



Seeking the Truth

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The Independent Panel's Communications & Engagement Working Group is pleased to share the latest edition of our Newsletter. As the Panel now turns its full attention to preparing our final report, this will be our final newsletter update.

On behalf of the Panel we would like to thank our readership since our first edition was published in Nov/Dec 2023. We hope you have found the newsletters informative and a valuable resource to keep up to date with the Panel's work throughout our tenure.

In this edition there is an important article from the Panel Co-Chairs which sets out the Panel's recent request to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an extension. In a spirit of openness and transparency, we emailed this letter to those registered for updates on the 12th September 2025. The article sets out the rationale for this request.

This edition also features the latest updates from the Panel's Working Groups, and some top-line analysis from recent consultation surveys on Giving Testimony and Access Records. Further analysis of both these surveys will be included in our final report.

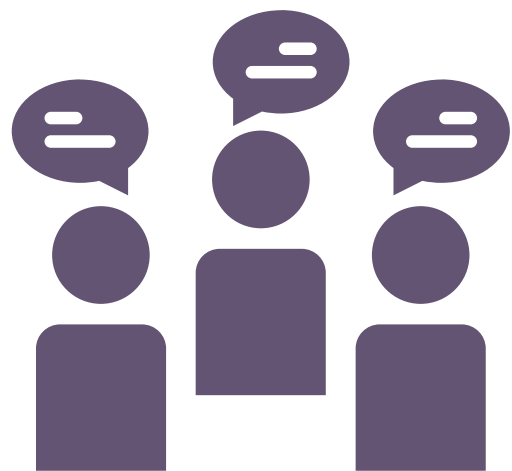
As the Communications & Engagement Working Group have managed the content of the newsletter, we thought it would be fitting that the final edition 'In The Spotlight' featured an interview with Paul McClarey, one of three victim-survivor representatives on the Panel, and Chair of the Communications & Engagement Working Group.

Further Extension of Panel's Timescale Granted

We wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 21 July to seek an extension of our term until 31 March 2026. The extension was approved on 5 September 2025.

We asked for more time because of two important developments that will help us create a stronger and more meaningful final report.

Firstly, we received an incredible response to our leafleting and social media campaign that took place in February and March 2025. Over 350 people got in touch, and 238 went on to share their testimony with us. We are truly grateful to everyone who took the time to speak with the Panel.



Preparing transcripts of these testimonies is a careful and respectful process. We have worked closely with each participating person to ensure they are fully comfortable and content with what is included in their agreed transcript. This takes time, but it is important to do it properly.

Secondly, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland recently received important records about some of the Institutions. These records are very significant and need to be digitised before we can analyse them. We've been trying to access these records for two years and it is important that we include an analysis of these in our report.



We are delighted with the success of these aspects of our work. To ensure the Panel's findings and recommendations to the forthcoming statutory Public Inquiry are fully informed and as detailed as possible, we need to carefully study both the testimonies and the archival records. This important work has been in progress for some time as we work towards the delivery of a comprehensive and robust report.

We understand that some of you may feel disappointed by the delay. However, we believe this extra time is critical to allow the Panel to deliver a more comprehensive report - one that truly honours the voices of victims and survivors and reflects the depth and importance of their experiences. The Panel's aim is to complete the report by the end of this calendar year. January and February will be spent checking the accuracy of the report and ensure that any legal issues are dealt with before preparation for publication in March. Thank you for your continued support and patience as we complete this vital work.

BBC (NI) Cover PRONI & Panel Records Project

On 31 August, the BBC website featured an extensive article about the work which the Panel has been conducting in conjunction with the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). That same evening, BBC Newsline broadcast a feature, which included interviews with Panel member Mark Farrell and PRONI archivist Joy Carey. BBC radio also carried an interview with Joy on the 'Good Morning Ulster' programme on Monday 1 September.

The website and the broadcasts explained the work which has gone into securing records from the various institutions, and conserving, cataloguing and digitising them. It was noted that over 5,500 records have been digitised, comprising of approx. 50,000 individual digital images. The article and the broadcasts also noted the importance of the proposed permanent archive in bringing clarity and consistency for those seeking their personal information.

The BBC News article can be accessed here: [Mother and baby home archives to become digitised - BBC News](#)

