

# Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery

## Implementing a Trauma Informed Approach

FEBRUARY 2024

## Context

In this consultation paper the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (the Commission) seeks feedback on the future development of its Trauma Informed Approach. The feedback received will inform decision making on the approach the Commission will take.

## Audience

This paper will be of interest to victims, survivors and families who have been impacted directly or indirectly by the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and Ireland. There may also be interest from victim and survivor representative bodies, both statutory and voluntary, and the wider population in Northern Ireland.

## Reconciliation as principal objective

Reconciliation is the principal objective of the Commission. By contributing to this consultation, you will help improve how the Commission delivers for all those across the community, thus helping to improve the basis for reconciliation.

## Reason for consultation

The Commission has set out as a principle that it should focus on providing useful information to those affected by the Troubles. While the legislation is fixed there is wide flexibility about how this Commission is designed and how it can support individuals, embedding a trauma informed approach. The Commission is seeking feedback from the public about key aspects and stages of the Commission's development. This consultation focuses on how the Commission embeds a trauma informed approach.

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## **Foreword**

At our first meeting as Commissioners we all recognised the seriousness of the work that will be undertaken by this new Commission and that if we are to make a positive difference how we do things is as important as what we do. We resolved that the Commission must embed a trauma informed approach in all it does. It needs to be mindful of the harm and suffering that people it comes into contact with have endured and it must treat all as individuals rather than just numbers and cases.

Our Code of Conduct sets out the values we consider will support such an approach in all of our behaviour. But it is also not enough for us to make such commitments to a trauma informed approach without openly setting out the steps that we are taking to achieve this. This is so that we can hold ourselves accountable, and be challenged externally, as well as to hear from others what more we can do or what we should change or improve. This document is the first step in that process.

As Commissioners, our individual and collective commitment is to:

- Monitor and challenge the wider Commission and those working for it about whether the actions set out are being delivered;
- Encourage and support the Commission to listen to and reflect feedback about what more, what next, and what not; and
- Personally undertake training, improve our own understanding, and bring focus to bear in all our discussions as a Commission.

And this must be a continuing commitment, both organisationally and individually. We are therefore also consulting on proposals for the Commission's strategy from the summer once we are able to receive requests for individual cases.

We urge all to share their views with the Commission on our proposals. This approach has been discussed and agreed at Board level.

**Declan Morgan, Chief Commissioner**

**Peter Sheridan, Commissioner for Investigations**

**Tristan Pedelty, Chief Executive Officer & Commissioner**

**Lindsay Todd, Lead Non-Executive Commissioner**

**Kathleen Russ, Non-Executive Commissioner**

**Rogelio Alonso, Non-Executive Commissioner**

**Brice Dickson, Non-Executive Commissioner**

## Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (the Commission) has been set up to provide information to families, victims and survivors of Troubles-related deaths and serious injury and promote reconciliation.
- 1.2 When individuals approach the Commission, they may do so for different reasons and with different hopes and expectations. The Commission will work with individuals to explore the range of options open to them and will support them to make informed decisions about how they want to proceed. This will be based on a trauma informed approach.
- 1.3 At its first Board meeting on 14 December 2023, Commissioners took a decision to implement a trauma informed approach throughout all activities, placing a focus on victims, survivors and families and supporting them appropriately to access the Commission.
- 1.4 The Commission has been engaging with relevant stakeholders across Northern Ireland, talking to victims and survivors' groups and conducting polls and surveys to try and gather views and opinions about how the Commission should be approaching this commitment.
- 1.5 The Commission has brought in expertise from previous Inquiries and Commissions to support the development of this work and importantly, to start the thinking about what a trauma informed approach actually means in practice, for this Commission. This consultation seeks feedback on the future of its trauma informed approach.
- 1.6 In the fifth section of this paper there are a number of questions that we invite responses to.
- 1.7 This consultation seeks comments by 11 April 2024.

