

A Review of Child Safeguarding in the Catholic Church in Ireland

A Report of a Public Consultation with Survivors of Abuse

November 2024

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of a series of horizontal bars of varying lengths and heights, creating a stepped, staircase-like effect. The bars are colored in shades of blue and white.

A REVIEW OF CHILD SAFEGUARDING IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

BACKGROUND

In November 2021 RSM Ireland were commissioned to conduct a strategic review of the structures and services for child safeguarding across the Catholic Church's ministries and services in Ireland.

Whilst the Review was completely independent, oversight of the project was undertaken by a Project Steering Committee (PSC) consisting of clerical and lay representatives from the **Irish Episcopal Conference** (IEC) and the **Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland** (AMRI), the leadership bodies for the Catholic Church in Ireland (hereafter 'the Church') across the island.

CONTEXT

Public consciousness of the problem of child abuse has been growing in Ireland since the early 1980s and a series of high-profile cases reported in the media. In the 1990s Irish society became fully exposed to the phenomenon of the abuse of children by third parties, such as priests, religious and other clergy, who were in a position of trust and authority over them.

Initially, Church leaders completely failed to deal adequately with the abuse that was being disclosed. They often covered the abuse up, moving abusers to new parishes and communities, allowing them to abuse again and again. Additionally, their stance was to adopt an adversarial approach to survivors which was detrimental to any real progress being made.

CHURCH INQUIRIES

There have been a series of public inquiries about child abuse in the Church. These include:

- The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in 2000 (***The Ryan Report***)
- The Inquiry into the Allegations of Clerical Sexual Abuse in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ferns in 2005 (***The Ferns Report***)
- The Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin in 2009 (***The Murphy Report***)
- The Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne in 2010 (***The Cloyne Report***).

These inquiries investigated allegations of clerical abuse going back to the 1960s. They revealed a widely held view that the Catholic Church had an awareness of the problem before it entered the public domain. Since then, the Church has taken several steps to address the safeguarding of children.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

After reviewing the literature and examining lessons learned from other countries, we concluded that there are a number of issues which needed to be considered in the context of planning for a consultation initiative with survivors:

- The process needs to be as **open and transparent** as possible
- Consultation needs to be implemented across a range of media/channels so that it is as **inclusive** as possible
- Survivors require significant amounts of **support** as they engage with the process
- Aspects of the process need to be **open to the public**
- There needs to be an outcome. It should not just be a tick box exercise but rather provide demonstrable **evidence of improving and learning** by the Church.

As part of our consultation, we sought the views of those who had disclosed clerical or religious abuse in the last 20 years on two key questions:

- **How responsive is the Church to meeting the needs of survivors?**
- **How could Church structures be improved to build a better future?**

LAUNCHING THE CONSULTATION

This consultation with survivors of clerical and religious abuse took place across October and November 2023. The survey platform used was called SenseMaker and it was live for more than a month. The survey was specifically tailored to focus on survivors' perceptions of the Church's response to disclosures reported within the past 20 years.

The survey was promoted in a variety of ways – through press releases and on social media - and by the Catholic Communications Office. A dedicated email address was set up in RSM to respond to queries.

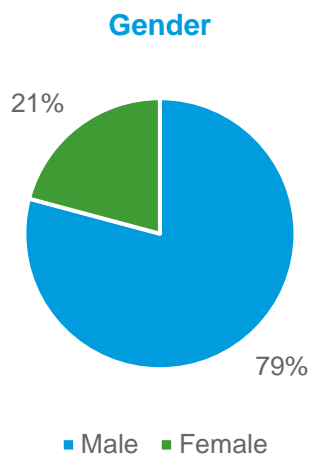
A specific page on the RSM website described the process. Informed consent was sought at the start of the survey and there were a number of Frequently Asked Questions and Sources of Support listed.

Data collected through SenseMaker can capture attitudinal information using dyads and triads (sliders and triangles where respondents move a mouse or slide a cursor to lodge their response as opposed to typing in answers). No question was mandatory so respondents could avoid answering any question they did not want to.

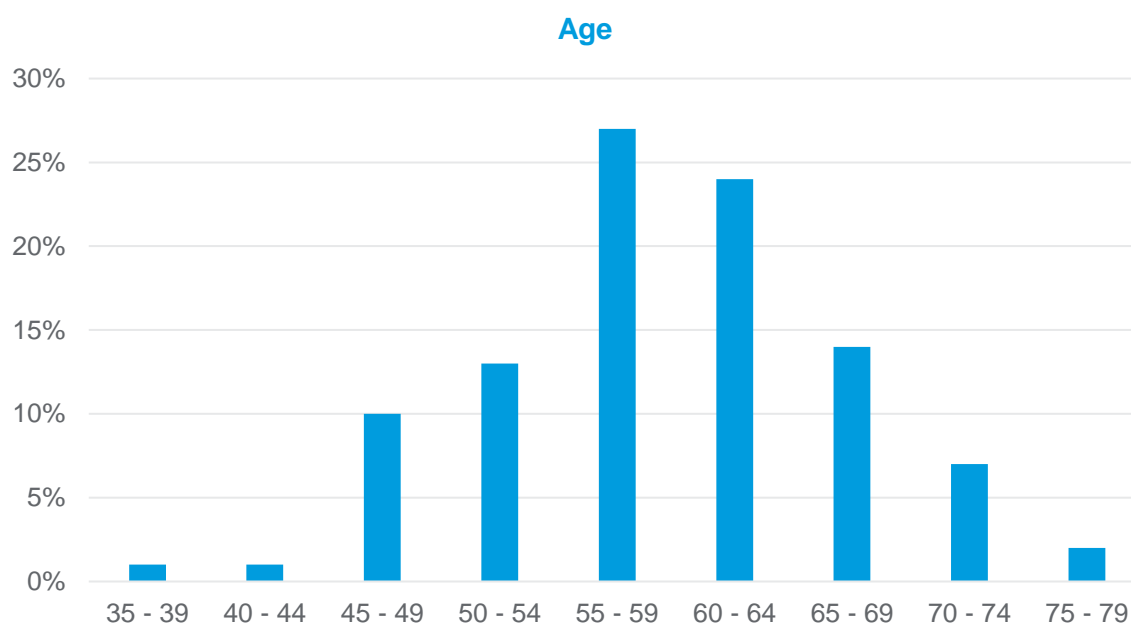
SenseMaker provides a framework for answering questions that is specifically devised to focus on personal experience so that people record **what matters to them**.

