

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

9th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday
18 May 2022

PE1905: Public Inquiry into the response of
religious organisations to allegations of child
sexual abuse since 1950

Note by the Clerk

Lodged on	25 October 2021
Petitioner	Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of the UK XJW's Support
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions taken by religious organisations in response to child sexual abuse allegations since 1950.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1905

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [23 March 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee took evidence from petitioner, Angela Cousins and agreed to consider the evidence heard at a future meeting.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
4. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

5. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
6. Members may wish to note that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales issued its [report on Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings](#). Many of the issues identified in its report are similar in nature to concerns raised by the petitioner. The report stated that the Inquiry will return to a number of issues, including:
 - mandatory reporting;
 - vetting and barring;
 - regulation of the voluntary sector in respect of religious organisations and settings; and
 - introducing primary legislation to provide that voluntary settings adhere to basic child protection standards. We anticipate these issues will be addressed in our final report.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1905: Public Inquiry into the response of religious organisations to allegations of child sexual abuse since 1950

Petitioner

Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of the UK XJW's Support

Date lodged

25/10/2021

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions taken by religious organisations in response to child sexual abuse allegations since 1950.

Previous action

I contacted my MSP about this matter who I believe also spoke to the relevant Government Minister.

Background information

I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. Like many others, when I reported that I was abused, I was failed by people within my church.

I supplied my evidence to the inquiry for England and Wales however, they could not use it as that inquiry didn't pertain to Scotland. Although there is a Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, it is focussed on investigating the abuse of children in care.

There needs to be an investigation into the response of religious organisations, who were informed about allegations of abuse against children who were not in care. I would like the inquiry to investigate how many victims and how many alleged abusers there were, and what these organisations did to protect the victims.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales has just released its report. Scotland now needs its own inquiry.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1905 on 23 March 2022

The Convener: Welcome back. Our next continued petition is PE1905, which is on the response of religious organisations to allegations of child sexual abuse since 1950. The petition was lodged by Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of UK XJWs Support and it calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions taken by religious organisations in response to child sexual abuse allegations since 1950.

Today, we will take evidence from our petitioner, Angela Rosina Cousins. On behalf of the committee, I extend a very warm welcome to Angela and thank her for coming to speak to us about something that is obviously very personal to her and, I imagine, difficult to talk about. We very much appreciate that she has taken the time to come and speak to us this morning.

We know, from our previous consideration of the petition, that the Scottish Government's view is that to extend the public inquiry would in some way undermine its ability to make progress in the short term, whereas other parts of the country are perhaps taking a different view.

We will move straight to questions. Angela, by way of helping with our understanding for our discussion, will you explain a bit about your background, what led to the petition, and the issues that you have raised in relation to child abuse in religious organisations?

Angela Rosina Cousins: Yes. I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness from a very early age. I was a baby when my parents were recruited on the doorstep by a couple of doorstep callers. That went on for 19 years. I suffered abuse from my father and one of the elders in our congregation, and nothing was done about it. It is my firm belief that this organisation is a paedophile's paradise, because they do not do anything about allegations of child abuse. They do not phone the police. That is why I am bringing my petition here today.

The Convener: What benefits do you think a public inquiry, the scope of which extended to those who have suffered abuse by religious organisations in Scotland, would have for the pursuit of the injustice that you feel you have suffered?

Angela Rosina Cousins: The main benefit would be for the children, because they are silenced, particularly in the Jehovah's Witness community. They are not allowed to speak up. The little lamb that I have with me represents the little lambs of the community. They do not have a voice. They are silent, but that should not be the case. Someone should speak up for them, and that is what I am here to do today.

The Convener: What response did you receive to your endeavours to have the situation that you were facing addressed?

Angela Rosina Cousins: The response that I received was from a judicial committee in the Jehovah's Witness organisation. Three elders had my father and me in a room with them. They asked me very provocative questions about what had happened, and then they sent me and my younger sister home with my parents.

The Convener: Was that, as far as they were concerned, as much as they were prepared to consider or pursue in relation to the matter?