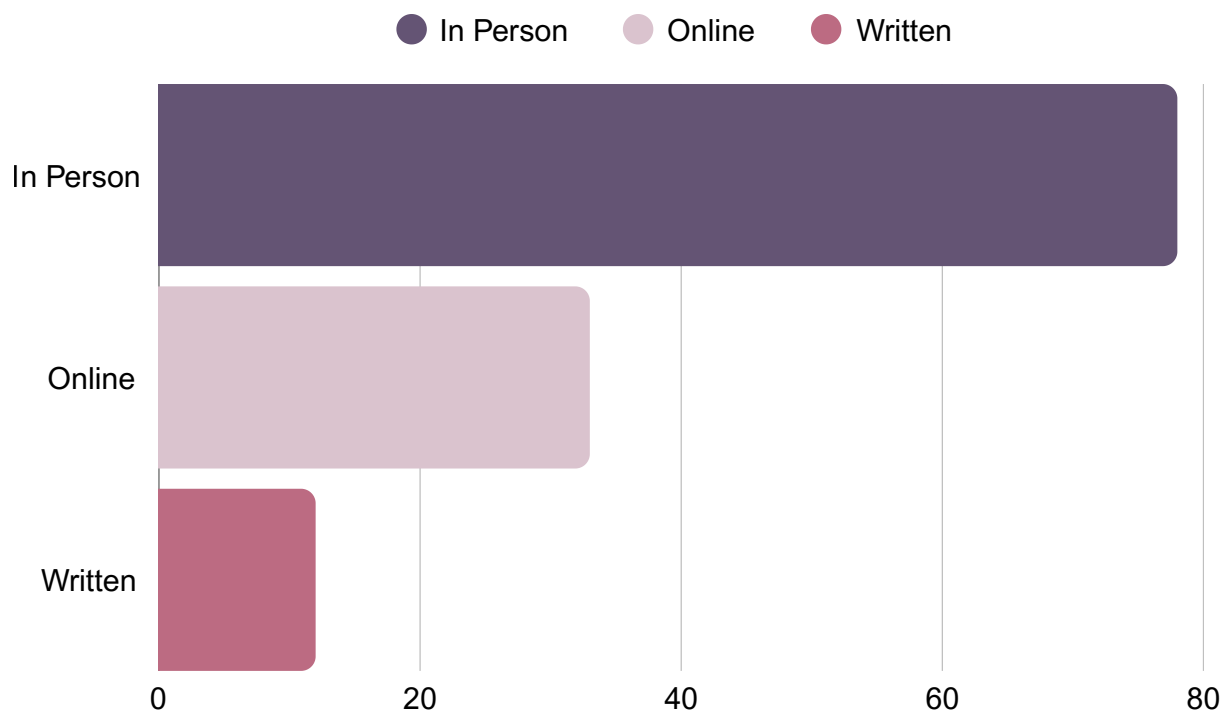


Mark Farrell, Independent Panel Archivist interviewed at the panel offices in Equality House Belfast by BBC NI journalist Bernie Allen.

Testimony Survey

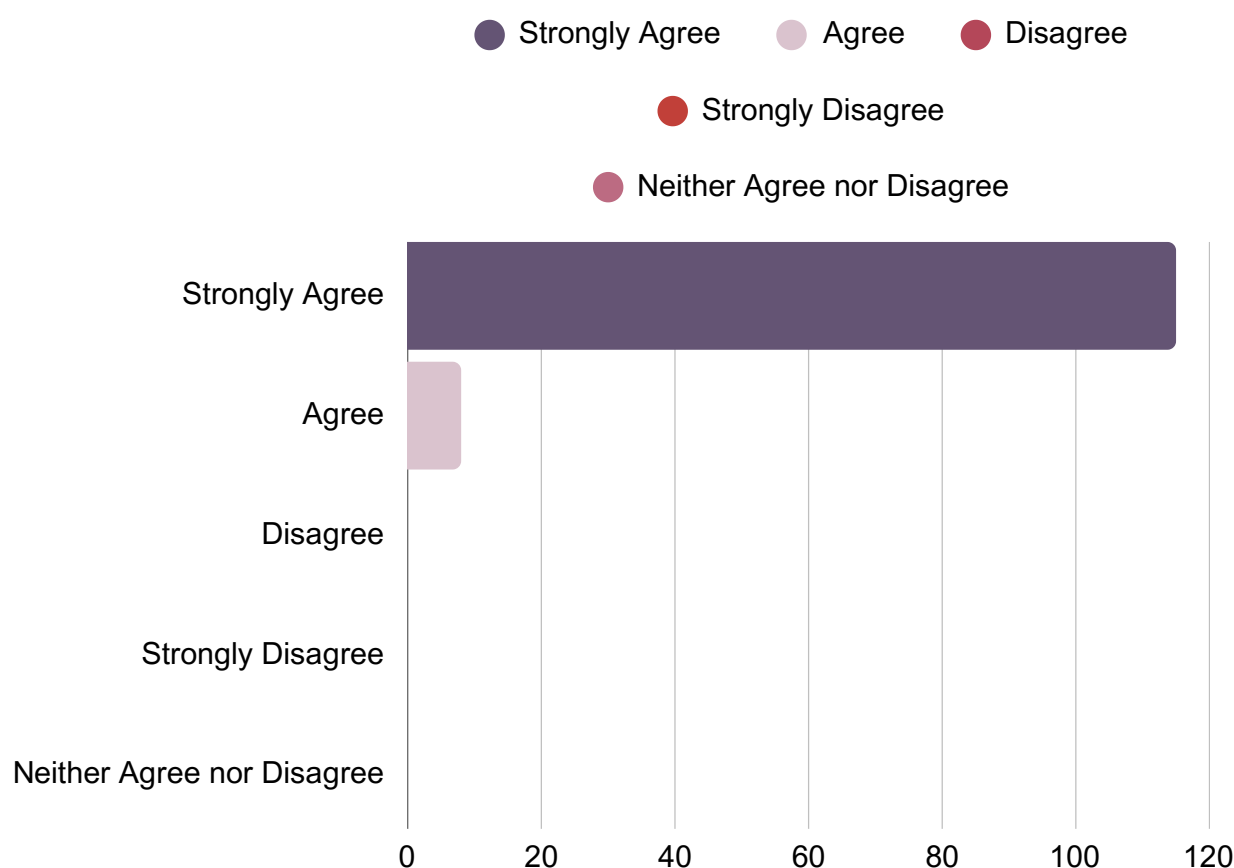
The Testimony Working Group conducted a survey with victim-survivors who had given testimony to the Panel. The survey ran from 8– 22 April 2025 and again from 2 - 16 September. In total, 123 individuals responded to the survey. Thank you to all of you who took part.

Question 1: How did you share your Testimony?