KEY FINDINGS

The total number of responses received was 96, 95 of which were completed online and 1 was submitted through the post. In terms of respondents, 79% (n=76) were male, while 21% (n=20) were female.



The age of the respondents followed a relatively normal distribution, skewed slightly to younger survivors, with a median age of 55 to 59 years of age. This may be explained by the recruitment mechanism of the survey. Whilst efforts were made to bring in older survivors, through the use of traditional media outlets, the vast majority of responses were received following posts on social media (Facebook) which were reshared by Church accounts. Nine respondents did not give their age.

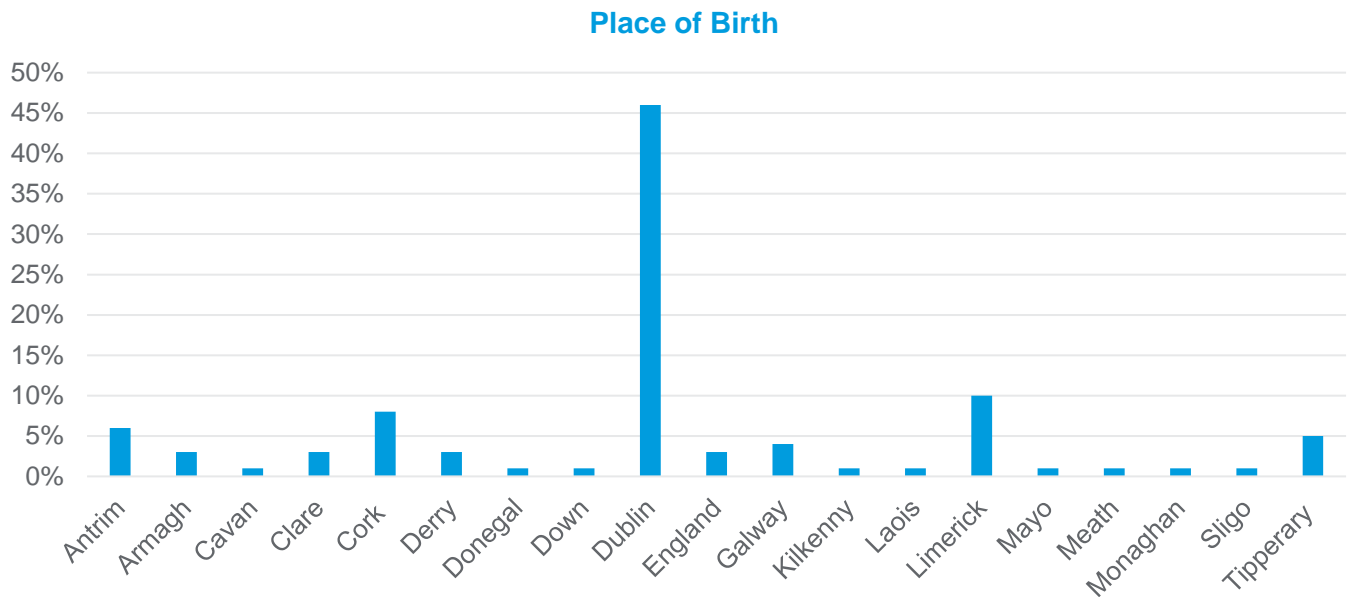


(N=87)



Place of Birth

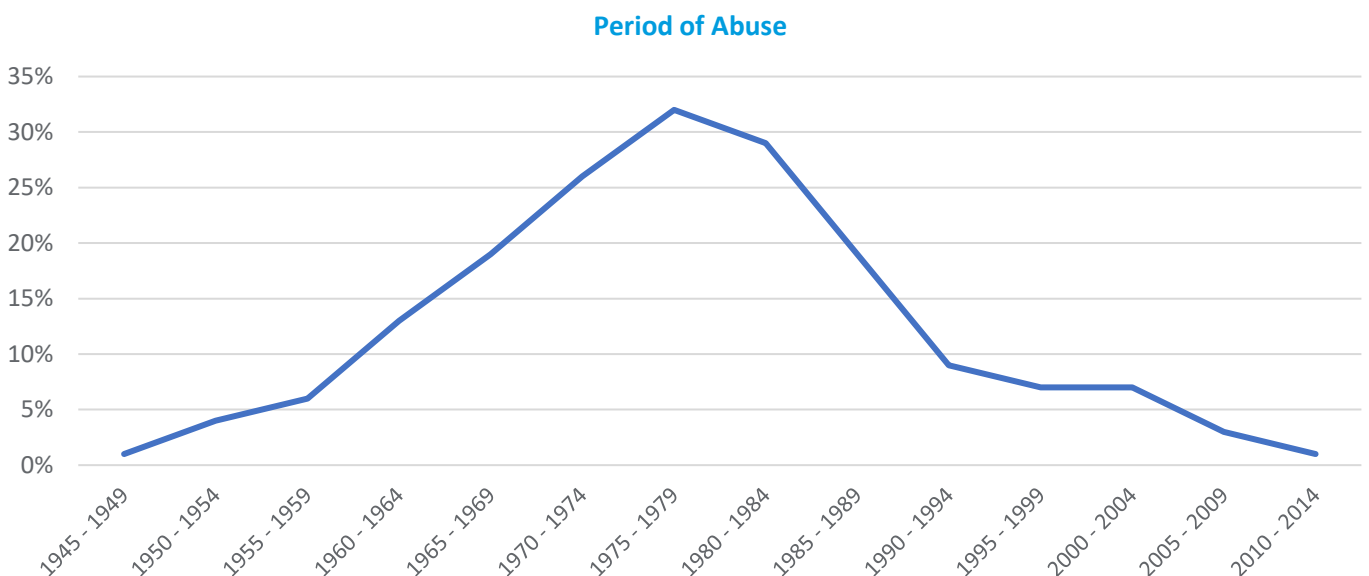
Amongst those who provided their county of birth, Dublin represented some 46% (n=37) of the responses, followed by Limerick with 10% of the responses.



