

Written evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Committee for the Executive Office, on Clerical Child Abuse

Submitted in advance of the oral evidence session, Wednesday 11 March 2026

Our calls:

The research commissioned by the Executive Office should be published in full.

The research provides the most comprehensive picture ever produced of historical clerical child abuse in Northern Ireland. It should be published to validate the victims and survivors who contributed their experiences to the research, to contribute to public understanding of the issue, and to support public policy decision-making.

The six recommendations from the combined research reports should be implemented in full.

Together, the recommendations provide a mutual-supporting approach to ensure a) accountability for past wrong-doing and b) safeguarding to support non-repetition and the prevention of further harm.

The Executive Office should reinstate a clear process of structured engagement with the Reference Group

It is necessary that rights holders – victims and survivors – can participate in shaping decisions which affect their lives and about which they have direct lived experience.

Introduction

1. Amnesty International UK (AIUK) is a national section of a global movement of over seven million people who campaign for every person to enjoy all rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. We represent more than 670,000 supporters in the United Kingdom. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest, or religion.
2. AIUK is working to ensure a human rights compliant approach to the abuse of children in faith settings in Northern Ireland. AIUK has been represented on the Inter-Departmental Working Group (IDWG) on Historic Clerical Child Abuse (HCCA) since its establishment and have worked with departmental officials and a series of independent chairs through the multi-year process which has resulted in the report and recommendations received by TEO Ministers in July 2025.
3. Our work with victims and survivors of clerical child abuse and related matters in Northern Ireland dates to 2010 and contributed to the establishment of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

(HIAI)¹ and Redress Scheme, work on accountability for abuses in Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes and Workhouses² and the process leading to the current HCCA report.

4. AIUK provided a briefing on clerical child abuse to the then First Minister and deputy First Minister in 2013, which set out the case for a human rights response from the Executive, including an independent public inquiry.³
5. AIUK welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's scrutiny of the Executive Office response to this matter, and in particular the research and recommendations contained in a report to Ministers in 2025.

Context

6. The full scale and impact of clerical child abuse in Northern Ireland remains unknown. HCCA is the last of the three categories of abuse to be addressed by the Executive, following work on HIAI and Mother and Baby Homes, etc.
7. However, it has long been documented that church authorities across multiple denominations in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere have prioritised the protection of reputation over the protection of children⁴: 'the avoidance of scandal, the preservation of the reputation of individuals and of the Church... took precedence over the safety and welfare of children'⁵.
8. Research evidence shows that child abuse can have 'significant adverse long-term effects' on victims and survivors, and that 'more severe' child abuse can give rise to 'more adverse outcomes' in adulthood.⁶ These effects include problems in terms of adult physical and mental health, psychosocial adjustment, educational and occupational achievement, and alcohol and substance abuse.⁷ For adult victims and survivors of sexual abuse, acknowledgement and validation are 'essential components of healing', recovery and ongoing development.⁸
9. The lack of an appropriate response to clerical child abuse from the Executive to date has the potential to obstruct the healing processes of adult victims and survivors of this abuse.

¹ Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (2017). Available from: <https://www.hiainquiry.org>

² See: McCormick, L. et al. (2021). Mother and baby institutions and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922-1990. Available from: <https://www.healthni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mbhl-exec-summary.pdf>

³ Amnesty International UK, Briefing: clerical child abuse in Northern Ireland. The case for a human rights response by the Northern Ireland Executive, 2013.

⁴ P. Gilligan, 'Contrasting Narratives on Responses to Victims and Survivors of Clerical Abuse in England and Wales: Challenges to Catholic Church Discourse', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 21 (2012).

⁵ *Derry Journal*, 'Diocese 'disgraced' by church abuse', *Derry Journal*, 30 November 2011. The individual quoted is Monsignor Eamon Martin, the Diocesan Administrator for Derry, commenting on how church authorities responded to allegations of abuse detailed in the Derry diocesan review.

⁶ A. Carr, B. Dooley, M. Fitzpatrick, E. Flanagan, R. Flanagan-Howard, K. Tierney, M. White, M. Daly and J. Egan, 'Child abuse & neglect adult adjustment of survivors of institutional child abuse in Ireland', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34 (2010), p.478

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ P. Gilligan, 'Contrasting Narratives on Responses to Victims and Survivors of Clerical Abuse in England and Wales: Challenges to Catholic Church Discourse', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 21 (2012), p.424.

