

CONSULTATION ON THE NEXT PHASE OF VICTIMS POLICY – SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

During the course of the last year, Angela Smith, Minister with responsibility for victims' issues, sought views and opinions from all interested parties on the development of the next phase of Government policies to address the needs of those who have suffered directly as a result of conflict in Northern Ireland.

This document provides a summary of the responses, views and opinions expressed during the period of the consultation. These have been gathered from a range of sources including:

- a leaflet drop through the 3 main newspapers which drew 112 responses from individuals,
- the outputs from a series of 7 workshops involving victims, representatives from victims groups, children and young people and others,
- meetings which the Minister had with representatives of victims groups, church leaders, service providers, academics, experts and practitioners in the victims' field,
- outputs from a series of 5 workshops (one in each Health Board area and the Sperrin Lakeland Trust area) which fed into the 3 day international conference, "Towards a Better Future...Building Healthy Communities" held in Belfast in October 2003,
- needs analysis exercises carried out in both the Northern and Eastern Health and Social Services Board areas, and
- the report of a series of 8 seminars held across Northern Ireland for Churches and Faith Communities.

Due to the very wide range of issues raised and views put forward, this document is presented as a series of themes arising from consultation. Inevitably, there are some areas where the themes overlap. However, and although it is not possible to present all of the views expressed in detail, it is hoped that the summary presented here reflects the major issues and provides a picture of the diversity of views expressed. The document reflects the range rather than the volume or frequency of comments gathered under each heading and includes some conflicting views. It will be used to inform Government in the further development of victims' policies, but is not to be taken as a statement of Government policy.

To preserve anonymity, respondents are not listed in this summary.

October 2004

1. Terminology and Definition of 'victim'

- 1.1. Many preferred to see themselves as "survivors". Some felt that those they regarded as "perpetrators" should not be viewed as victims while others felt that such people were just as much victims of the Troubles as anyone else.

2. Statutory Sector

- 2.1. Statutory agencies needed to have a sympathetic approach to victims' needs and training programmes should include an element to cover awareness of victims' issues. Some victims were reluctant to use statutory services because they were concerned how staff might use confidential information.
- 2.2. It was felt that a "one-stop shop" or some type of assistance to access services, statutory and voluntary, would be helpful. This might include help with practical things such as completion of forms. There should be Trauma Centres in each HSS Board area. Trauma Advisory Panels (TAPs) could be more proactive in developing services and a mechanism for victims/victims' groups to communicate with the Interdepartmental Working Group on Victims was suggested.
- 2.3. Victims' issues need to be part of the core business of statutory agencies and not just something which gets attention at certain times as a political issue. Need a long-term joined-up strategy which takes account of current needs and which provides for voluntary and statutory bodies to work more closely together.

3. Voluntary & Community Sector

- 3.1. The view was expressed that there were many areas where the voluntary/community sector staff can act more quickly and go into areas which would be difficult for statutory agencies' staff. Although recognition was given to support from the statutory sector, views were expressed that the approach taken by the voluntary and community sectors was better in that an individual was treated as a person rather than a problem. Another view expressed was that there was no need for any more organisations as availability of funds had led to a proliferation of organisations, with overheads of offices, phones etc consuming much of the available funds; rather the need was for higher levels of funding for existing organisations, with the voluntary and community sector being adequately financed for any service delivered to statutory sector.
- 3.2. With regard to victims groups, some felt that theirs was the most valuable help, for example their self development programmes. Concern was expressed that the funding arrangements for victims groups were excessively bureaucratic and that there was a need for the work of the groups to be strategically funded over many years. Some expressed a view that funding should go to those victims groups which were encouraging their members to move forward, while still remembering the past. It was commented that some individual victims did not wish to be associated with groups at all, regarding membership of some groups as stigmatising.

