional, trauma informed way.”

“Take records out of the hands of social workers and the voluntary adoption agencies.”

“Remove the Trusts from the process, they are obviously not able to provide the service required to ensure no further harm or suffering is caused.”

“No one from government, legal, social services, or any other organisation linked to these organisations, who have a bias, or has an invested interest in managing what information is shared against the interests of the victims of this atrocity should be involved.”

“Now it has been digitised there shouldn't be any wait. I think they should have full access to their records, and disclosure not left to discretion of a social worker.”

“Independent research and report article which should outline all the truths and challenges, as well as the failures. this should be released across the countries and especially to the general public. a case review should be legally binding in regard to required changes which should then be put into law.”

“Place them in the hands of PRONI....”

“Make religious orders allow me un-redacted access to my history from birth.”

One respondent gave us poignant details on the lifelong impact intermediary bodies can have on the lives of victims-survivors:

“As a birth mother, I left a letter for my son in the Eastern Board Adoption Offices in Wellington Park in 1999. The office was being renovated and there was a delay in my information being returned from the secure storage location. The only information I was given was that his death certificate could not be found in the Northern Ireland records office. This meant if he still lived in the north, he was still alive but if he had moved then they could not check. After over twenty years, legally, this was all the information they could give me. I was told at the time my letter would be circulated to other offices/agencies. When he tried to contact me, nine years later, there was no record of the letter being circulated.”

Proactive advocacy and support for those seeking access to records with aftercare provided

Twenty respondents detailed the need for proactive support for victims-survivors at each step of their journey to access records and an effective aftercare process to be introduced. In addition, there should be a clear explanation at the start and support throughout via updates and after care if needed.

“Each individual applicant seeking their records should be allocated/appointed a specific agent to search for their records on their behalf.”

“More opportunities for survivors to meet or access support if information obtained is upsetting and/or negative e.g. in person meeting if receiving sensitive news and next steps for support.”

“In our experience, it is clear some Trusts and Churches still prioritise protecting the institution over healing and redress for victim-survivors and their families. Access to records experiences cannot improve unless this root cause, and the attitude of protecting the institution is dealt with.”

“Victims should be fully supported, and the truth is very important. Trained professional people could be involved.”

“There should be support from the outset. Someone to fully explain the process and give guidance.”

“To have records and someone to understand. Independent and certified counsellors should remain available.”

Respondents also suggested that the support services should be publicised including:

- A leaflet prepared and given out regarding entitlement
- Public awareness campaigns - e.g. need to reach elderly at home in rural areas

Other issues identified were:

- Support groups should be given sufficient financial support to ensure victims-survivors receive the support required for positive outcomes
- Independent legal advisors available for every person who comes forward
- More help for those not resident in NI (those across Britain in particular and further afield)
- Free support - help with understanding rights and options
- Independent team to include members of the Truth Recovery Panel
- Legal right to access health records of family member (deceased)

The following quote reflects the deep frustration victims-survivors have with current practices:

“Victim and survivors should have an input to training of social workers to enable them to understand the importance these records are and the detrimental effect withholding information can have.”

One-stop shop

Nineteen respondents detailed the idea of a ‘one stop shop’ to be available for the digitising, holding and distribution of records. This facility should make the process as straightforward as possible, easy to understand and negotiate all records. This is very much in line with research already carried out by the Independent Panel and reinforces and highlights the urgency of the need for legislation to change the current process. The link to the ‘Permanent Archive Consultation – results summary report’ can be found [here](#).

The quotes from respondents supporting this approach can be found below:

“A central repository is definitely needed. A one stop shop with professional advocacy to help navigate this complex process. In my experience there is a raft of records sometimes you don’t know where to look.”

“Centralised system where I can go and, with help and support, access all my records. A one stop shop.”

"I think that there should be a one stop shop for victims and survivors to call upon, and then work should be done on behalf of the Victim-Survivor."

"All records relating to individuals should be properly filed, held and stored. Information about a child's adoption should be protected and easily accessed by the adoptee when requested."

"To have a named department to access records on my behalf, and to be support while reading and understanding of the documents."

"Would be good to have a central place to access records or someone to help in the search process."

"Quicker access and one central place to go to help co-ordinate access e.g. a key worker to co-ordinate and monitor."

"Good support needed (with no obligation to use available support) before and after receiving records."

"Have survivors more involved in process."

"There should be total cooperation between AAI/TUSLA and the record holders and one access point to search all records."

"Centralised one stop shop with calming environment."

"All records should be freely available to victims and survivors. They should all be housed/located at a central register rather than located in different places to help with access."

Timeframes honoured

The issue of the importance of receiving records in a timely manner was raised by 12 respondents. The issues raised included the need on the part of respondents for tenacity and emotional investment:

"It's a difficult time for the person finding out they're adopted but the information is there just a bit long in getting it all gathered up."