## 2. What is a trauma informed approach?

### Overview

- 2.1 Trauma informed approaches aim to mitigate the negative impact of trauma on mental and physical health, and to enable people who are experiencing trauma to engage safely with public services and other institutions. They acknowledge the link between trauma and negative outcomes, considering direct trauma impact, coping responses, structural inequalities and interpersonal relationships.
- 2.2 A trauma informed approach acknowledges that organisations and institutions have a significant role to play in aggravating or ameliorating the impacts of trauma when they are interacting with trauma survivors. Sometimes the structures and procedures within institutions can actually unintentionally cause harm and distress.
- 2.3 Being a trauma informed organisation means looking at itself through a trauma lens, adapting policies and processes to reduce the risk that engaging with the organisation will cause harm. Collaboration and feedback are essential to respond to what people need.
- 2.4 Although there is no set definition of what a trauma informed approach is, there are several principles that provide structure for creating a trauma informed approach.
- 2.5 The Office for Health Inequalities and Disparities has set out a framework of practice. The Commission has been seeking to reflect this framework in its activities, as informed by the context of the Commission's remit (**Figure 1**).

### Figure 1: Trauma informed Framework

**Safety:** Prioritise physical, psychological, and emotional safety through clear communication and safeguarding measures.

**Trustworthiness:** Build trust through transparent policies, consistent actions, and clear expectations.

**Choice:** Support shared decision-making, acknowledging trauma survivors' potential difficulties developing trusting relationships.

**Collaboration:** Recognise the value of staff and service user experiences, actively involving them in service delivery.

**Empowerment:** Share power, validate feelings, and support individuals in decision-making to counter feelings of powerlessness.

**Cultural Consideration:** Move beyond stereotypes by offering gender-responsive services, leveraging cultural connections, and incorporating responsive policies.

Source:

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, *Working definition of trauma-informed practice*, [Working definition of trauma-informed practice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice) February, 2024

### 3. What has the Commission done so far?

#### Overview

- 3.1 Since the identification of Sir Declan Morgan as Chief Commissioner, the team supporting his work has begun to reflect trauma-informed thinking in its work.
- 3.2 As the Commission has grown this has been embedded through wider activity across four strategic areas, people, processes, external engagement and places – virtual and physical.
- 3.3 The following highlights work undertaken to date and what is underway to ensure that, structurally, the Commission is capable of implementing a trauma informed approach throughout all of its work.

#### Building expertise

- 3.4 As a starting point, beginning the conversation about what a trauma informed approach means in our context has been undertaken through:
- Hiring expert, skilled advisers to provide dedicated input to the Commission's work to embed a trauma-informed approach, safeguarding and how a diverse range of lived experiences can be brought into the Commission's work;
  - Inducting the Chief Commissioner, Commissioner for Investigations and Chief Executive Officer in latest trauma informed practice;
  - Adopting a Code of Conduct for all Commissioners and Commission staff that explicitly promotes five values all associated with a trauma informed approach (**Figure 2**). And that explicitly commits individuals to reflecting a trauma informed approach in their behaviour; and
  - Publishing ideas about how the Commission could operate and proactively seeking feedback and engagement from the public and representative groups on these proposals.



## **Figure 2: The Commission's Values as set out in its Code of Conduct**

**Integrity** - Putting the obligations of public service above your own personal interests. Acting in line with other applicable professional obligations and standards.

**Impartiality** - Behaving in a fair and objective manner, treating all equally, remaining open minded and taking decisions based on evidence.

**Openness** - Being truthful and straightforward in your communications and your engagement while respecting confidences and keeping information safe.

**Accountability** - Operating within legal requirements, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the Equality Act 2010 and equivalent equality legislation in Northern Ireland, the requirements of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, and within the objectives and policies of the Commission. Being willing to justify decisions, actions and omissions.

**Respect** - Treating everyone with whom you interact with courtesy, irrespective of their background or beliefs. Recognising the importance of a trauma-informed approach. Engaging in constructive, respectful and professional dialogue even in the case of differing opinions.

## Setting up the right structures

- 3.5 At the present stage of designing how the Commission will work it is vital that we embed approaches that have considered how to support a trauma-informed approach. The overall stages to the Commission's work, where resource is allocated and how leadership structures are built in the Commission should all be considered for how they can support a trauma informed approach:
- 3.6 We have developed a first stage of the Commission's investigation work where the requesting individual has control over decision making and whether to proceed. They will be able to meet with the Commission staff and be given the information they need about the process, what may happen next, and how and by whom decisions in the investigation and findings phases are taken.
- 3.7 They will be able to explore and understand in their context what might be achieved and what the work cannot achieve. And they will have the time and space to take the decision on whether or not to proceed in a way that best meets their needs.
- 3.8 We are taking a relational approach to how the Commission engages with victims and survivors through a dedicated caseworker model.
- 3.9 This means that a requesting individual or family will always have a single point of contact that they can speak to, to ensure that there is regular communication between families and the Commission and that people are kept well informed.
- 3.10 This dedicated caseworker will be with the requesting individual or family throughout the investigations and findings work by the Commission. They will keep the Commission focused on what matters to the individual and facilitate contact and meetings with the experts at each step of the process.
- 3.11 The team will be led by a dedicated Assistant Commissioner for Investigations, reporting to the Commissioner for Investigations. They will be part of the wider senior leadership team within the Investigations Directorate.