4. Information about services and identification of need

- 4.1. A number of comments were made to the effect that more information on services should be available to victims. Suggestions were made that directories of services

and / or Web pages at TAPs level might help, as might a regional and local awareness campaign. It was suggested that, identification of need, including baseline information, should be an ongoing activity.

- 4.2. At an individual level it was proposed that there should be someone to speak to a victim, or his or her family, to establish needs.

5. Services

- 5.1. A substantial number of detailed comments were made regarding the provision of services to victims. These included a call for the review of the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwelling Scheme, financial help with the purchase of a new home and the need to ensure that a victim with disabilities had accommodation appropriate to their needs. The idea of “fast tracking” of victims by the Social Security Agency was also put forward. In relation to education it was suggested that trauma awareness training should be provided for teachers and that financial assistance should be available for “educational catch-up” for those who had lost out as a result of the Troubles. Funding for the re-establishment of businesses which had to close and to help victims set up new businesses was also proposed.
- 5.2. Very many comments were made regarding health and social services. These included the need for victims to be “fast-tracked” for help such as orthopaedic surgery; a review of trauma services; more training for statutory and voluntary groups in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy; more help for carers; better awareness of victims issues and collection of data on victims by social services; more specialist psychiatric services. It was commented that there was need for GPs to be better educated regarding victims’ issues and for them to be more aware of the services which are available and to which their patients might be referred. Some felt that more use could be made of health visitors and community practice nurses in meeting the needs of victims.
- 5.3. The Trauma Counselling Service available to victims / survivors was seen by some to be a positive step. However, suggestions were made that there ought to be centres of excellence for individual and family counselling and that counselling service providers should give clear statements as to the standards of services, qualifications and accreditation of counsellors. Waiting lists for counselling and chronic pain management services needed to be reduced. Some felt that there should be free access to alternative therapies (e.g. reflexology) as part of a broad spectrum of services and that an exploration of the benefits of alternative therapy services was required.

6. Funding

- 6.1. A number of calls were made for increased funding. Some felt that long-term funding to secure services and to reduce the competition and insecurity that exists within the victims sector was required. Some felt that different groups such as ex-prisoners and bereaved families should not be competing for the same funding. The application form for Peace II funding was considered to be unduly complex and the emphasis placed on training by European Union funding programmes was considered unhelpful, given that the age profile of members of victims / survivors groups was rising and retraining for employment was considered by some to be of decreasing importance.
- 6.2. The additional money provided through the OFMDFM Strategy Implementation Fund was welcomed. However, many felt that the overall level of funding was inadequate.

Some commented that any additional funding should not be directed into the Health Service as victims' groups were better qualified to address the issues. In general the main issue relating to funding was that of sustainability and the difficulties encountered by groups in operating under current short-term funding arrangements.

7. Research

- 7.1. A variety of comments were made regarding research in relation to mental health, bereavement therapy, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Personality Disorder Specialist Services and the need to look at techniques used elsewhere which might be adapted for Northern Ireland. Research was also needed regarding the high suicide rate and its relationship to the conflict.

8. General views on consultation process

- 8.1. There was some appreciation of the efforts being made by the Victims Minister to consult and involve a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations in the next phase of victims' policy. However, views were expressed that more or less the same ground had been covered in previous consultations over the last few years.

9. Community Issues

- 9.1. A range of views was expressed that the power of paramilitaries needed to be broken; that people were still living in fear and that fear of moving outside one's own locality would leave a legacy for future generations; that there was a need for more long-term funding for communities and for cross-community work; that people were misled by some local politicians who took a sectarian view; that slogans and flags are perpetuating hatred and that integrated schooling and housing were important. Some commented that there needed to be more police on the ground and that "terrorists seem to get everything". It was also commented that the wives and members of the security forces felt that they had been forgotten.
- 9.2. It was suggested that it was important to listen to the views and fears of young people as they were suffering the repercussions of the conflict.

