

The West Australian

Fair go for child sex victims

DEAN SMITH



Amid news of the storming of the United States Capitol in Washington DC and an even more contagious strain of COVID-19 forcing parts of Australia back into lockdowns behind closed borders, you could be forgiven for missing the positive stories of the new year.

For the survivors of institutional child sexual abuse and their families, anxiously awaiting updates on their applications for compensation under the National Redress Scheme, 2021 has already brought welcome news.

Last week, the Minister for Social Services announced that all institutions required to join the scheme by a December 31, 2020 deadline, and which had the capacity to do so, have now come on board.

The scheme now includes about 450 institutions, covering more than 60,650 sites across Australia — including churches, children's homes, schools, swimming centres and sports clubs.

Only 47 institutions joined when the scheme was first established in 2018. The following year this number grew by 176 and, with the scheme now in its third year, another 223 have joined.

This is significant progress, because more participating institutions means more applications being finalised, and survivors no longer enduring emotional and financial pain caused by unnecessary delays.

So far, 9117 applications have been received by the scheme and 4350 payments have been made totalling \$377 million. A further 540 offers are awaiting a decision from applicants.

Much of the credit for getting so many institutions to join the scheme must go to the Morrison Government, which followed through on its justified threat to “name and shame” institutions and strip them of

their tax and charitable benefits.

Now it is time to refocus our efforts on two specific survivor groups whose access to justice is being blocked — both with a strong West Australian element.

Redress must be urgently delivered to the “Fairbridge Kids”, who were among the 3580 British child migrants sent to the Kingsley Fairbridge Farm School near Pinjarra between 1913 and 1982.

The original Fairbridge Society ceased operating in the early 1980s, when it was rolled into The Prince's Trust UK.

That organisation has established Fairbridge (Restored) Ltd to act as the legal entity responsible for meeting the liabilities of Fairbridge Farm schools.

While Fairbridge (Restored) was publicly named for its failure to join the scheme last year, we now understand that its reluctance was due to legal barriers in Britain rather than a lack of willingness and good faith.

It is clear to me that the unique and unforeseen circumstances surrounding the “Fairbridge Kids” warrant special attention.

It's reassuring to know this view is also shared by the National Redress Scheme with the Secretary of the Department of Social Services describing the matter as having “a sense of urgency” and noting they are very committed to resolving the issue “as quickly as we can”.

The second priority in 2021 must be to improve awareness and access to the scheme for Indigenous survivors.

We know that factors including poor understanding of the scheme in regional and remote areas, access to records and historical documentation, and even a reluctance to ask questions out of fear of being judged, are preventing greater Indigenous participation.

There can also be a cultural unwillingness to detail accounts of historic childhood sexual abuse, which is stopping many older Indigenous survivors from even starting an application.

Late last year, the chief executive of the Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation detailed key areas where the scheme could improve to better address the needs of Indigenous Australians, including increased access to culturally appropriate support in remote communities.

In evidence to a parliamentary committee the KSGAC noted that “Aboriginal people don't see counselling the same way non-Indigenous people do . . . that's not what works for them and it's not culturally appropriate for them either”.

Of the 3123 applications for redress received between July 2019 and June 2020, 1052 were from Indigenous survivors, representing 34 per cent of all applications for that period.

This is an improvement on past numbers but is far short of the 9000 Indigenous survivors estimated by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

As a new year dawns, now is the time to get on with the task of delivering justice for these two deserving groups of survivors.

Dean Smith is a Liberal senator for WA and chair of the joint select committee on Implementation of the National Redress Scheme.