## **4. What is the Commission doing now?**

### **Overview**

- 4.1 In the current phase of work building the organisation and getting ready to receive cases, our work has focused on:

### **Developing our expertise**

- 4.2 We are hiring qualified and experienced practitioners with clinical and social work practitioner backgrounds to work alongside and within our Case Support Team.
- 4.3 We are meeting with external experts, and those with experience and insight in order to test our approach, gain feedback and change and improve what we focus on.
- 4.4 We are procuring a third party specialist emotional support service for all those interacting with the Commission. This will ensure that anyone engaging with the Commission will be offered dedicated time with a support worker to help manage the emotional impacts of information recovery, should they choose to accept it.

### **Our people**

- 4.5 We are looking to recruit staff from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Jobs are openly advertised, with plain language explaining the role. Our values and a focus on interpersonal and compassionate engagement with people, form important aspects of our selection criteria.
- 4.6 We are developing a comprehensive induction programme for all new starters into the Commission that explains our commitment to a trauma informed approach and what that means for staff.
- 4.7 We are also developing ongoing training for all staff so that our trauma informed approach is part of our continuous learning.
- 4.8 We are putting in place staff support measures to create a working environment that enables people to deliver their best in supporting others by being well-supported themselves.

### **Embedding processes**

- 4.9 Recognising the timetable that the Commission is being designed to and the impact that processes can have on people, we are developing a design

checklist so that all those involved in design work for the Commission are reminded of trauma informed approach principles in all their work.

- 4.10 Checklists can be a helpful prompt, but they are only a small part of the approach. We share information about proposed processes publicly so that others can input into the design and give feedback.
- 4.11 We will test processes and interaction with the Commission from the perspective of requesting individual or families.
- 4.12 We are evolving a glossary of terms so that we use language appropriately and sensitively, based on feedback. This will be published online.
- 4.13 We have prompts in our formal governance and in our preparation for external meetings to ensure that what a trauma informed approach means in each circumstance is considered.

### **Creating physical and virtual safety**

- 4.14 The physical spaces in which the Commission will conduct its work will consider ways to minimise retraumatisation for victims, survivors, families and for those working in them. The Commission is currently considering the experience and décor of the family areas in its main premises in Belfast and will seek to bring potential future requesting individuals in physically to provide feedback on plans.
- 4.15 The Commission will be considering different options for how and where it speaks to and meets with people considering making a request, and with those who have information relevant to its investigations. It will develop a range of approaches for different circumstances to reflect people's needs.
- 4.16 We are considering how we will handle people's personal data throughout the process and developing clear notices and information so that people are aware of this at the outset.

## 5. Considerations for the future of the Commission's Trauma Informed Approach

### Future

- 5.1 The trauma informed approach that the Commission wishes to embed will need to be refined, evolved and amended iteratively over the lifespan of its existence. Continuous improvement will be critical to success. The Commission has a number of areas to consider when planning how to achieve this approach in the longer term:
- A process by which requesting individuals have the opportunity to provide feedback to the Commission in an open way about their experience, both during the process and after;
  - The Commission needs to give consideration to the level of emotional support it offers requesting individuals and families, as well as witnesses, when that support starts and ends and how to respond in crisis situations, should they arise;
  - The Commission will need to consider how it engages with external experts, particularly across NI in order to review, monitor and provide expert advice on improving and enhancing the trauma support offer to victims, survivors and families. This could happen through an external advisory group; and
  - The Commission will need to put in place quality assurance processes with any external support provider that it procures in order to ensure quality of service and alignment with Commission values and trauma informed ambitions.
- 5.2 We have learnt from other organisations and from listening to victims and survivors that it is easy to feel lost in the 'system', like you are just a number or a case to be processed.

### Question

**What ideas do you have for how the Commission treats those wishing to access its services?**

- 5.3 We want to understand the needs of all those engaging with us. We want to build trust and ensure that we have understood what people want from the

Commission and that we have communicated clearly what we think we can and can't offer.