Clerical child abuse as a human rights violation

10. Defining clerical abuse in human rights terms is about understanding how those children who experienced sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment by individuals in faith-based settings, experienced treatment which equates to human rights violating behaviour.⁹
11. International and regional human rights treaties spell out the rights of victims of human rights abuses. The international human rights standards that would be engaged by any inquiry into this clerical abuse include provisions on the prohibition of torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.¹⁰
12. The Amnesty International Ireland report *In Plain Sight* affirms this point, by illustrating how the clerical sexual abuse documented in diocesan reports in the Republic of Ireland ‘can be categorised as torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment under human rights law’.¹¹ Under international human rights law, a state has obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights specified in those treaties to which it is a party. The relevant treaties for ensuring justice for victims of child abuse include:
 - European Convention on Human Rights, 1950 (UK ratification 1951);
 - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 (UK ratification: 1976);
 - United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984 (UK ratification: 1988); and,
 - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UK ratification: 1991).¹²
13. The Northern Ireland Executive is subject to the obligations set out in this legislation given the United Kingdom’s ratification of the treaties.¹³
14. Although clerical abuse in the community is perpetrated by private individuals, the state may be held to account.¹⁴ This is because, the state is accountable to respect, protect and fulfil human rights of everyone in its jurisdiction. This means that the state is required to take ‘positive action’ to protect persons from abuses inflicted by private individuals.¹⁵
15. Where there is a reasonable basis for supposing that serious violations have been perpetrated, including violations perpetrated by private actors, the state is required to investigate, identify liability and hold perpetrators to account. The purpose of the investigation should be to identify what happened and the context in which it happened.

⁹ Amnesty International Ireland and C. Holohan. *In Plain Sight: Responding to the Ferns, Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne Reports*. All: Dublin (2011), p.37.

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, ‘Response on the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill 2012’, NIHRC: Belfast (2012).

¹¹ AI Ireland and Holohan, op. cit., p.37

¹² NIHRC, op. cit.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ AI Ireland and Holohan, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.29.

16. But holding the perpetrators of child abuse to account within a human rights framework, in processes of justice, remedy and reparation, is also about ensuring that ‘systemic lessons are learned to reduce the likelihood of similar abuses in the future’.¹⁶
17. Regarding the right of an effective remedy in cases of abuses conducted by private actors, state responsibility is clear: the state is always directly responsible where an individual cannot exercise their right to a remedy for human rights abuses, whether those abuses originated by breach of state actors or private individuals.¹⁷

Background to the research

18. The HIAI was an independent inquiry into the abuse of children in residential institutions (other than schools) in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995.
19. Historical clerical abuse that did not take place in a residential setting fell outside its terms of reference.
20. In 2012, when the Executive established the HIAI, victims and survivors of clerical abuse in the community called for an additional inquiry into their own experiences of abuse.
21. One man, who as a minor was a victim of sexual abuse by a clergyman in County Fermanagh from 1968 to 1974, told Amnesty:
- ‘the [Executive’s] inquiry into institutional child abuse ... does nothing for me and the hundreds of other victims of clerical abuse who were molested in ...locations outside children’s institutions... Our abuse was no less and our call for justice is no less deserving of being heard. If the Northern Ireland Executive is committed to excluding clerical abuse victims from this inquiry, then they must now make a public commitment to establishing a separate inquiry into clerical sex abuse of children in this jurisdiction.
- ‘It is clear that not only did the church fail to protect children, but so did the State, which turned a blind eye to widespread and systemic child abuse over many decades. Only a proper public inquiry can establish the facts and ensure that this can never happen again.’¹⁸
22. The public position of Ministers in relation to abuse perpetrated by the clergy and members of religious bodies outside an institutional setting has been that:
- the issue of clerical abuse is no less important or emotive than institutional abuse and Ministers were mindful of the equally destructive impact it has had on many individuals; and

¹⁶ D. Wilson, ‘Delivering a Human Rights Compliant Inquiry for the Victims of Historical Child Abuse in Northern Ireland,’ in Amnesty International Northern Ireland, Conference Report, Time for Justice, Belfast (2010), p.8.

¹⁷ Al Ireland and Holohan, op. cit., p.84.

¹⁸ Amnesty International UK, ‘Northern Ireland: Amnesty and abuse victims call for clerical abuse inquiry’, 20 November 2012.

- following the HIAI, it would be for the Executive to consider how to deal with clerical child abuse that did not fall within the Inquiry's terms of reference.

23. In October 2016, the NI Executive agreed that a single Inter-departmental Working Group (IDWG), with an independent Chair, should be set up to review the evidence relating to Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Institutions and Workhouses and HCCA.

24. HCCA is the last of these matters to receive attention. The HCCA programme of work sought to understand the nature and prevalence of historical clerical child abuse and the impact on victims and survivors. The purpose was to support the IDWG to provide evidence-based recommendations to Ministers on any future action required, including any future action required for an effective investigation into HCCA and possible remedies for victims.