(N=80)

Details of Abuse

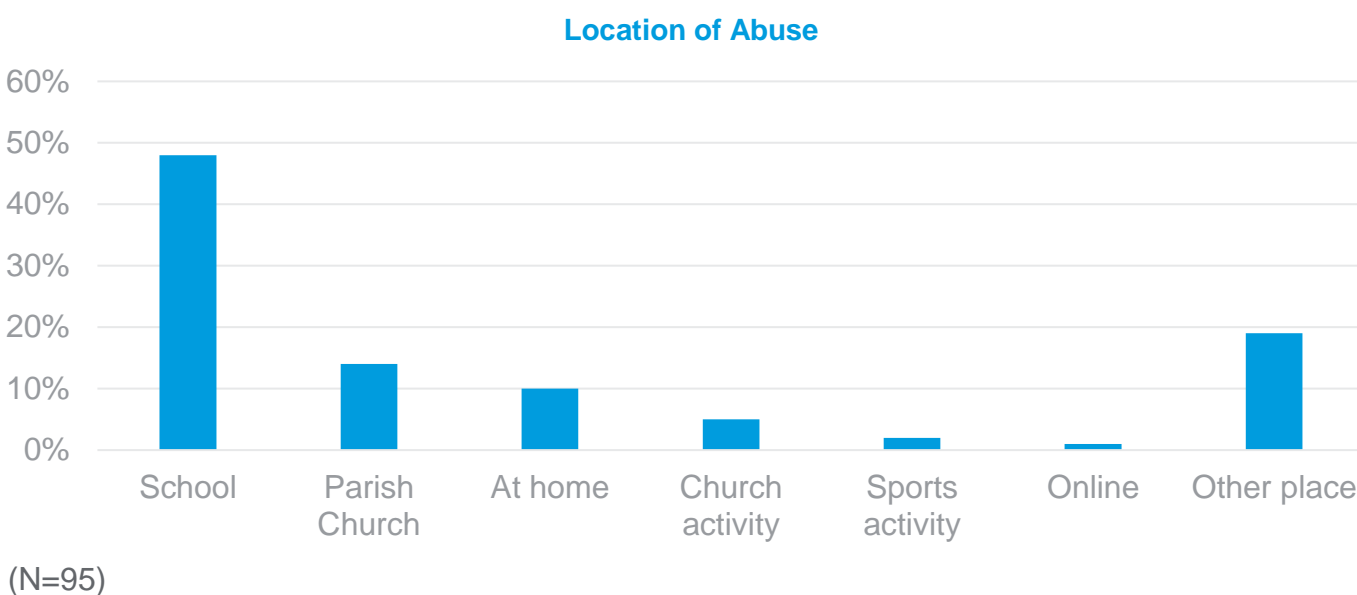
A number of questions were asked regarding the details of the abuse the survivors suffered. These primarily included fixed response questions, although a significant number of respondents chose to share details of their abuse in the open text questions. Most abuse suffered by respondents occurred from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, with some 87% (n=83) of respondents noting that some of their abuse occurred in this window. In all, the abuse suffered by respondents occurred at a significant level over a 60-year window, from 1950 to 2010.



(N=95)

Location of Abuse

Abuse occurred in a wide range of locations and circumstances. Some 48% (n=46) of respondents said the abuse occurred at a school, but within that significant variation existed. For some, it was a primary school setting, for others, a secondary school. Several people specified that it was an industrial school, rather than a traditional school run by a Religious Order. Other locations were varied. 14% of the respondents noted their abuse occurred in a Parish Church (n=13), 10% (n=10) said it happened at home, and 5% (n=5) said it happened at a Church activity. Two noted their abuse occurred at a sports activity, and just one said it occurred online. Some 19% of respondents noted it occurred in another place.



Details about Disclosure

This consultation was focused on people who had disclosed abuse in the last 20 or so years in line with the creation of the Church's safeguarding structures. Of the 96 responses overall, 81 people disclosed their abuse within the timeframe specified in the survey parameters. Several respondents noted they disclosed their abuse before the 2000s, with one noting it was in the 1960s, another two in the 1970s, two in the early 1990s and four in the late 1990s. For those who disclosed their abuse between 2000 – 2023, the trend is marked by two distinct phases. From 2000 to 2015, there was significant variability in the year-on-year number of disclosures made. From 2016 on, there have been more consistent levels of disclosures. This shift may reflect a change over time in the social terms with respect to making allegations against the Church, however, given the low sample size, it would be an over-interpretation of the data to assume peaks during this period follow any major public revelation or publication of findings into the Church. There were some responses that are worth mentioning; one individual noted his parents disclosed his abuse to the police in the 1990s, but he was only interviewed about his experience as an adult in 2015. Another individual noted that they have not yet made a formal disclosure.

Respondents told us that the main reasons for disclosing their abuse included the following:

- Stories in the media
- Feeling it was a moral duty to come forward
- Support from families
- Wanting to heal and move forward
- To get justice
- To hold abusers accountable
- To speak on behalf of others who could no longer share their experiences
- To resolve trauma

The most impactful factor was hearing media stories of abuse and disclosure, with some 52% (n=48) saying it affected their decision to disclose their abuse.

