

**On the 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021 the Inquiry heard evidence from Christopher Fitzgerald, Chair of the MacFarlane Trust (2007 – 2012).**

Mr. Fitzgerald began by explaining the Trust's funding situation on his appointment as a Trustee and Chair. He explained that the inadequacy of the Department of Health's funding was a constant subject of submissions by the Trust, and further funding had not been granted since 2003. He spoke about numerous unsuccessful attempts by the MFT to apply to the Government for further funding. In his view, the Archer Inquiry was the best chance of improving the MFT's chances and he felt it was a 'lever' to bring public pressure on politicians to respond to their submissions.

Mr. Fitzgerald explained how during the financial crisis and the increasing issue with the Department of Health, it became the MFT's policy to reduce their reserves from 1 year to 6 months, but this took a considerable length of time to achieve. The MFT took steps to increase grants, regular pay and help to non-infected beneficiaries. He explained there was fear at that time of a recoup by the Department of Health, which indicated that the MFT would not get any more money until the reserves were used. Beneficiaries could not understand why the MFT could not just 'dish out' the reserves, but restrictions meant that the MFT were unable to do this. Mr. Fitzgerald admitted that the MFT could have reduced the reserves sooner and this would have helped beneficiaries who had missed out, such as the bereaved.

After the Archer Inquiry, Mr. Fitzgerald explained it took time to develop policies, and to trace and assess beneficiaries. He says it was not an easy process. They had tried to move things forward by resorting to appeal in the national press for widows to come forward and had also relied on the beneficiary community to spread the word.

Mr. Fitzgerald said the MFT had to continue with discretionary and non-discretionary payments because of lack of funding from the Department of Health. His view was that people should not have been living on charity and the Department of Health should have supported the victims of this tragedy.

Inquiry Counsel questioned Mr. Fitzgerald on the policies for regular pay to beneficiaries and widows post Archer, and how and why beneficiaries were means tested on their applications for financial assistance. Counsel discussed with Mr. Fitzgerald the definition of the term 'poor' and the definition of need when considering applications for funding. Mr. Fitzgerald clarified that to comply with charity law the MFT were required to carry out a means assessment to establish a financial need and define the extent of that need. He explained, however, that some people unfortunately would not qualify if their household income was in the high bracket.

Mr. Fitzgerald explained how beneficiaries on benefits had been investigated by the Fraud Investigation Services and how MFT helped beneficiaries in this regard.

Inquiry Counsel questioned Mr. Fitzgerald on the discrepancy of payments from the MFT and the Eileen Trust for female beneficiaries and he explained it had been a running issue between the two Trusts.

**Inquiry Counsel finished with questions from Core Participants to Mr. Fitzgerald.**