

Commission on child sex abuse faces 'huge task'

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Judge eases evidence fear

By Harriet Alexander

The head of the royal commission on child sexual abuse has described the panel's task as "huge" after the six commissioners met for the first time in Sydney on Wednesday.

Justice Peter McClellan said to run it as efficiently as possible, the government would amend the Royal Commission Act to allow hearings to take place without all commissioners present.

Some hearings may need to be private to protect victims.

Speaking publicly for the first time since his appointment on Friday, Justice McClellan also sought to allay concerns some matters may be excluded from examination because of confidentiality agreements.

"We wish to emphasise that under the Royal Commission Act, the commission has powers to compel the production of evidence including documentation and we will not hesitate in appropriate circumstances to exercise those powers," he said.

Justice McClellan said there may be some instances where constraints would have to be placed on the reporting of matters before the commission.

However, the commission "expects that those institutions which have entered into confidentiality agreements with individuals will co-operate with the commission in relation to the discovery of those materials".

Justice McClellan met his fellow commissioners, the former Queensland police commissioner Bob Atkinson, the Family Court judge Justice Jennifer Coate, the Productivity Commissioner, Robert



MEETING: The commission head, Justice Peter McClellan.

Fitzgerald, an Aboriginal health academic, Professor Helen Milroy, and the former West Australian senator Andrew Murray in Sydney. Most of them had not met previously.

Justice McClellan said it would take some time to hire staff and organise resources and it was impossible to know how long it would be before hearings started.

But the commission has set up a phone number for people to leave messages, which staff will follow up when they are hired.

Gail Furness, SC, will be counsel assisting the commission.

"The task before the commission is large," Justice McClellan said.

"However, until the commission has commenced its work and people come forward to give us an account of their personal circumstances, we can't gauge the full extent of that task."

The commission would make arrangements for people living overseas to attend hearings where required, he said.

The commission was not a prosecuting body but would co-operate with local authorities in each state and territory, he said.

"It is also important to understand that the commission is not charged with determining whether any person is entitled to compensation."