Angela Rosina Cousins: That was pretty much all that they did. They did not do anything else apart from giving my father a mild reproof. He was allowed to continue coming to the congregation and mixing with youngsters and other people. He was not allowed to hold the microphone. That was one thing that he was not allowed to do.

The Convener: What age were you when you sought to pursue these matters through the congregational process?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I was 16 years old.

The Convener: Okay—thank you.

David Torrance: Thank you for attending the committee meeting today, Angela. It must be extremely difficult for you. What is your opinion on the Scottish Government's view and its argument that expanding the remit of the inquiry would only delay it and extend the time that it will take to fulfil its commitments to other sexual abuse survivors?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I empathise with other abuse survivors who have been in care. My view is that there are children out there who are hidden in plain sight, and they need to be heard as well. Whether that extends the inquiry or whether a separate inquiry is brought forward for this, something needs to be done.

David Torrance: On that point, you have lodged a petition for a public inquiry but would it be acceptable to you if a separate inquiry was launched?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I think so. There is a difference between being in care and being out in the world with everybody else watching us but still being hidden.

Ruth Maguire: Convener, I note for the record that Angela Cousins is my constituent and that we met in 2018 to discuss the matter.

Angela, thank you for being with us this morning. I am sorry for what happened to you. Thank you for being so brave in speaking up for other people.

I will ask you about the suggestion that the Scottish Government has made that it will consider and address any future recommendations made by the current inquiry to improve legislation, policy and practice. Will recommendations from the current inquiry be able to address the concerns that you have about what happened to you in the religious organisation of which you were part?

Angela Rosina Cousins: Unless the recommendations involve mandatory reporting for religious leaders, I do not think that that will be the case.

The Scottish Government has introduced the named person scheme, which is fantastic. However, a Jehovah's Witness child will not speak to a named person. They are required to remain silent. Unless it is made mandatory for a religious leader to speak to the police and child protection services in instances where such allegations are made, those children will forever remain silent.

Ruth Maguire: I will ask you a little bit more about mandatory reporting. We explored it before. The Scottish Government—these are its words, not mine—says: “there is not a compelling case for the introduction of mandatory reporting in Scotland and previous evidence has suggested that there could be some significant unintended consequences for wider child protection issues.” You gave the example of why the position for a child within your previous religious organisation would be different. Will you expand a little bit more on that and on why mandatory reporting would be helpful for a child in that situation?

Angela Rosina Cousins: The state of Illinois in America has mandatory reporting and, just yesterday, the elders who did not report the abuse of a child from six years old right up until the age of 18 were sentenced for a year each.

Ruth Maguire: You say that children within the organisation would not talk to anyone outside it. Is that why you feel that mandatory reporting should be introduced?

Angela Rosina Cousins: Yes, that is exactly why mandatory reporting should be put in place. Children in the organisation are taught that everybody outside it is part of the devil's world. They are taught that they are all controlled by the devil—the Government and the police are controlled by the devil—so it is nerve wracking for a child to say anything to anybody outwith the organisation. They are isolated from normal, everyday life.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you for your testimony in response to questions so far. How disappointed are you that the Scottish Government is not prepared to extend the inquiry? The First Minister and Deputy First Minister made comments about that in the chamber. How do you feel about the fact that they do not see the need to progress it any further?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I think that the First Minister is unaware of what has been going on under her and everybody else's nose. Of course I am disappointed, but, at the same time, I think that education for the First Minister and other governmental officials is key, so that they are aware of not just my story, but the stories of a number of children who are now adults across the world. There have been 30 documentaries in 15 different countries on this issue over the past 20 years. I think that it is time that the First Minister and other governmental officials were educated on this.

Alexander Stewart: You touched on the idea that other authorities are perceived as not being supportive, or that people are brought up in that regime to believe that they

are “the devil”. Do you feel that you have been listened to by other authorities and other organisations and individuals?

Angela Rosina Cousins: After I came out and met my partner, he told me that this is what I should do—speak to the police about what had happened to me. Therefore, I have been supported by authorities. I have been supported by social workers in our area, by health therapists, and by education—I am an art student in college at the moment.