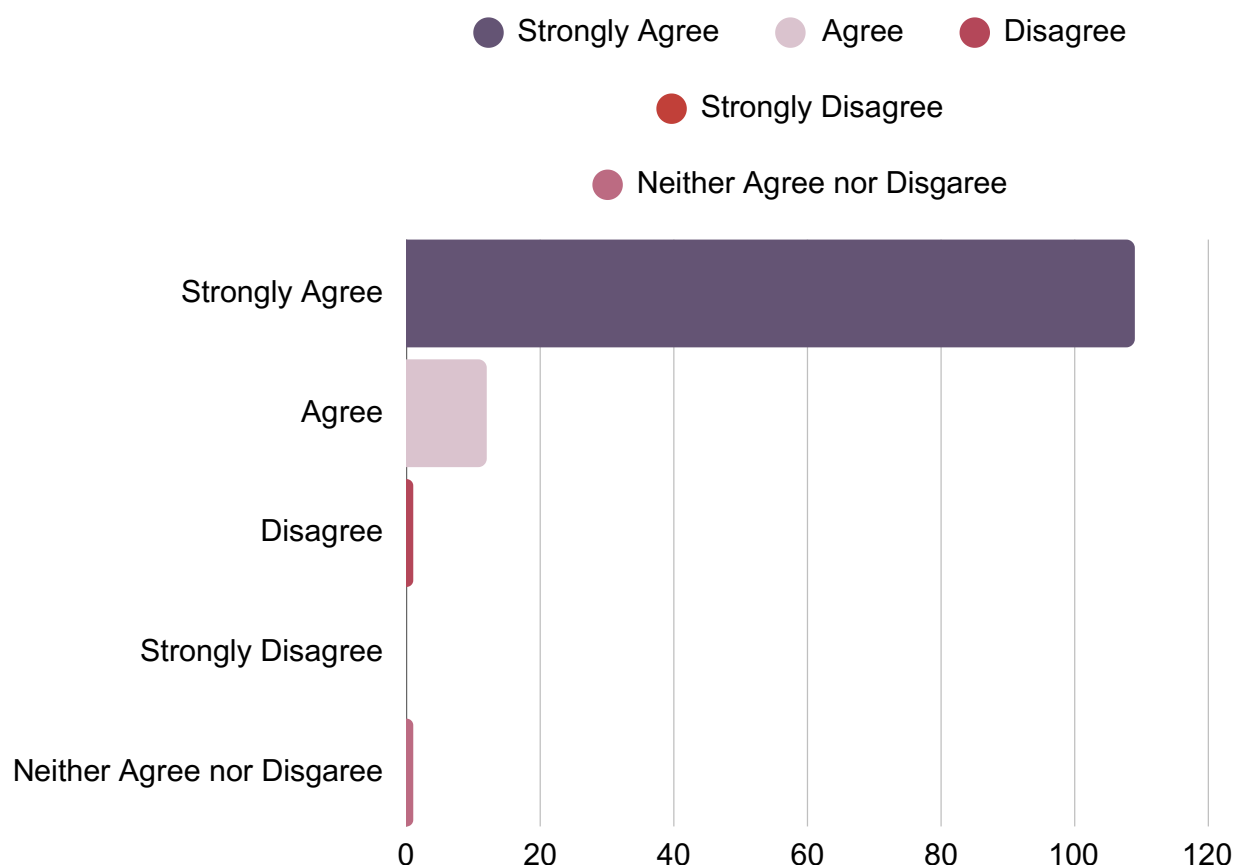
Victims-survivors had the opportunity to choose how they shared their experiences. Of the 123 individuals surveyed, 63% opted to provide their testimony in-person to the Panel's Testimony Team

Question 2: Did you feel you were treated with dignity and respect throughout your engagement with the Testimony Team?



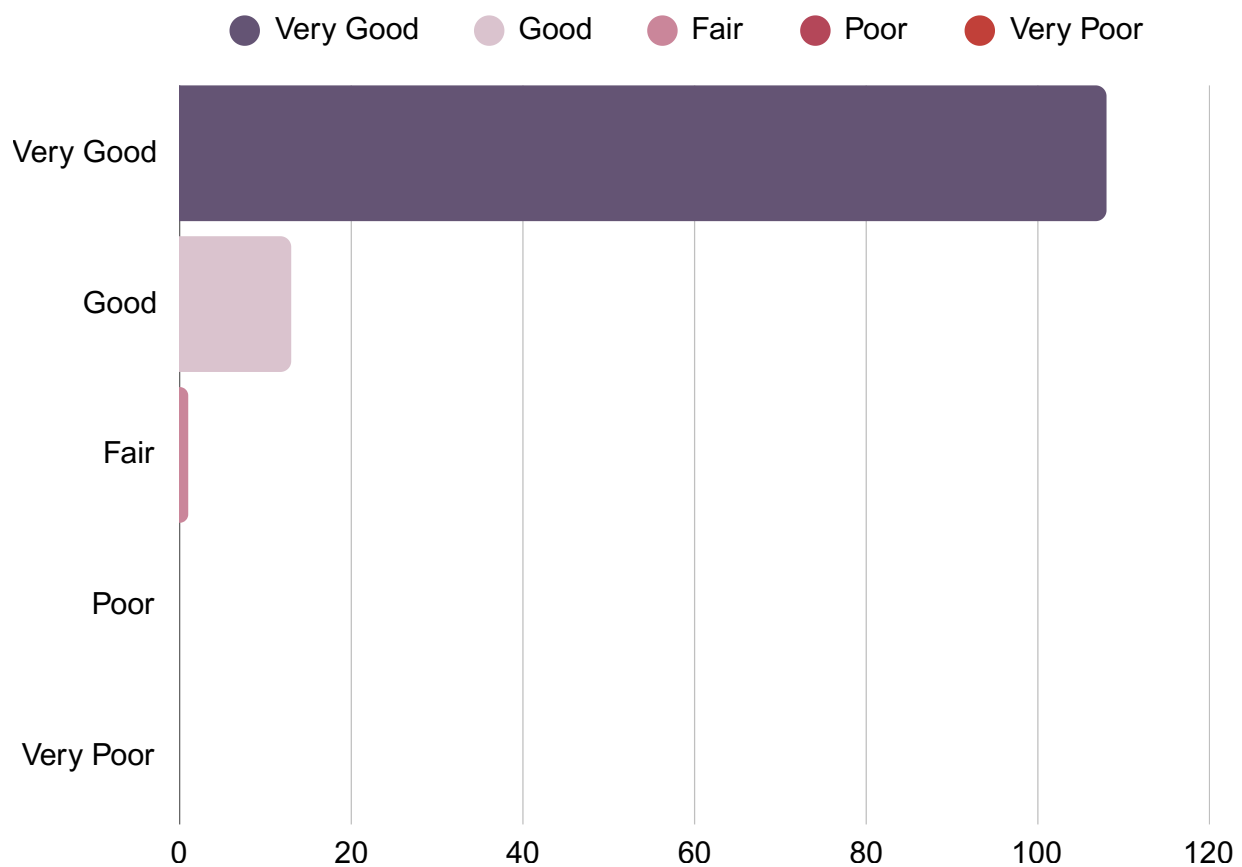
Of the 123 respondents, all stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they were treated with dignity and respect. 94% of the respondents strongly agreed.