### **Offering choice**

- 5.4 We know that victims and survivors seeking to access information about a loved one's death, are frequently met with barriers and blocks, feeling powerless against "the system". It is a trauma informed principle to be aware of the impacts of power and to support individuals in decision-making to counter feelings of powerlessness. Within the boundaries of the legal parameters the Commission operates, we want to facilitate as much choice as we can in our interactions with the people, and to be open about who makes the decisions on what issues. The Commission is committed to properly involving victims, survivors and families in its investigations. We will need to deliver sufficient information up front to people to assist them to make a fully informed decision about whether they wish to progress their case.

### **Questions**

**In what ways should the Commission make information available and how can it give individuals time, space and support to take or impact decisions?**

**Where action is taken by others, in what ways can the Commission involve and explain decisions that have been made?**

### **Building psychological safety in all our interactions**

- 5.5 Everyone needs psychological safety. The impacts of trauma and of experiencing failures and betrayals from trusted institutions can make it difficult to feel physically or emotionally safe enough to trust an organisation again. It does not matter if that trauma was something recent or something that happened decades ago because trauma knows no time. How psychologically safe we feel in any given interaction is influenced by lots of things. There are many things we can't influence as a Commission but what we can influence is the cultural environment that people step into as they interact with us. Building psychological safety needs to be at the heart of all our interactions with requesting families.

## Questions

**How should the Commission generate and maintain a psychologically safe environment within its interactions with victims, survivors and families, both through communications and the physical environments it builds? Do you know of any examples of best practice that the Commission could learn from?**

## Accessibility

- 5.6 Our Have Your say survey reflects our conversations with stakeholders and our research by telling us that “victims and survivors of the Conflict” are thousands of people from different communities. We will shortly be setting out a proposed Equalities Scheme for consultation.
- 5.7 As an independent Commission we will be neutral and objective in our work, seeing and respecting individual differences, avoiding assumptions about people's backgrounds or communities.

## Question

**How can the Commission take steps to engage with and hear voices from all communities and be accessible to the many who may have important questions but have not sought to use existing legal processes?**

## Continuous learning

- 5.8 The Commission is committed to continuous learning and improvement and believes this is the way to provide the highest standards of service in the long term.
- 5.9 One of the ways that the Commission hopes to improve over time will be to encourage feedback from those individuals using the Commission and we are keen to understand how to gather this sensitively.

## Question

**Do you have any suggestions of organisations that have implemented a successful continuous learning and improvement culture/system that the Commission could benefit from engaging with?**

### **Communities and families**

- 5.10 The Commission understands that for many people, the process of engaging with us and going through an investigation is a journey that will involve wider family members and the communities in which some people live.

### **Question**

**How should we work effectively with whole family and community groups and not just individual people?**



## 6. Next Steps for Consultation Responses and Further Issues

- 6.1 We invite comments and constructive input from all respondents expressing their views on any aspect of the paper. Responses should be received on or before noon on 11 April 2024 and should be addressed to:

**Freepost ICRIR**

**or**

Email: [engagementteam@icrir.independent-inquiry.uk](mailto:engagementteam@icrir.independent-inquiry.uk)

- 6.2 Our preference would be for responses to be submitted through either of the two routes – email and postal.
- 6.3 This consultation focuses on the development of this Commission, it is not a consultation on the UK Government's proposals and the legislation (Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023).
- 6.4 Information provided in response to this Consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA)).
- 6.5 Any personal data contained within your response will be deleted once the matter being consulted on has been concluded though the substance of the response may be retained.
- 6.6 This document is available in other accessible formats, such as large print, Braille, audio cassette and a variety of relevant minority languages if required. Please contact the Commission by email: [engagementteam@icrir.independent-inquiry.uk](mailto:engagementteam@icrir.independent-inquiry.uk) to make a request.

### **Key Milestones**

- 6.7 Table below provides an overview of the key milestones and associated timelines for this consultation process:

Key Milestones	Timeline
Issue public Consultation	15 Feb 2024
Consultation closes	11 April 2024

#### **Process after the Consultation's publication**

- 6.8 We will reconsider our approach in light of the responses received to this Consultation.
- 6.9 The responses received to this Consultation will inform our approach, as we finalise our policies ahead of the Commission becoming operational from this summer.