10. Families/Children

- 10.1. The importance of the family to society was noted. It was pointed out that many men and women had lost partners through the troubles and have been left to raise children alone. Some of these parents had to give up work. It was suggested that any barriers to childcare for these parents should be lifted. The problems of isolation of ex-UDR members who could not tell their neighbours about their job were commented upon.
- 10.2. Some felt that money should be put into a trust for children of victims and that the suffering of siblings should be recognised and a fund set up specifically to help them. Reference was made to young people being drawn into paramilitary acts at a very young age as "invisible victims" and to the trans-generational impact on families affected by the conflict.

11. Rural Issues

- 11.1. The problems of rural isolation were commented upon, particularly in relation to difficulties in accessing services, problems with transport and the need for outreach

services. People who were forced to move away from property along the border needed financial assistance to re-establish farms; this included people who had suffered in the early stages of the Troubles.

12. Clergy/Pastoral Care Workers

12.1. Clergy and faith workers identified a need for personal and spiritual support, pastoral care and supervision to prevent burn out and overcome feelings of isolation. There is a need to develop a networking system for clergy and faith workers and to provide opportunities for cross-community clergy/ministry contact. More contact with psychological therapy groups and an exchange of dialogue and learning would also be useful as would in-service practical training, e.g. as expert counsellors.

12.2. It was suggested that there was a need for representatives of the clergy / faith workers to be involved in the work of government through a forum or similar body and that the way forward should be for the Victims Unit, the Victims Liaison Unit, the Health Service and Churches to work together.

13. Victims Commissioner

13.1. There was a divergence of views on the need for a Victims Commissioner or Ombudsman. Some felt that he / she should be appointed on a dedicated long-term basis; should not be a civil servant and should come from grass roots level. The Children's Commissioner was put forward as a possible model. There should be one central agency dealing with victims. Others questioned the need for a Commissioner given that all the required structures are in place.

14. Recognition and Acknowledgement

14.1. A wide range of proposals regarding the attention that ought to be paid to victims were put forward. These covered such matters as a call for the UDR / RIR to receive some recognition equivalent to the George Cross given to the RUC and for other organisations such as the Fire Brigade and Customs and Excise to be given some form or recognition.

14.2. Some views were expressed that all victims should have equal recognition and that it was not right that larger atrocities attracted all the publicity. Concerns were also expressed as to the role of the media in that victims could be re-traumatised and perpetrators glorified. It was noted that the Government had given recognition to some extent, but some felt there should be some form of written acknowledgement of the price paid by those who have been injured or killed as a result of the Troubles. It was suggested that more attention ought to be paid to those who had been injured as opposed to those killed.

15. Memorials

15.1. Various views were put forward as to a memorial to victims. These included proposals for a memorial garden to cover Crown Forces and civilians. The idea of separate memorials to civilian victims was also proposed. Some were opposed to any memorial which included both innocent victims and perpetrators.

- 15.2. Some who would have liked to see some type of memorial recognised that it would be contentious. Others felt that resources would be better spent on a pain clinic for victims instead of a garden of remembrance, or other such form of memorial.

16. Remembering / Storytelling

- 16.1. A number of views was expressed that victims needed an opportunity to tell their individual stories, perhaps in the form of a book, and to share their experiences.

17. Truth and Justice

- 17.1. This subject received substantial attention and a very wide variety of views was expressed. These included comments that all participants in the conflict, including the British and Irish governments should admit their roles and responsibilities. The view was expressed that not enough was being done to help victims' families find out more information about how the death of relatives was investigated or to help them understand why no one had been prosecuted.
- 17.2. It was suggested that before the people of Northern Ireland can be properly reconciled, they must be content that the truth regarding various matters becomes common knowledge and that justice has been done. Some thought that if acknowledgements of wrongdoing were offered, perhaps people could then move on. However, it was also stated that not everyone will be happy with whatever version of the truth they are given. A matter of concern was whether the truth could be obtained when individuals feared the consequences. There were objections to an amnesty forming a part of any truth and justice process.
- 17.3. While the view was expressed that all murderers should be jailed for life, others felt that the emphasis should be on truth and healing. The problem of separating truth and justice was discussed, with the view being expressed that separating truth and justice would cause pain to the victim or his / her family; it would be a very delicate matter to determine whether the benefits arising from the separation of truth and justice were for the greater good. Some expressed the view that it was unclear how a truth and justice process would work.