“Media coverage made me think he might still be abusing, and I had a duty to stop him.”

“I’m so impressed and encouraged by abuse survivors’ determination.”

“Reading the news brings back horrible memories.”

“It seems like every time I see a priest story .. It is just rampant. I can’t watch the news now and I have to filter this very carefully for my own sanity.”

Some 27% (n=25) of respondents said that their family was a factor in coming forward with their disclosures of abuse. Whilst some people found strength and support from their loved ones, others felt they would let their families down by coming forward, and so delayed their decision to do so. In addition, 35% of respondents (n=32) said they felt it was their moral duty to disclose their abuse. For some, aspects of their faith gave them the confidence to come forward.

“It is a matter of justice and truth, to expose evil and make perpetrators accountable.”

“I reported because my faith led me to believe I could trust the diocese.”

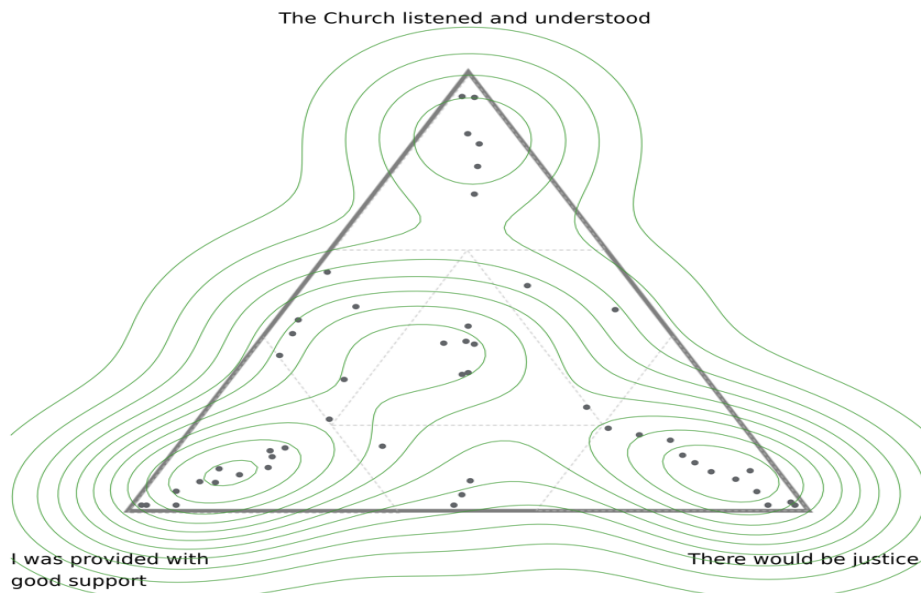
“I believe in forgiveness.”

“I understand my faith is important and choose to believe, irrespective of the [Church’s] cowardice and abuse of legal processes ... ”

“My religion is bigger than sins committed by the Church..”



Respondents were asked about their feelings towards the Church's response to their disclosure. One triad asked whether there were any positive elements to the Church's response. This question had the lowest response rate (n=52) suggesting that those who did not answer it, might have felt that none of the positive elements, namely that the Church listened and understood, that they were provided with support, and that there would be justice, applied to their situation.



However, some of open text responses highlighted how some members of the Church, particularly DLPs, tried to show compassion and kindness when survivors come forward:

“The Church responded to my complaint with a listening ear and were very open and supportive to me. They involved me in any piece of healing works which they carried out. I have always been made feel very welcome by the Bishop and Safeguarding Officer .”

“The Bishop, when I met him, was very apologetic. He offered me hope and support.”

“Firstly, disclosure was made to One in Four. Then I was referred to the designated person. I’ve had a couple of meetings with this person who is very good and has shown great empathy. I was referred on for counselling which has been helpful.”

“I met the Director for Safeguarding. I was treated with compassion and was offered and accepted counselling support. The offer of support was also offered to all members of my family. I didn’t feel though as I was talking to the “Church”.”

“The Safeguarding Lead contacted me promptly and with extraordinary sensitivity.”

“I thought they responded well. They appointed a lady that listened to my story and investigated what I said about the perpetrator ... I felt they acted responsibly.”

The majority of individuals said their experience of disclosure had the strongest impact on their feelings, as opposed to their relationships or identity.



Several individuals gave details about how their disclosures were first met with denials and doubt:

“Poorly, denial – felt like I was the one on trial, defensiveness and no real acknowledgement to this date of their actions”.

“They ... denied my allegations to the extent that they .. called them "vexatious" and implied that they were frivolous and opportunistic. They said that the rapes and sexual abuse I suffered did not happen.”

“They completely disbelieved me. I was made out to be a liar. Just looking for attention. I felt that it was all in my head. That it was impossible that this could have happened.”

“Denial, they didn't want to know.”