"Accessing records has been arduous and complicated. I think that anyone unaccustomed to government bureaucracy will be put off by the process. The lengthy

delays have meant that I did not know who my birth father was until a year after he had passed away.”

“My brother applied in early January 2025 and is still waiting and no one has contacted him to update him on when he will receive them.”

“As one of 4 Adopted brothers, we constantly have to follow up to ascertain if there is progress. The journey is very slow!!”

“I would like to see Health Trusts given a limited time frame in which to provide access to records for victims and survivors.”

“My experience has been mostly positive apart from how long it's taking the Health Trust.”

Positive experiences

Again, some respondents took this opportunity to relay their positive experiences in their journey with the truth recovery process. Although in the minority, it is still worth recording that 7 respondents recorded positive experiences with various aspects of the truth recovery process - all are recorded below.

Regarding the Independent Panel's work:

“I think the operation of the service was impeccable. I became aware of the service because a leaflet came through my door in early 2025. When I called, I had no idea of the help I would receive. No one I have spoken to is aware of the Truth Panel... so I guess my only comment would be to make it more widely known.”

Other agencies that also received positive feedback:

“Since my own experience was very positive with the General Registrar's office, the social worker and with another body whose name I forget, who provided me with information from Marianvale, Newry, I can only say that I hope other people can have the same experience.”

“Some NHS social workers appear to have taken on board the newer thinking about access to records, however I believe not all the other agencies are of similar mindset.”

“I'm not sure as when I decided to try and look for records everything seemed to go fairly smoothly.”

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the survey, we propose a number of recommendations below.

A new era of transparency needs to emerge, one that places the needs of victims-survivors at the centre of how agencies manage and disclose records relating to those affected by historical institutions. The current system for accessing records has not served victims-survivors well. Access to records is a fundamental form of redress.

To enable this new era to emerge we recommend that The Executive Office actively supports and drives forward the following initiatives:

- The urgent drafting and implementation of legislation to establish an independent archive for victims-survivors to access their own records and their family members' records relating to historical institutions and individuals affected by them. This is detailed in the "Permanent Archive Consultation" carried out by the independent panel in May 2025:
 - i. The archive should centralise all relevant records, including adoption and medical records.
 - ii. Legislation must clarify access rights for individuals and researchers.
 - iii. The archive should be established within PRONI and managed by a diverse Executive Council, including direct representation for victims-survivors in the management of the archive.
 - iv. Trauma-informed practices should guide all operations and decisions related to the archive.
 - v. Public ownership of records is essential, with controlled access to personal information.
- Plans should be developed in advance with the appropriate Departments, to enable the smooth transition of records, and the design of necessary support structures for the establishment of recommended mechanisms that will be brought about, through legislation to create a centralised permanent archive.
- Whilst the legislation is being developed, the Executive Office should advise and oversee the development and implementation of policies in trauma informed practice

by state agencies, institutions and post adoption services, specifically related to those who have been impacted by historical institutions under investigation by the Public Inquiry.

- The **immediate** establishment of a central computerised index of all Northern Ireland adoption and care records to ease access to records in advance of the establishment of the permanent public archive.
- The principle that victims-survivors of historical institutions and their families should have access to their records which is not arbitrated by the agencies who have impacted on their lives needs to be embedded in current and future practice.
- Funding support should be mainstreamed through government for advocacy and support services to proactively support those seeking access to their own and their family members' records.
- A mainstreamed wrap-around service should be made available incorporating trauma informed practice to those seeking access to records and when they have obtained records, with follow-up and aftercare provided.
- Available support and guidance should be signposted and embedded in agencies and government departments involved in this process including training of relevant staff. This would include signposting by these agencies to advocacy and support services and any future mechanisms developed, on first contact with a victim-survivor.
- The DoH should oversee the implementation of consistent approaches to access to records across health trusts both currently and when future mechanisms are developed.
- Guidance on accessing records in NI and training on using the guidance should be made available to key stakeholders and diaspora networks across other relevant jurisdictions, including England, Scotland and Wales.
- The means-tested criteria for accessing legal aid and the Advice and Assistance scheme should be revised to ensure that individuals seeking access to records from historical institutions under investigation in the Truth Recovery Process are provided with free legal advice and support, particularly in relation to court documentation.
- Advocacy agencies should actively monitor the timelines set by current legislation for agencies and organisations to provide victims-survivors and their families with access to their records. If these timelines are not honoured, the Information Commissioner needs to be alerted and action taken against those agencies who do not comply.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the victims and survivors who responded to our survey and gave so generously of their time detailing for us their lived experiences of this difficult and challenging process. We hope that this report goes some way to acknowledge your tenacity and resilience in the face of many challenges, obstacles and heartbreaking experiences.