25. Three separate pieces of work were commissioned to contribute to this HCCA programme:

- a review of historical records. This included a review of relevant literature including reports from other similar relevant investigations into child abuse carried out in the UK, Ireland and other jurisdictions; identifying other records relating to historical clerical child abuse allegations; discussions with more than stakeholders including senior leaders from a range of faith organisations, criminal justice agencies, and social services; and a detailed online survey of faith organisations.
- a review of experience and expectations of victims and survivors. The aim of this research was to explore the nature of HCCA in NI and its impact on victims and survivors. It provides a narrative of how victims and survivors experienced the impact of the abuse as well as an analysis and reflection on cultures and systems implicated in how the abuse has happened. It was also designed to inform recommendations for any future action required for an effective investigation into HCCA and possible remedies for victims and survivors.
- a review of safeguarding policies and procedures to prevent clerical child abuse. This work reviews current safeguarding policies and practices across churches and faith-based groups, including support services for survivors, and assesses whether these policies effectively address past failures and current needs in safeguarding and support.

26. Collectively, the research reports amount to hundreds of pages of distilled learning and constitute the most comprehensive review of clerical abuse in NI ever conducted, documenting the pain inflicted, the ongoing impact, state and church responses, and current practices in safeguarding in faith-based organisations.

27. These research reports were summarised into a single report with key findings and recommendations and was provided to Ministers in July 2025.

Research recommendations

28. AIUK has requested in writing that TEO publish the research reports in full in order to assist Assembly and public scrutiny on this matter of public interest. While this has not yet happened, and we remain committed to the confidentiality of the process to date, it is necessary to provide the Committee with a gist of the recommendations.
29. The Historical Clerical Child Abuse Interdepartmental Working Group agreed recommendations following engagement between victims and survivors, the research teams, and officials.
30. Emerging from the three separate research strands was a clear requirement not to create or tolerate a hierarchy of victims and survivors of historical abuse. There should be parity between the victims and survivors of historical child abuse associated with faith organisations both inside and outside residential institutions.
31. Consequently, there was a strong consensus around the establishment of a statutory inquiry as a central plank of a human rights-based response to the research findings.
32. In summary, the recommendations are as follows:

33. An Executive priority with victims and survivors at the centre

The recommendations should be adopted as an Executive priority and adequately resourced to ensure timely delivery.

Victims and survivors must remain central to all future work. Open, trauma-informed dialogue should shape implementation, including the establishment of a survivor advisory and advocacy group to ensure lived experience informs delivery while minimising re-traumatisation.

34. Statutory public inquiry into child abuse in faith settings

The Executive should establish a statutory public inquiry to examine the extent and impact of child abuse in faith settings since 1945. The inquiry should identify systemic issues, recognise abuse as a human rights violation, and examine failures in reporting and responses by state bodies, criminal justice agencies, and faith organisations.

It should seek truth, justice, and accountability at individual, organisational, and state levels, and recommend future actions, including redress where systemic failures are found.

The inquiry must be properly resourced with clear Terms of Reference. It should investigate abuse linked to faith organisations in all relevant settings not previously examined, including schools and colleges. Drawing on best practice, it should adopt a modular approach to deliver outcomes within survivors' lifetimes. The chair must be independent, and preparatory work should begin once agreed.

35. Survivor support services

The Executive should establish immediate, adequately resourced dedicated support services for victims and survivors and their families. Services should provide trauma-informed care, counselling, mental health support, and advocacy.

36. Public conversation facilitated by a robust public awareness campaign

The Executive should promote constructive public discourse on child abuse in faith settings, improving public understanding of prevention, identification, reporting, and organisational responses.

A robust awareness campaign should highlight the lifelong impact of abuse and emphasise disclosure, transparency, and prevention over institutional reputation.

37. Structured engagement on safeguarding approaches

The Executive should resource urgent structured engagement among faith organisations, criminal justice agencies, social services, and other relevant bodies to share and implement best practice. This should address research findings and consider improvements in policy, training, practice, regulation, and legislation, including safeguarding guidance and the role of digital communication.

38. Structured collaboration across professionals involved across Historical Institutional Abuse, Mother & Baby Homes / Magdalene Laundries investigations and child abuse in faith settings

The Executive should lead structured collaboration across faith organisations, statutory agencies, academia, and the voluntary sector to share learning from related initiatives.

This should extend across Ireland and the UK, with appropriate resourcing and coordination to support victims and survivors consistently and effectively.

Conclusion

39. Victims and survivors of clerical child abuse in Northern Ireland have already waited too long for an appropriate response by the Executive. Since calls were first made some sixteen years ago for an inquiry and other measures to ensure accountability and non-repetition, more children have suffered sexual, physical and mental abuse in churches and other faith-based settings.
40. Victims and survivors, who courageously shared their stories of abuse with researchers appointed by the Executive, and others who participated in the IDWG Reference Group, are frustrated at the lack of apparent urgency and action from Ministers.
41. Recent revelations from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland show that clerical abuse and catastrophic safeguarding failures in faith settings are not historic issues but are very real current concerns that continue to put children at risk.
42. The report contains clear recommendations - agreed by all the victims, researchers and officials involved - including safeguarding measures and a public inquiry into failings by church and state. We must learn from past mistakes, or we will be doomed to repeat them.
43. We are asking the Executive Office to publish the research, act on the recommendations without delay and to work directly with victims and survivors on how they will be implemented.