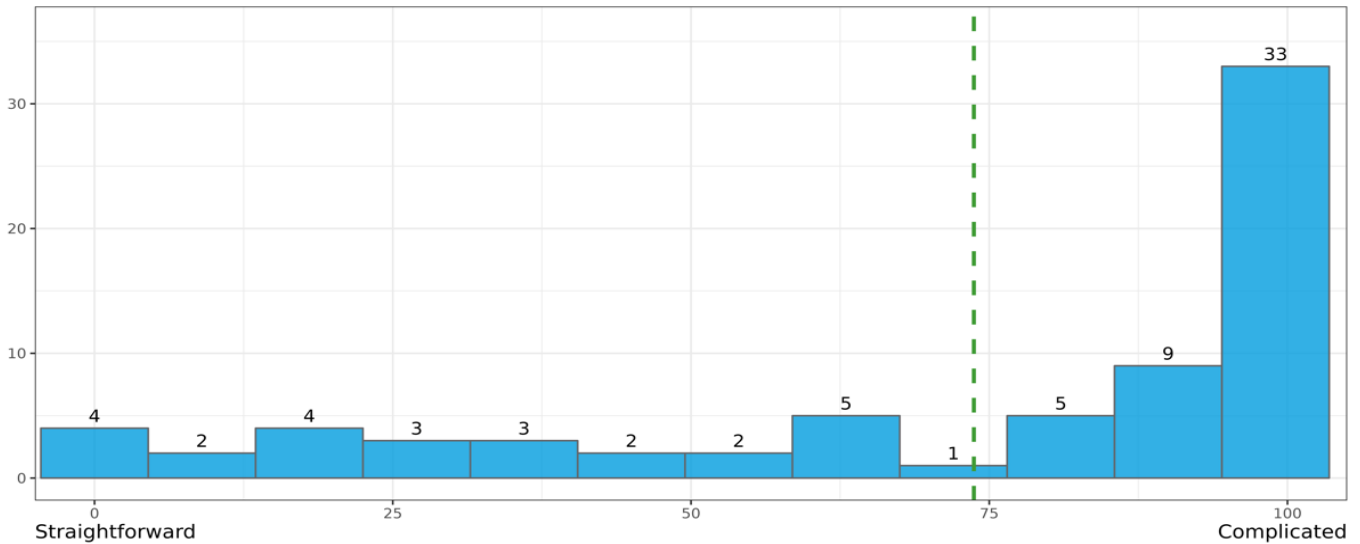
Other respondents stated that little, or nothing, happened following their disclosure of abuse. Some highlighted the difficulty in recalling specifics, which, they felt, contributed to the lack of action undertaken by the Church.

“I heard nothing from them. They say it's not their fault and the government also say it's not their fault.”

“Wanted names that I couldn't recall as the memories of the terror were repressed.”

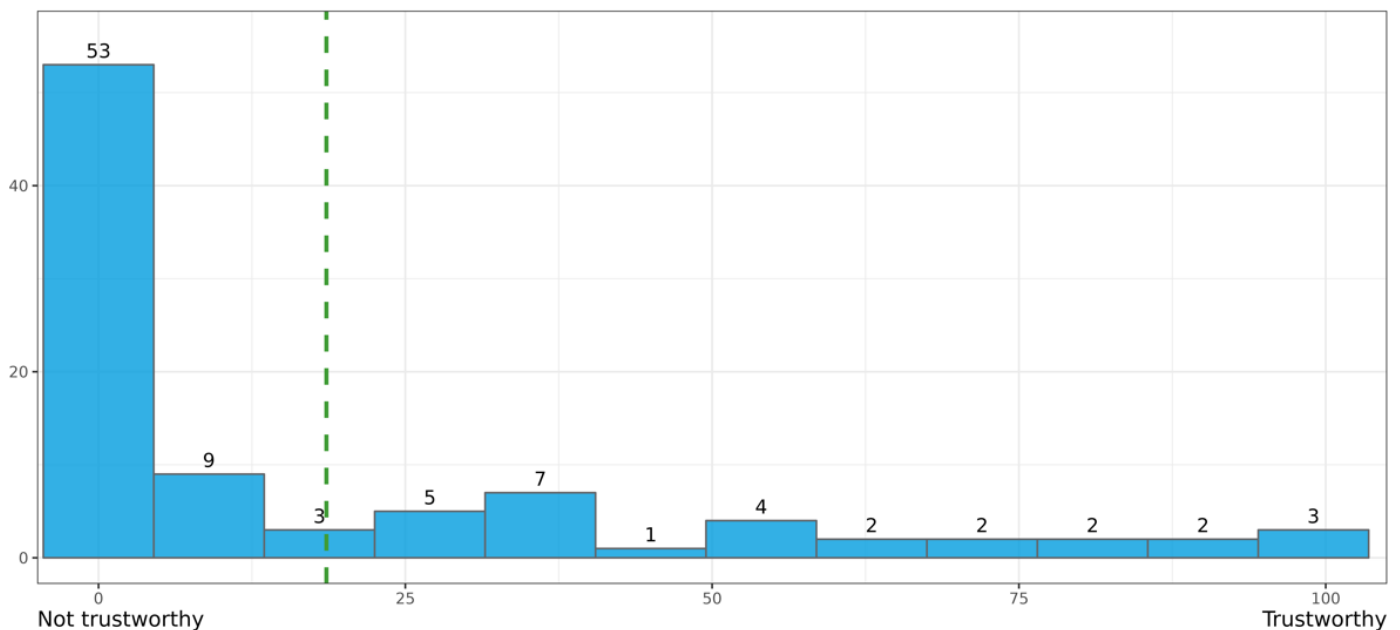
Ease of Disclosing Abuse

When respondents were asked about their experiences with the Church during and following their disclosure process, and these responses tended to be highly critical of the Church, its processes and its priorities. The ease of disclosing abuse to the Church was perceived to be complicated as opposed to straightforward.



(N=73)

Similarly, there were strong views in regard to the trustworthiness of the Church when dealing with and responding to allegations of abuse. Some 84% (n=78) believe the Church to be less, rather than more, trustworthy when responding to disclosures of abuse, whilst 57% (n=53) believe the Church to be not at all trustworthy.

