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Religious orders have paid just 13% of bill for child abuse inquiry - watchdog

Religious orders which ran institutions where children were abused have paid just 13% of the bill for a long-running inquiry, redress and compensation, the state's financial watchdog has found.

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, known as the Ryan inquiry, and the Redress Board cost a total of 1.5 billion euro (£1.3 billion) by the end of 2015, according to the Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG).

In the dying days of the government in 2002 then education minister Michael Woods arranged a controversial indemnity deal with 18 religious orders that they would hand over property, cash and assets worth 128 million euro (£111 million) to cover some of the costs.

The C&AG said 21 million euro (£18 million) of this was left to be transferred to the State at the end of 2015.

But the audit also revealed that a second deal was agreed after the Ryan report was published in 2009 - cataloguing decades of abuse and cover-ups in institutions for children - which agreed to an additional 353 million euro (£306 million) of cash and property being handed over. That was subsequently reduced to 226 million euro (£196 million) in 2015.

The C&AG's office found only 85 million euro (£73.7 million) from the new deal has been handed over.

The watchdog called for the redress scheme to be evaluated in the hope that lessons can be learned for future inquiries.

"As the redress scheme and Commission draw to a close, an evaluation of both would be useful. This should identify lessons learned and improvements which can be applied to any future redress schemes and/or commissions of inquiry," the C&AG said.

The watchdog added: "Both the cost to the State and the time required to bring the process to a conclusion have hugely exceeded original estimates."

It said government policy was to pursue the cost of redress on a 50:50 basis making the religious congregations liable for 760 million euro (£658 million).

The Ryan report laid bare the physically and psychologically abusive regimes operated by religious orders in church and state-run institutions over several decades of the 20th century.

Eighteen religious orders were identified, but no abusive priest or nun was named and the Christian Brothers struck an immunity deal before giving evidence.

Critics of the indemnity and compensation deals struck with the government suggest the orders should have known the extent of the abuse in children's homes, orphanages, industrial and reform schools.

The C&AG's audit also revealed that by the end of 2015, a total of 970 million euro (£840.5 million) has been paid out to 15,579 people with the average award 62,250 euro (£54,000).

Another 176 million euro (£152 million) has been spent on health, housing, educational and counselling services for the survivors of abuse.

The C&AG's audit gave a breakdown of the contributions by the 18 orders. At the end of 2015 the total payouts by the religious congregations included 139.9 million euro (£121 million) in cash, 10 million euro (£8.6 million) in counselling services and 48 properties valued at 42.8 million euro (£37 million).

Arrangements to transfer another 15 properties under the original 2002 indemnity deal are ongoing.

The report also revealed that the arrangement for the transfer of 353 million euro (£306 million) worth of cash and properties struck in 2009 on the back of the Ryan report was revised in 2015 after the Christian Brothers withdrew an offer on 49 school playing fields.

The 127 million euro (£110 million) worth of land is being transferred to the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, the C&AG said.

Sean Fleming, chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, said: "The contributions made by the congregations to date, and the delay in making those contributions, are unacceptable and this is an issue of serious concern."

The report on the financial costs of the abuse of thousands of the Republic's most vulnerable children was released amid ongoing debate on whether the Mother and Baby Home inquiry should be extended.

The horrors of an underground chamber holding substantial numbers of remains of babies where the institution in Tuam, Co Galway once stood have already been confirmed.

An interim report on the inquiry is due later this month.

Education Minister Richard Bruton said if the religious orders pay up on all the offers on table it will come to 21% of the 1.5 billion euro bill.

"Ordinary members of the church, who look to these organisations as sources of authority and good, will be among the most let-down by these developments," he said.

"Unfortunately, after today's report we have to ask questions as to why organisations with stated missions to serve the public and uphold moral codes are apparently placing so little importance on those values".

Mr Bruton said it was hugely disappointing and massively frustrating that arrangements with congregations for payments and transfers of assets have gone in reverse.

The Christian Brothers said it was on course to meet its commitments under the 2009 deal.

Br Edmund Garvey, province leader of the order, said this was despite dramatic falls in property values.

He said another 10 million euro (£8.7 million) in cash was being paid this year. Br Garvey also said the playing fields would ultimately benefit the state even though they are being transferred to a trust associated with the order.

"These measures, together with prior transfers by the Christian Brothers, will bring total contributions to redress, welfare and education to over 600 million euro (£521 million)," he said.

The Sisters of Mercy said it honoured all of its commitments as part of the redress scheme. But it said the values of some properties are now lower than they were when the 2009 deal was arranged.

"The congregation has always made clear that the value of its contribution was subject to the fluctuations in value attaching to individual properties," the order said.

Press Association