Question 3: Did you feel safe and supported throughout your engagement with the Testimony Team?



121 respondents stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe and supported. 89% of the respondents strongly agreed. One respondent said they disagreed with the statement.

Question 4: What was your overall experience of your engagement with the Testimony Team?



Of the 123 respondents, 121 stated that the overall experience of their engagement with the Testimony Team was either good or very good. 88% of the respondents stated that their experience was very good. One respondent said that their experience was fair. One respondent did not answer this question.

Question 5: Is there anything further you would like to say in relation to your experience of sharing your testimony?

A range of statements from participants are shared below with their consent.

“It was a very calming experience with [testimony facilitator], she was so understanding and supportive.”

“I felt that whoever I spoke to listened with empathy.”

“All the people with whom I have had contact have been courteous and helpful. They have listened and not judged, and when I needed it, they were willing to assist me.”

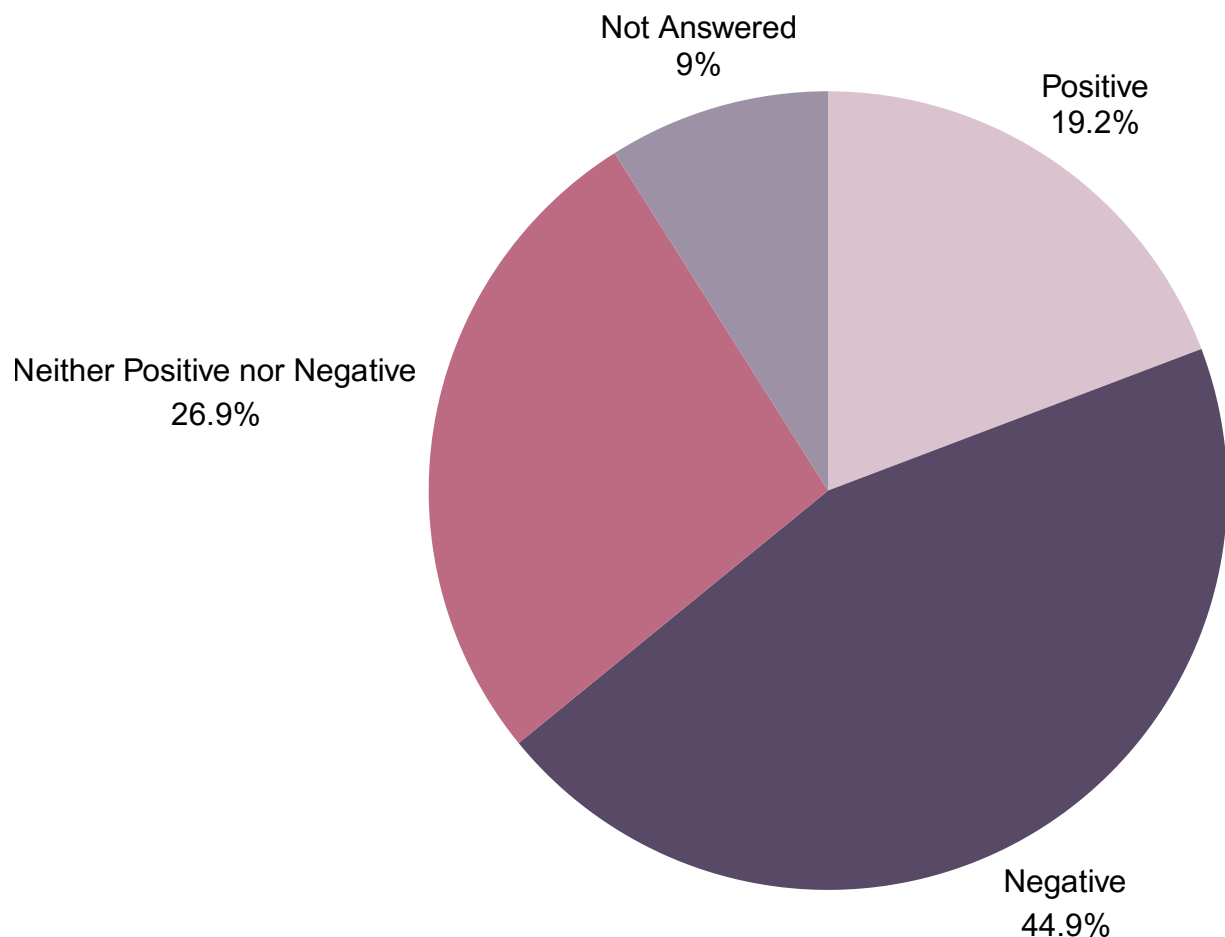
“Was able to feel validated as a human being for the first time. Means a lot.”