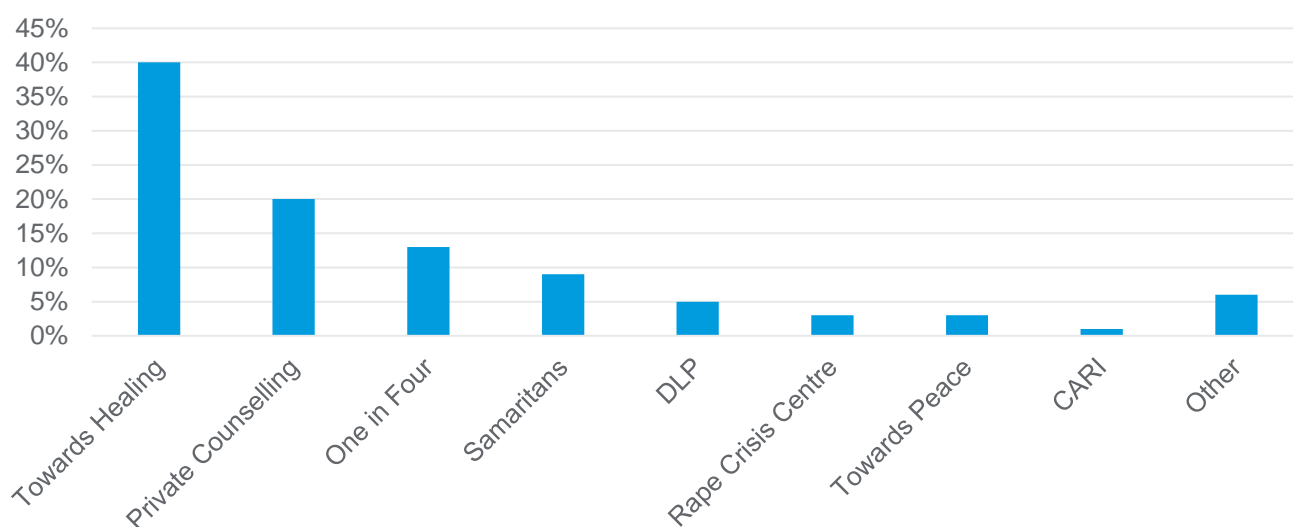


(N=93)

Support Services

We asked questions about the types and sources of supports accessed. Some 40% (n=38) used Towards Healing, 20% (n=19) accessed private counselling, 13% (n=12) accessed One-in-Four, and 9% (n=8) had contacted the Samaritans. Five percent or less accessed their DLP, the Rape Crisis Centre, Towards Peace and CARI. 6% (n=6) of respondents accessed other services, such as private spiritual directors, the National Counselling Service, Carecall, close friends and family, and Right of Place Second Chance.

Services Used by Survivors



(N=94)

Many respondents discussed their experiences with Church funded counselling services. While some of these were positive, for others, it was not sufficient. Most people seemed unaware that the Church funds Towards Healing.

“I started to receive counselling which was extremely helpful, and which opened other doors for therapy.”

“The response was very positive from Towards Healing.”

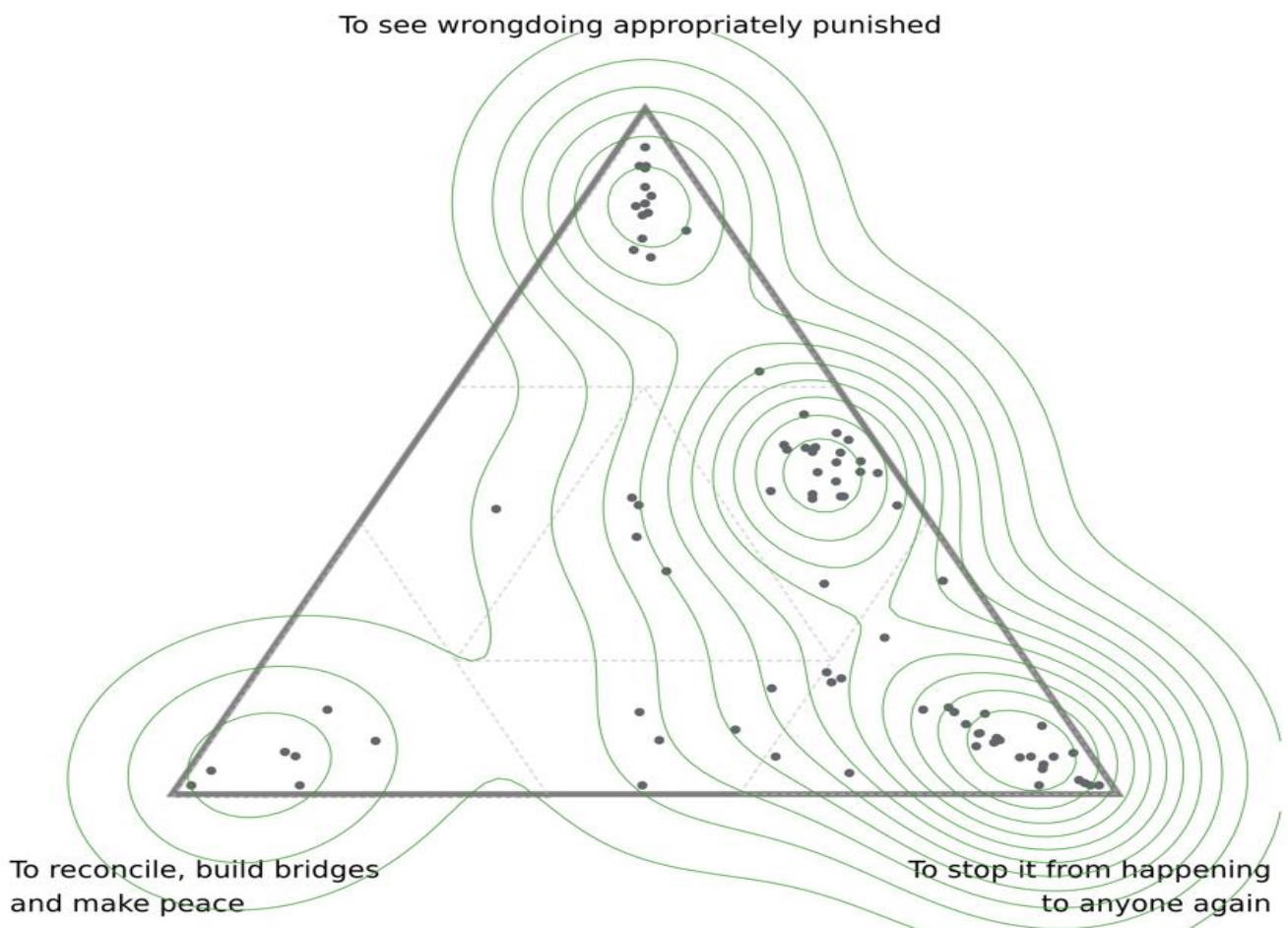
“Towards Healing was very understanding.”