The Convener: As we know, the child sex abuse inquiry in England and Wales is going to look at the issue more broadly than the one in Scotland did, which focused just on care homes; they are going to look at religious organisations as well. You made reference to there being 30 documentaries in 15 countries. Have you been able to meet or speak with others who might potentially find that their own circumstances are going to be addressed in the public inquiry in England and Wales, or is that a difficult kind of exchange to have?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I have, because our group is mainly online to help survivors of abuse who come out of the organisation and feel very fragile. We have over 1,000 UK members in our Facebook group. There is lots of support being given, every day.

The Convener: That is interesting. If the Scottish Government will not expand the remit of its inquiry or, as has been suggested, if a separate inquiry were not to take place, is it possible that some of the themes, lessons and recommendations that emerge through that inquiry in England and Wales could crystallise into actions that campaigners could pursue more directly with the Scottish Government here? In other words, is it possible that that inquiry will lead to recommendations of which Scotland should be taking note, too?

Angela Rosina Cousins: The inquiry has concluded and it put forward its report. I could bring that information to the committee, if you do not already have it.

The Convener: Okay. Paul Sweeney, you have been listening quietly. Are there any questions that you would like to put?

Paul Sweeney: I have been quite taken aback by the testimony today, as I think that we all have. It is obviously disappointing to hear the Government’s position on this. On the suggestion that the Scottish Government might consider addressing future recommendations made by the inquiry to improve legislation, policy and practice, do you think that will be sufficient to address any of the concerns that have been raised in your petition, or do you feel that that would not come close to dealing with the issue? Is there at least some element of what the Government is saying that might be helpful, or do you think that it is not adequate at all?

Angela Rosina Cousins: I do not think that it is adequate. If there is not mandatory reporting for religious leaders, there is no way forward.

There have been cases, such as the one in America that we heard about just yesterday, where they have not reported. It is about bringing accountability for people to report abuse to the authorities, because they are the people who know

how to deal with this in a kind and empathic manner without asking children provocative questions.

Paul Sweeney: That is very helpful. You are calling for mandatory reporting. You described the way that you were treated, which was appalling. It was almost gaslighting. Will you describe what you think mandatory reporting should look like? How would it play out? What would it be like in your ideal scenario?

Angela Rosina Cousins: In my ideal scenario, it would be just like what teachers have to do. Teachers have to report any allegation of child abuse to the police and the social work department. If religious leaders are mandated to report as well, that will go a long way towards bringing out the voices of the little lambs.

Paul Sweeney: Thank you very much.

The Convener: You met Ruth Maguire a few years ago. I know that you have met many politicians in the period since then, and you will have raised your concerns directly with Scottish Government ministers. Everybody will have been very sympathetic but, of course, you are looking for outcomes as much as anything else. Am I right to say that the key outcome that we can take from our discussion this morning is on the issue of mandatory reporting? Does that sit above or on the same level as your desire for the scope of the current Scottish Government inquiry to be expanded, or are the two things parallel and equally important to you?

Angela Rosina Cousins: They are parallel and equally important, because they will both help the Scottish Government to understand not just my former religious organisation, but others. My former religious organisation is a group with a very high degree of control, but I suppose that there will be others that are hidden in plain sight.

The Convener: Your life is being rebuilt with the support of your partner, Ian, who we are very grateful to have with us this morning as well. His support has obviously been hugely important to you.

In concluding, I would like to give you an opportunity to make any additional remarks to us as a committee that will help us going forward. If you have anything that you would like to read to us by way of a statement, that will be equally valuable.

Angela Rosina Cousins: I will quote something that I heard while learning at college: "Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me." That is by Carl Rogers, the psychologist.

The Convener: Obviously, personal experience has been the basis of your understanding of these issues and the way in which you have sought to pursue public redress and public action to try to help others, potentially, and to have the issue tackled directly at source.

It has been very brave of you to join us this morning. I am very grateful to you both. I know that it was a long journey to get here and it will probably be a long journey back.

We take the petition seriously and I know that members will want to consider in further detail the evidence that we have heard. As you will be aware, we have gone back to the Scottish Government on the inquiry and, having heard your evidence this morning, we will consider the points afresh.

I thank you very much for the time that you have taken and for your courage in speaking with us today.

I suspend the meeting.