“I was treated very well and felt safe throughout the process.”

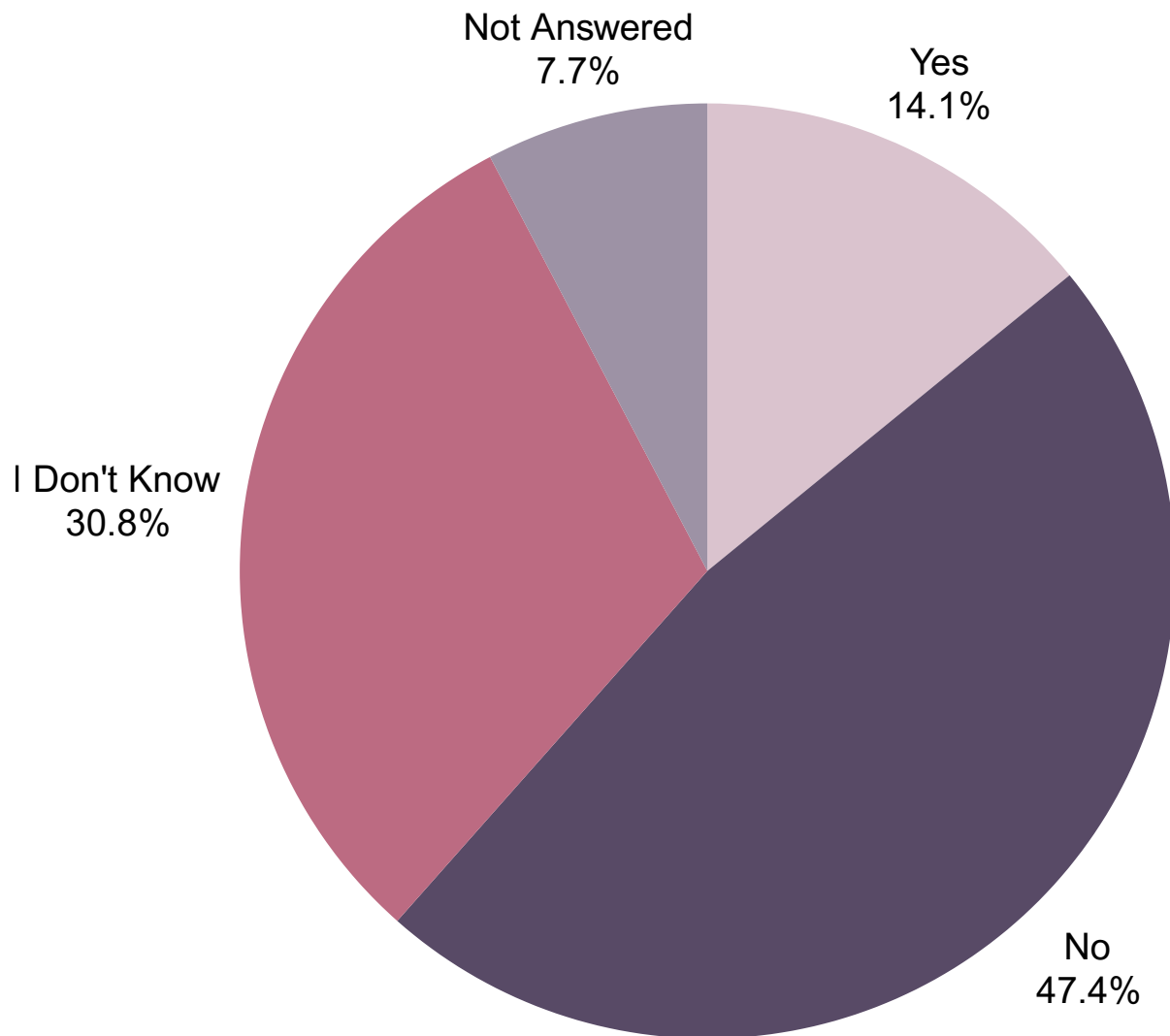
Access to Records Survey

The ARAGLS Working Group conducted a consultation survey with victim-survivors and family members from 8 May - 6 June 2025. In total, 78 individuals responded to the consultation. Thank you to everyone who took part. Further analysis of the survey results will be included in the Panel's final report, but we wanted to take this opportunity to share the top-line results with you.