18. Inquiries

- 18.1. Views expressed ranged from concerns that open inquiries are not always in the best interests of victims and their families; that inquiries forced individuals to relive trauma and that public inquiries were a waste of money. However, some took the view that a specialist team to investigate what happened to their loved ones would be a good idea.

19. Truth Commission

- 19.1. It was suggested that a small committee should be appointed to take forward the truth and reconciliation agenda and that politicians should not be included on this committee. The idea of some form of Commission led by three people not from Northern Ireland was put forward.
- 19.2. Criticism was expressed that Truth courts, South African style, would not be appropriate in Northern Ireland while some opposed the whole concept of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission being set up. It was suggested that, without a complete end to terrorist activities it is premature to establish a commission type forum and that too much is still disputed to enable a satisfactory 'truth' to be accepted by all

parties. There was some feeling that victims wanted to move on and that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would not bring healing as different people take different roads in order to cope. Others felt that a Truth Commission entailed some form of amnesty and that they would have difficulty with that.

20. Reconciliation & Healing

20.1. It was suggested that reconciliation and healing cannot be taken forward before Truth and Justice is achieved and that public apologies might be a way forward. Others felt that reconciliation could not be achieved while paramilitaries still exist and without a stronger attack by government on terrorism. Some felt that reconciliation, though a laudable objective, was over ambitious for the moment; unless progress on closure for the victims and relatives happens. It was suggested that it might well take one or two generations to pass before the rawness of recent events can even begin to heal. Views were expressed that reconciliation would remain difficult before the conflict ceased and all the arms were in.

21. Compensation

21.1. Many comments were made to the effect that the compensation system should be reviewed. These comments related to detailed matters relating to the legislation and administrative processes. For example it was argued that the system should be speeded up; that compensation for loss of business was inadequate; that the system treated certain members of the security forces unfairly and that recent changes to the compensation arrangements should be made retrospective so that victims of earlier incidents would benefit. Some people found the concept of compensation irrelevant or even distasteful: they took the view that the loss of a loved one can never be truly compensated.

21.2. It was suggested that the compensation system was easier for victims of non-troubles related incidents and that earlier victims have not received equitable treatment. The compensation and associated court processes were regarded as undignified for victims with no compensation for "loss of love".

22. Justice System, Law & Order

22.1. Concern was expressed that people did not know how cases were investigated and how decisions not to reopen certain cases were made. People needed to know why no one has been brought to justice and why the investigation has never been reopened. Some felt that the PSNI needed more resources to pursue unsolved murder cases and that if the authorities tackled terrorism and racketeering more effectively this would bring solace to victims. Greater police protection in the workplace was an issue for some.

22.2. Some complaints were made about the costs involved in obtaining details of the inquest for each person involved and that relatives were not informed when the inquest was to be held and had great trouble getting information released. In relation to the courts, some felt that victims were made to feel like perpetrators and that judges should be accountable to some form or governing body. Calls were also made for a review of judicial sentencing and for free and rapid access to legal services to be

available.

23. Northern Ireland Memorial Fund

23.1. Some aspects of the Fund were praised, e.g. that it had been helpful with home adaptations and is generally a good vehicle for small amounts of government funding to be given to victims. However some felt that there was a need to review criteria and change rules. For example, people should be able to apply more than once under the same scheme and siblings of victims should be able to access the Fund.

24. Great Britain

24.1. It was suggested that victims in Great Britain should receive equal treatment to all other victims and that they needed an embryonic support group.