



Catholic Diocese of Geraldton

Bishop of Geraldton W.A.

14 September 2023

Dr D.J. Honey MLA
Chair
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
C/- Dr Alan Charlton
Email: lacdjsc@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Dr Honey

Re: Inquiry into options available to survivors of Institutional sexual abuse in Western Australia (WA) who are seeking justice

Thank you for your two letters sent to me on 29 June 2023, and 15 August 2023.

The Diocese of Geraldton has accepted responsibility for the harm caused by the tragic history of child sexual abuse by a number of clergy and lay church workers. These disastrous events have affected very deeply victims, survivors, and their families. We also acknowledge, without any doubt, the past failures of leadership in the church to recognise and act against known abusers has added greatly to the deep stress for people affected by sexual abuse.

In the early 2000's the first principles and procedures put in place to respond to complaints of abuse in the Diocese of Geraldton was the Church's national inception, "Towards Healing". The Diocese has engaged compassionately with those who have come forward with a complaint and over the years addresses and reassess its accountability processes and protocols to ensure children and vulnerable adults are well protected in every part of the structure of the diocese.

When the W.A. Working With Children Checks rolled out in W.A. our Diocese in W.A. was the first of the Catholic dioceses to have a Working With Children Policy and Procedures in place and rolled out in our Parishes, ensuring our parish leaders were aware of their responsibilities. Each parish operated a WWC Register and this was, and still is, annually audited by the Bishop in his Episcopal visitations, ensuring everyone requiring a card has one.

Since 2013 the Diocese has ensured that WWC is an automatic agenda item at its meetings.

In Professional Standards the Diocese has focused on raising awareness for all people who work in any capacity within the Diocese, paid or voluntary, ensuring they fully understand our professional standard protocols in respecting people of all walks of life, and especially children and adults who are vulnerable. Through the leadership of a Diocesan Director of Safeguarding, and the provision of regular professional development, we strive to help our workers understand the devastating impact of child sexual abuse upon individuals, to always listen with understanding and compassion, and work together as a Diocese continually looking at new ways of preventing it ever happening again in our church.

For anyone who wishes to express a complaint, the Diocese publishes in its newsletters and website the contact details of the W.A. Professional Standards Office (WAPSO), a provincial office set up for the four Catholic diocese in W.A.. The Diocese of Geraldton's procedure is that any leader or staff member approached by someone wishing to make a complaint, no matter who, is to firstly inform the person that they are to contact WAPSO so that they do not have to repeat their statement, to avoid further hardship and to also protect their privacy and all involved. This is the very clear protocol that all are expected to follow at the present time, including myself as the Bishop. The complainant is then free to choose. This is a procedure WAPSO recommended and also requested by lay staff members and I accept without reservation.

I will now make some comments on your request for information in your letter.

The present situation has become more complicated and difficult for victims and survivors. Once they have made the first very difficult step of making contact, they then are required to decide which avenue they choose to seek for compensation. Either the civil law path or that of the National Redress Scheme (NRS), which began in 2018.

Civil cases require involvement with lawyers by the plaintiff and therefore it leaves the diocese with no choice but to also engage lawyers, as financial claims are usually quite substantial and, and it would only take a small number of complaints to make any diocese financially unviable, especially one as small in resources as ours. The very act of engaging a lawyer is often seen as an antagonistic act, when it is not at all intended.

The legal process becomes very difficult for the victim and survivor, first and foremost, with the time to settle often extending over long periods of time. This is not helpful in any way to someone badly needing closure. It is more often and not due to the drawn outness by lawyers and not a reflection on the efficiency of the courts. From what I have experienced I believe the long-drawn-out process is quite demeaning and traumatising for survivors, yet it is often the only option available to them. For a small diocese like Geraldton, seeking to honour those who come forward with a complaint, seeking a response and justice, it is also a very difficult situation. We wish to engage fruitfully with the complainant but cannot. We are seen as opponents or combatants, instead of compassionate listeners and this doesn't assist with healing. Civil Cases also drain the staff of our small team, both emotionally and workload.

The National Redress System (NRS) does present problems for the Diocese in that the burden of proof is negligible. It is more often than not unclear who the alleged abuser was, with often no name or physical description given and has no avenue for the Diocese to defend itself.

I understand the NRS is not easy for survivors of sexual abuse to navigate, especially if you do not have access to a computer or lack the necessary skills to adequately complete the application. There are also from our experience long delays in settling the majority of these cases, which suggests there are not sufficient resources provided by the Government to process these NRS claims.

The Diocese of Geraldton has always willingly submitted requested information to the NRS application and paid any redress payment, when found liable, within the required time. We have always been open to a direct personal response when it has been requested by the applicant on the commencement of their application, but it is our experience that once the applicant receives an acknowledgement and redress payment, they do not follow through with the direct personal response from myself as Bishop.

The Diocese is committed to engaging with any survivors of child sexual abuse with compassion and focussed very much on their needs and concerns in order to find closure. Our WA Professional Standards Office (WAPSO) is always available to offer support to survivors and coordinate whatever support is needed for anyone, and in the manner requested by the survivor.

There is attached to my letter a summary of the Diocese of Geraldton's data to date involving historical sexual abuse claims in Western Australia.

Yours sincerely



The Most Rev. Michael H. Morrissey
Bishop of Geraldton

Attached: Catholic Diocese of Geraldton_Inquiry Response

**Inquiry into the options available to survivors of
Institutional child sexual abuse in Western Australia
who are seeking justice.**

1	How many claims have been through?	
a)	NRS	25
b)	Civil litigation both, before and after the introduction of the 2018 Act.	11
c)	Any other allegations dealt with outside a) and b) TOWARDS HEALING	6
2	Of those claims or allegations, how many (for each category) have resulted in financial payments to claimants?	
a)	NRS	15
b)	Civil litigation both, before and after the introduction of the 2018 Act.	9
3	What was the average payment for each category?	
a)	NRS	30,936.46
b)	Civil litigation both, before and after the introduction of the 2018 Act.	171,875.00
4	How many claims are still to be finalised in each category?	
a)	NRS	4
b)	Civil litigation both, before and after the introduction of the 2018 Act.	2
c)	TOWARDS HEALING	0
5	How many individuals in your organisation have had allegations of child sexual abuse against them?	10
6	How long did it take on average to finalise the claims in each category?	
a)	NRS	9 months
b)	Civil litigation both, before and after the introduction of the 2018 Act.	20 months

Tuesday, 12 September 2023

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