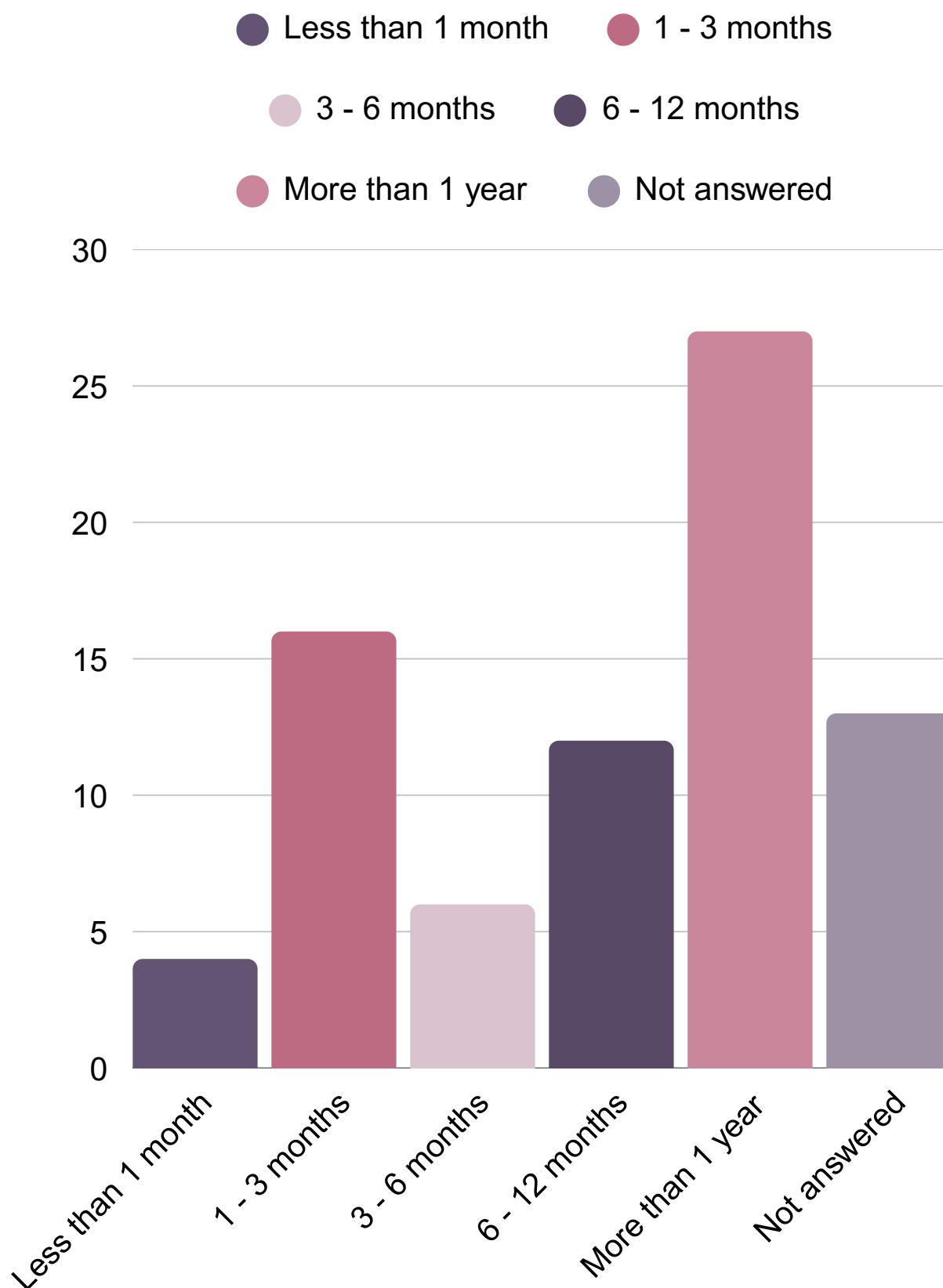
How has your experience of accessing records been?



Are you satisfied that you have been provided with all of the records to which you are entitled?



How much time passed between making your request and receiving your records?



How has looking for records affected you?

Below is a selection of comments from participants, who have given their consent for these to be shared.

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

“It’s left me feeling as though I don’t exist. This news has weighed heavily on me, leaving me feeling erased from an important part of my own history. It’s as though a vital piece of who I am has been lost, and I find that profoundly unsettling.”

“It was traumatic, but I had to learn what was said about me and found a lot of exaggeration and lies about me and others I could identify in the notes and documents produced.”

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

Have you used the Access to Records Guidance published by the IP?

30% said yes.

88% found it helpful.

What Should happen next?

Below is a selection of comments from participants, who have given their consent for these to be shared.

“Open the circle wider for relatives of deceased people directly involved.”

“Quicker access and one central place to go to help co-ordinate access e.g. a key worker to co-ordinate and monitor. New Truth Recovery guidelines very helpful as source of information and clearly defined sections.”

“To have a named department to access records on my behalf and to be supported while reading and understanding of the documents.”

“My experience has been mostly positive apart from how long it's taking the Health Trust. I would like to see Health Trusts given a limited time frame in which to provide access to records for victims and survivors.”

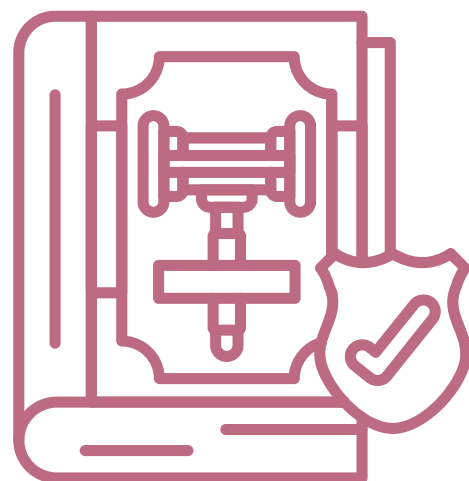
Working Group Updates

Records and Archives Working Group

Northern Ireland Courts NICTS

PRONI visited Omagh to view storage arrangements for adoption records held by the courts service. Records date from 1930s to present.

PRONI will make recommendations for any improvements which may be needed to secure the long-term integrity of records.



Health Trusts

PRONI have visited a storage facility which holds records of the Belfast Trust.

PRONI will make recommendations for any improvements which may be needed to secure the long-term integrity of records.

Other contacts

PRONI continues to liaise with a range of other organisations on behalf of the Panel, including:

- Barnardo's
- Down & Connor Diocesan Archive (re. additional St. Joseph's records).
- Local councils (requested to search systems for relevant records not yet with PRONI).



Ongoing work within PRONI



- Digitisation of Family Care Adoption Society (FCAS) records
- Research and extraction of information from FCAS records
- Ongoing research of local authority welfare records.