“I did go to counselling with Towards Healing, but it went nowhere. Going around in circles, going over the same stuff, re-traumatising myself over and over again.”

“Towards Healing covered the cost of some counselling sessions [...] In my opinion, a few counselling sessions is a start but not enough.”

MOVING FORWARD

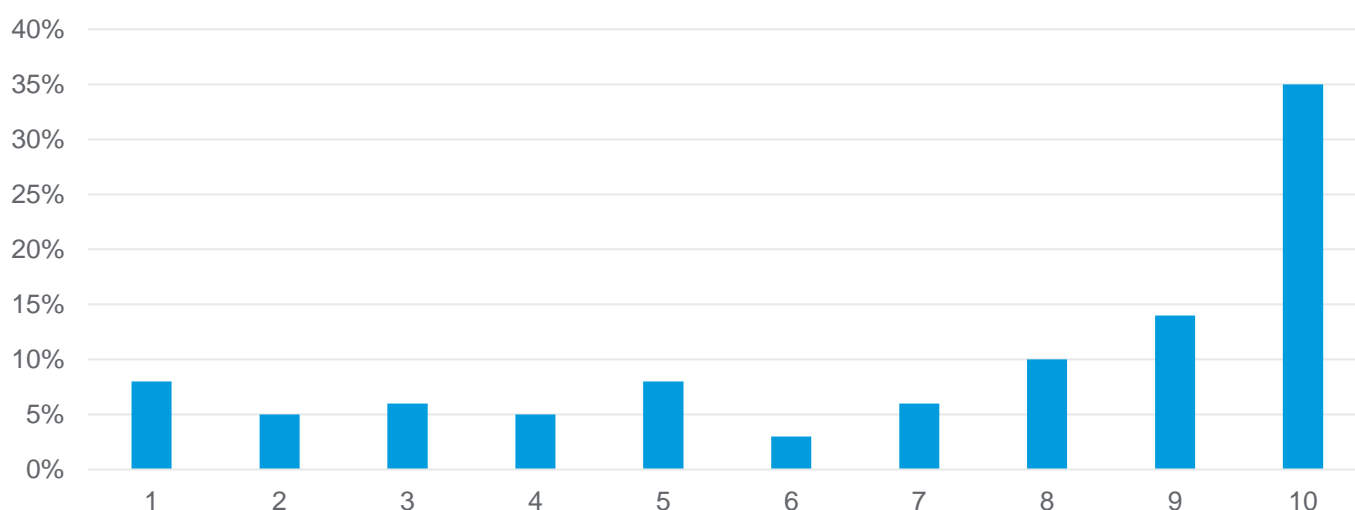
Respondents were asked about their views on Church policies in the future. These questions focused on priorities and specific actions the Church might take to move forward. Respondents were asked to compare their preference for three elements, namely, to see wrongdoing appropriately punished; to reconcile, build bridges and make peace; and to stop abuse from happening again. There was little appetite to reconcile, build bridges and make peace at the expense of appropriate punishment or the prevention of abuse occurring again. Rather, there was a slight preference to see abuse stopped over seeing wrongdoing appropriately punished.



OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE CHURCH

There was strong appetite amongst respondents to see survivor representation on Church Boards and Committees that have responsibility with respect to Child Safeguarding. Some 68% (n=58) of respondents were strongly in favour of such a measure.

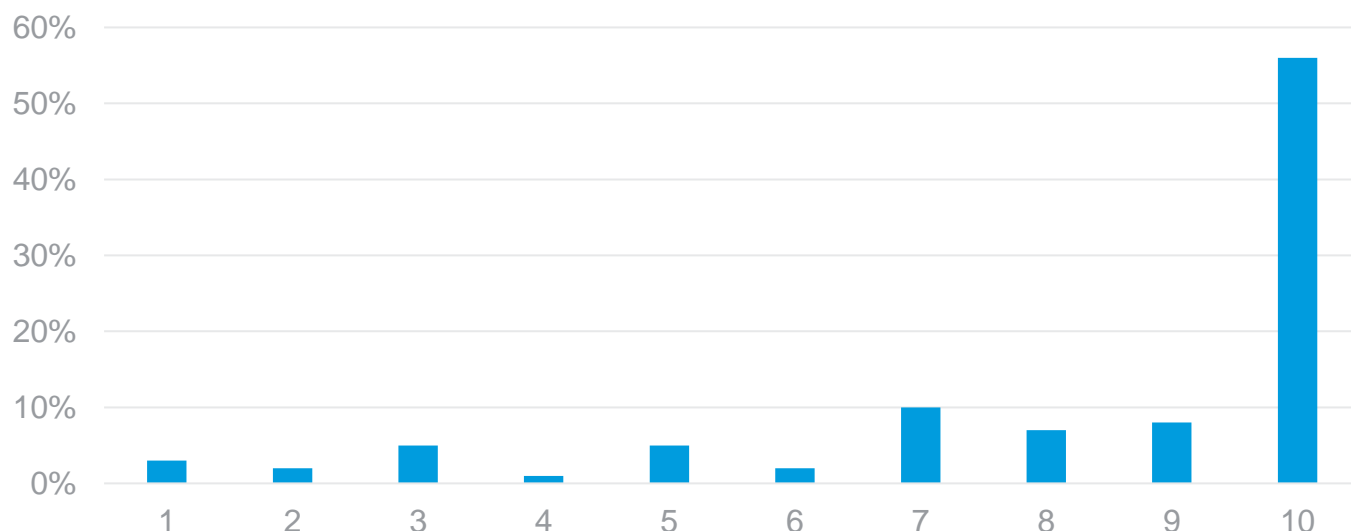
Views on Survivor Quota on Church Boards and Committees involved in Child Safeguarding



(N=86)

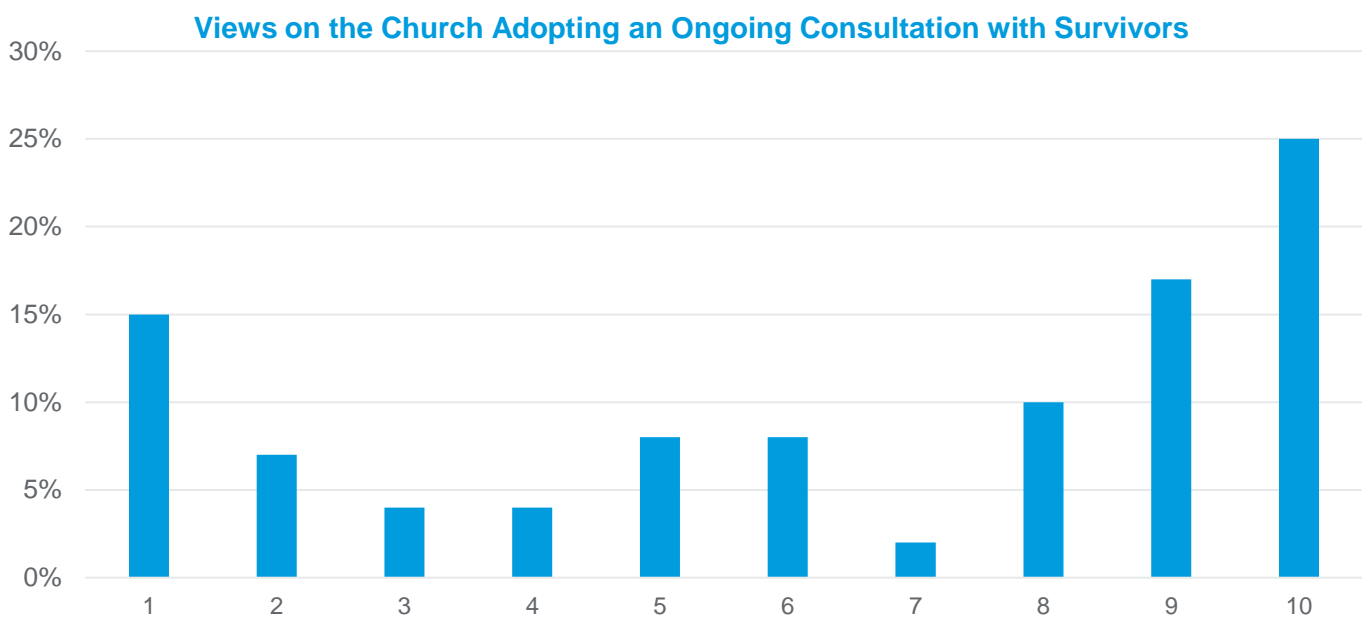
We also asked if there should be a unified approach to survivor compensation, such as a redress board. Again, the majority were in favour of such a scheme.

Views on a Unified Approach to Compensating Survivors



ONGOING SURVIVOR CONSULTATION

We also asked if there should be an ongoing consultation process established with survivors, such as a survivors' forum. Responses to this were slightly more polarised, with some 15% (n=13) respondents completely opposed to such a measure. However, overall, a comfortable majority, some 60% (n=53) were in favour of such a consultation. Representation on a board is of course a form of consultation; however, it is tangible, with meaningful associated responsibilities and a guarantee of influence. This compares to the less tangible general consultation. This is corroborated by responses within the open text responses received, in which scepticism was expressed at the survey, and whether it would result in any meaningful change.



(N=89)

Survey respondents provided detailed accounts of their frustrations and a myriad of other feelings, including what they hoped for the future. While some overall responses were positive, the majority were negative. Many people found the process of responding to the survey itself extremely difficult but there was a genuine desire to move forward.

“At this point I would like to tell you that writing all this is very painful for me. I am only doing this to help you see how difficult it is to make these disclosures and I hope that you will gain an insight into the lack of care I received as a Victim. Everybody, especially the Church, wants to "Move On".

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has described a consultation with survivors exploring their views on the Church's response to their disclosure of abuse. With almost 100 responses received we have a much better understanding of how respondents dealt with processes, feelings, care and support, and what could have been done differently.

The topics of focus, length and detail of the experiences shared with us varied widely, and we acknowledge that everyone's experience is unique.

Although some of the responses received were positive, the vast majority were negative. Survey respondents are generally more concerned with seeing wrongdoing appropriately punished and to stop it from happening again, than they are with reconciling or building bridges.

When asked to indicate how favourably they view ongoing survivor engagement, there is a strong desire to see survivor representation on Church Boards and Committees that relate to safeguarding, and some general form of ongoing survivor consultation. There was some evidence however, that people were feeling sceptical that this would ever happen. It is on that basis that we make the following recommendations.

1. The Church develops and adopts a **robust model of ongoing consultation with survivors**, such as an annual Survivors' Forum.
2. The Church introduces a **quota of survivors** across each of its relevant boards and committees involved in directing and operating the safeguarding activities of the Church.
3. The Church explores a **unified and efficient approach to compensating victims**, such as a Redress Board, to reduce the legal fees incurred by all parties and to accelerate the settlement process for survivors.
4. The Church **appoints a specific person as the Spokesperson for Safeguarding**, with a mandate to speak authoritatively on the issue, thereby addressing the perception that such a single voice is currently absent.
5. The Church funds a **new communications function** within the National Board, in order for the National Board to be able to respond appropriately to all matters pertaining to safeguarding, and to promote the variety of supports available to survivors, for both internal Church stakeholders and external public communications.

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