Final Report

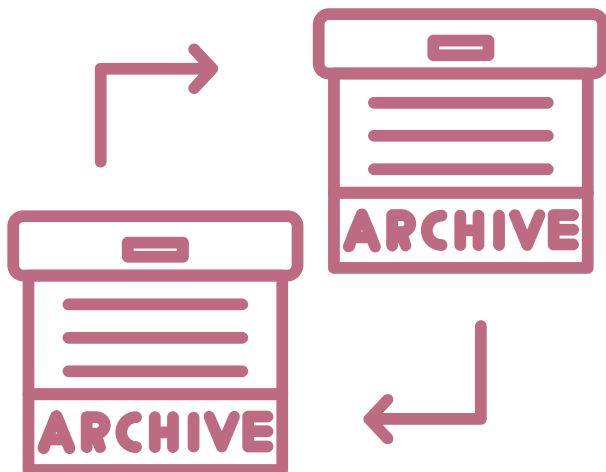
Co-Chair Professor Leanne McCormick, and researchers from PRONI, continue to analyse relevant records and draft institutional chapters for the final report.



Permanent Archive

The Working Group met with The Executive Office in July and August to discuss the Panel's recommendations and identify the next steps. A full evaluation will be included in the Panel's final report.

Once again thank you to all those who engaged in the Panel's Permanent Archive consultation, your views and ideas have helped shape our recommendations.



Testimony Gathering & Analysis Working Group

Testimony

The Working Group have completed taking testimonies and finalising transcripts.

Following the success of the Panel's leafleting and social media campaign that we deployed in February and March this year, over 350 people got in touch. The total number of testimonies given to the Panel was 238 new testimonies. These testimonies are in addition to those collected for the QUB/UU Report that was published in 2021.

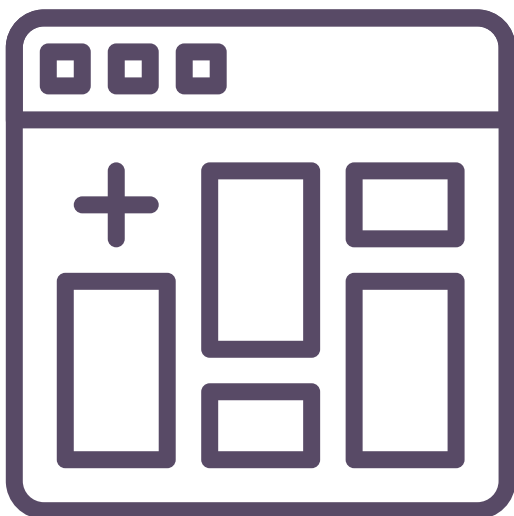


A team of 7 have been coding all the testimonies over the last number of months. The coding structure has been comprehensively developed with input from the entire Panel. This will allow for a full analysis of testimonies identifying various themes and sub themes, for inclusion in the final report.

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

Access to records guidance

The Working Group continue to develop comprehensive access to records guidance. Over the last few months, they have received legal advice on access to court records. Based on the advice, guidance on access to court adoption records held by County Courts and the Family Division of the High Court has been drafted.



Before the guidance can be published on the website, we propose to obtain templates for the necessary court applications from Counsel. We also plan to engage with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service about the possibility of a practice direction.

Communications & Engagement Working Group

Website Development and Legacy

The working group are currently planning the final phase of website development. Once this has been completed, the group will conduct an in-depth content audit of the Panel's website in advance of the website being transferred to PRONI, when we complete our work.



Final Report Design and Launch

The working group are in the process of leading on the design and publication of the final report. They are also working with the Panel's public relations and media partner, Brown O'Connor and our Secretariat to develop a communications plan for the launch of the final report.



Final Report – Working Group Chapter

The Working Group are currently evaluating the various communications and engagement activities the Panel undertook during its lifetime. This analysis of the various metrics will provide a full evaluation and the impact these activities had on our terms of reference.



Meet the Panel

Each Panel member brings their own unique skill set, experience, knowledge and expertise to the overall work of the Panel.

This edition features Paul McClarey.



Paul McClarey

Victim-Survivor Representative Panel Member

Why did you apply to be on the Panel?

When I heard about the Panel looking for 3 victim-survivor representatives I was delighted. **‘Walk in my shoes’** I am a firm believer that it’s impossible for those who do not share our lived experience to truly understand who we are and what we have been through. For me, it was fundamental that the Panel included victim-survivor representation and that this should not be a token appointment. **‘Nothing about us, without us’.**

I was approached by several victims-survivors asking me to put myself forward. This was truly humbling, and I was personally moved by their trust and confidence in me.

I came to the decision that being **'in the room'** gave me the best opportunity to advocate on behalf of others and ensure the broad spectrum of voices was being heard. I wanted to ensure that the voices of victims-survivors who were not actively involved in the current Truth Recovery process were being heard and that they had real agency in the Panel's work and deliberations.

I had to do some soul searching before applying. My primary concern was being able to give the Panel the time commitment I believe it needed, on top of my busy day job. I would never take on such an important role if I could not give it the full commitment it deserved. With the help of a supportive employer, I was able to make that commitment.

How does your experience and expertise add value to the work of the IP?

I have been a campaigner and advocate for several years and have been a member of the Consultative Forum since it started. Whilst the Forum has had its problems over recent years it does function as a microcosm and reflects a wide range of views. It is, however, quite small in its active attendance. For me, being a steering group member of one of the main support groups and working alongside other support groups, I have been privileged to have access to the wider community of victims-survivors, **The Silent Majority**.

By attending support group residentials, activist events and building friendships and as someone with lived experience,

I have always been deeply moved when I have spoken to others. I have been deeply privileged that many people have placed their confidence in me and trusted me enough to share their very personal lived experiences with me. This includes Children now Adults, Birth Mothers and Laundry Survivors. I have learned a lot from them all. With the breadth of knowledge I have gleaned from these conversations I believed I would be able to truly represent many different viewpoints.

I was also confident that the range of skills, experience and expertise that I had built up during my professional career would add value to the work of the Panel. This included communications and marketing, negotiating, planning, influencing and project management.

What advice would you give to victims-survivors starting the journey of applying for records?

First and foremost, **look after yourself**. I know from personal experience this is a frustrating experience and can cause huge emotional strain. It's a life-long journey, caused by our '**absence of self**', who we are, where we come from and why. For me personally, despite having many records it is never enough, we believe there is more hidden from us, it comes from a deep sense of mistrust in the institutions and state. For many of us whose mothers were deceased by the time we found out any information, in my personal journey, this continual pursuit of information is trying to answer the question I desperately wanted to ask my mother, 'did you love me, did you want to give me away?'.

The Access to Records Guidance that the Panel has published is invaluable. I would encourage everyone to use this, even if you have gathered records years ago, look at the guidance. Make new

applications under the Department of Health guidance which may give you more unredacted information from what you already have. Use the templates and appeals mechanisms that are recommended. I would have gained information a lot quicker if this resource had been available on my journey many years ago.

Keep Going. I know it's difficult but leave no stone unturned. I had a small number of institutional records and a redacted adoption file for many years, provided by Family Care Adoption Services. For over 30 years, I thought that was all that existed and for me many questions remained unanswered. Through peer support groups and friends, I was advised to make a Subject Access Request (SAR) to one of the health trusts to see if there was any information about my time-in-care. I received a large volume of pages, many redacted, but still providing me with additional information I needed to see. Latterly, I applied under the new Department of Health Guidance to have these records revisited under that guidance and many pages were unredacted. I must admit these were difficult to read and deal with, but I had the '**power and choice**' to access my personal records. Like many of you I cannot accept the judgmental comments from Social Workers who tell us 'This is very sensitive information and would be difficult for you to deal with'.

I've spoken to many adopted people who have located their adoption files but who had previously spent time in care or on multiple foster placements. They have never considered trying to locate care files from the relevant Health Trusts. Knowing that other information may exist and where it potentially exists and importantly how to request it, is a real step forward.

There are now advocacy and support workers available from Adopt NI and Wave. I encourage you to use their services to access records on your behalf if you feel you need that support.

Lastly and again, **look after yourself.**

What has your experience of being on the IP been like so far?

My experience so far has been one of mixed emotions. At times I've felt incredibly proud of the progress we have made, especially in terms of the number of institutional records which have been secured and the large number of individuals who have come forward to share their testimony with the Panel.

At times it has been frustrating working within the protocols of the Civil Service. Processes can be slow and risk averse and I have found that difficult personally.

Working alongside a diverse group of panel members has been a rewarding experience. I have learnt so much from them, debating issues and making decisions and it has been interesting listening to other perspectives.

I have been particularly proud to act as chair of the Communications and Engagement Working Group. It has been a privilege to lead that group and publish regular updates through our newsletter and produce a website and engaging social media channels. The delivery of a leaflet to every household across the North / Northern Ireland in February / March this year was a personal highlight for me and there is no doubt that it significantly impacted on the numbers coming forward to give testimony. Whilst not the primary objective of the leaflet it also acted as a catalyst to bring victim-survivors into the overall process. As a victim-survivor who has long been concerned about the small numbers of

participants I welcome that also.

I have been encouraged that a large number of victim-survivors have been very supportive and have full confidence in the work of the Panel. A 'thank-you' and 'we appreciate the work you are doing on our behalf', keeps me motivated in the knowledge that we are doing important work on their behalf.

Why is it important to have the voice of VS heard in your work?

Having the lived experience and personal testimony of victims and survivors is vitally important. Institutional records, in my view, cannot convey the full extent of what really happened, and they offer a 'one sided' narrative. Without '**real voices**' the impacts of lived experience and life-long trauma would be missed.

Only by considering a breadth of testimonies will the Panel be able to fully understand the impacts and harms. It allows the Panel to carefully analyse the testimonies and establish themes, investigate systemic failings and identify human rights violations.

It gives those victims and survivors who participate in the process a greater sense of agency and for some this can be a cathartic process as well.

What value will the Panel's work bring to victims-survivors from your point of view?

The Panel's final report will include recommendations for the Public Inquiry, potentially highlighting further areas for investigation.

The work of the Panel in terms of its investigatory phase, through analysis of both institutional records and personal testimonies, will also give the inquiry a strong foundation as it sets its own terms of reference.

There is no doubt that the creation of the Panels Access to Records Guidance will be a valuable resource for victims and survivors in this complex and often frustrating journey. The Access to Records Consultation responses from victim-survivors have helped the Panel to understand the experiences that individuals have had. This has helped the Panel lobby relevant government departments and recommend improvements in this area.

By securing a large volume of institutional records and working alongside PRONI, the conservation, preservation and digitisation work ensures these records are now 'safe'. This is something that victim-survivors had huge concerns about previously given what has happened in other jurisdictions.

I am also delighted that victim-survivors were given the opportunity to have their voices heard through the consultation on the permanent archive that the Panel conducted. Their responses have shaped the recommendations that the Panel will make on a permanent archive. This is something that victims and survivors have long sought.

A '**one stop shop**' where all the records would be housed, alongside appropriate support structures.

Finally, I believe the Panel's website, which will also contain Testimonies from those who have given consent, along with the Panel's Final Report and Access to Records guidance will be a lasting legacy for other victims and survivors that may come forward in the future.

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

If you are aware of anyone who would like to receive updates about the work of the Independent Panel, please ask them to register their interest and be added to our mailing list by emailing:



secretariat@independentpanel.org.uk

Find us also on:

