



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister  
and deputy First Minister

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Victims and Survivors: Briefing by the  
Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and  
the Victims and Survivors Forum

11 December 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Victims and Survivors: Briefing by the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and  
the Victims and Survivors Forum

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)  
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Alex Attwood  
Mr Leslie Cree  
Ms Megan Fearon  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Alex Maskey  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

|                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ms Kathryn Stone      | Commission for Victims and Survivors |
| Mr Mitch Bresland     | Victims and Survivors Forum          |
| Ms Eibhlín Glenholmes | Victims and Survivors Forum          |
| Ms Jennifer McNern    | Victims and Survivors Forum          |
| Ms Sandra Peake       | Victims and Survivors Forum          |

**The Chairperson:** We are joined by the commissioner and four members of the services working group. We have Eibhlín Glenholmes, Sandra Peake, Mitch Bresland and Jennifer McNern. You are very welcome.

**Ms Kathryn Stone (Commission for Victims and Survivors):** I thank the Committee for its invitation to members of the forum services working group to attend today. I also thank you, Chair, and the Committee team here at Stormont for ensuring that all the individual requirements of forum members have been met and met very well. That care and attention to individuals has not gone unnoticed. Thank you very much.

My role is advocating on behalf of and being a voice for victims. I am also required by law to establish a forum for victims and survivors. Whenever I can, I pay tribute to the forum, which meets frequently, as volunteers in their own time, to advise me on how we can improve things for victims. That 23 people would give up several days a month, if not more, and travel from all parts of Northern Ireland to meet for no remuneration in order to serve their community is extraordinary.

Recently, I have heard that there are those who believe that the forum is not useful, because its members cannot agree on anything. That is patently untrue. In recent months, the forum has met the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Dr Haass, the panel of parties, Lord Freud and many others. It has submitted advice to me that has informed subsequent advice to Ministers, including advice on the provision of a pension for those seriously injured. Of course, though, there are things on which the forum does not agree. We recognise those things, acknowledge them and, most importantly, have come to respect that others are entitled to a different world view.

I feel that victims in Northern Ireland have sacrificed most, suffered most and have an important contribution to make to a better and a shared future. The opportunity for the forum services working group to present to you today is recognition by the Committee of the importance of that contribution and a very real acknowledgement of the lived experience of victims.

Some of you will have read reports in the papers today of the commission and the WAVE Trauma Centre commenting on the Victims and Survivors Service. The timing of that story is unfortunate. It is also unfortunate that old news is being reworked as if it were new news. Since my previous appearance before the Committee, things have moved on; there have been developments. For example, I have been asked to undertake an independent expert assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service, and a programme board has been established to oversee the decision-making for the Victims and Survivors Service. A subgroup of departmental officials, commission staff and Victims and Survivors Service staff meet to consider the implementation of those things. There is still some considerable distance to travel and things that need to be put right, but there is a renewed determination from departmental officials, the commission and the forum to ensure that services delivered to victims and survivors are the very best that they can be. This is what our society expects, and it is what victims deserve.

I am now going to hand over to Sandra Peake, who is here today as an associate member of the forum and facilitator of the forum services working group. Sandra is also the chief executive of WAVE Trauma Centre but is not speaking in that capacity. Other members of the forum have been introduced by the Chair, and I would like to introduce other members of the forum who are here, again in their own time, in the public space at the back. They are Irene Kerrigan, Roberta Holmes and Alex Bunting. They have joined their colleagues to support them and to represent the forum.

**Ms Sandra Peake (Victims and Survivors Forum):** Good afternoon, everyone. The forum services working group, on behalf of the full forum, would like to begin by fully endorsing the statement made by the commissioner to the Committee on 9 October as a full and accurate record of the issues regarding the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). We would like to record our thanks and appreciation to the commissioner for her effective lobbying, her effective advocacy of victims and survivors and her wide engagement in relation to recounting the difficulties that individuals have faced in engaging with the service to date. We also commend the swift actions and urgency of the Committee in addressing the issues raised.

We would like to take this opportunity to reinforce our commitment to working with the Victims and Survivors Service in partnership to ensure that victims and survivors get the services that they are entitled to and that they deserve. We welcome the announcement of the victims and survivors board, as that was long overdue, and we hope that further representation may be sought from key areas such as health, given the health-related issues that many victims and survivors face. We welcome the opportunity to meet the Committee and to raise some of the issues that we have experienced in relation to VSS.

By way of background, I am keen to give you a sense of what we have been doing. The victims and survivors working group, established in October 2012, has engaged extensively with stakeholders to inform our work. We have informed the quarterly reports submitted to the Department by the commissioner and the submission that you have heard from the Victims' Commissioner. We also submitted an advice paper to her, in April 2013, with recommendations, and we are working on a further advice paper that will go forward in the new year. We have met with the Victims and Survivors Service on three occasions, and we have made numerous suggestions and provided feedback on a range of issues.

Given the issues many individuals have reported in their engagement with VSS, the announcement of an independent assessment of VSS to be overseen by the commission is timely and necessary. It is extremely positive that it is being undertaken. A central question for the services working group is the appropriateness of 100% assessment for all individuals, and we are concerned that the commissioner stated that the assessment — the individual needs review (INR) process — was not fit for purpose in

early October, yet the process remains. In the past few days, we have heard from a range of stakeholders how individuals recount their distress at having to go through such an invasive process. There is an urgent need, therefore, for this review to move swiftly.

We met the programme board on 20 November. We raised a series of issues and asked a number of questions, and we hope that they will be addressed. It is very positive that a programme board has been developed. We welcome that, and we are heartened that its members have sought to address the issues raised and the problems associated with some of the policies that are in place. We are also disappointed, however, that service users are not on that programme board. As you may be aware, service user representation is endorsed fully in the health area and is enshrined in the personal and public involvement (PPI) initiative. Health and social care has recognised the benefits of having meaningful and effective engagement with service users and carers to discuss their ideas, plans and experiences, why services need to change and what people want from them. Given that PPI is now a legislative requirement for health and social care organisations as laid down in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, we are keen that it is incorporated into initiatives here.

Given that many of the issues that have been raised with you to date are related to client experience, we contend that the incorporation of PPI through victim and survivor user participation should be central to how we move forward and to how services are shaped in order to ensure that they are victim-and-survivor centred and focused. We feel that the absence of an equidistant relationship between policy advice, the design of the service and service delivery is a fundamental problem at the core of issues, and it is through meaningful engagement with victims and survivors in the programme board that we can ensure that the valuable experience of victims and survivors can add to the learning and shape the necessary changes and policies that are vitally needed.

The programme board needs to build confidence with victims and survivors. Some have asked us how that is possible when the same people are making the same decisions that caused the problems in the first place. It is important to note the changes that have arisen in relation to the programme board and the work of the victims and survivors client services team, led by Kat Hinfey. We have seen the extension of respite deadlines, which was raised at this Committee, and changes in monitoring. However, sometimes changes that are being made are found out through client engagement, as opposed to through very clear communication strategies. We point out that that is an area where further work is required. The forum is an integral part of the victims and survivors strategy of 2009, as are the commission and the service. Therefore, the forum needs to be an integral part of the solutions.

The cost of running the VSS, we understood, on the direction of junior Ministers, was not to exceed the cost of the combined Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and the Community Relations Council funding of groups. With a growing staff team in the victims service and the cost of the rental of a city-centre premises — which many people, particularly the injured, have found to be inaccessible — the question arises of whether the victims service is cost-neutral. The capping of schemes is of particular concern to the service user. There was no cap on schemes created under the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. Individuals were afforded dignity and autonomy, and they were able to make decisions on how best they could utilise the assistance provided. The situation of capping has caused distress, and it is also causing distress for those who are applying for the first time. We argue that no disadvantage should be put on victims and survivors in that way.

Extra finance was asked for by the victims service and received. We have been asked why it was not asked for sooner, in order that the needs of victims and survivors could be met in a caring and effective way. Financial assistance was stopped with minimal warning in late spring. We hope that lessons can be taken on board in relation to the need for an appropriately planned system that is equitable and fair. We understand that a greater number of individuals have engaged with psychological trauma, and this increased uptake is extremely positive. However, rather than reducing assistance or service provision elsewhere, the resources need to be put in place. We have also been asked why some people are waiting for months and months for assessment when a simpler process could be used to assess them. The review is, therefore, timely. Why put people through a system that guarantees them nothing, with no published criteria, no guidelines and no transparency?

Finally, we would like to highlight the inequities created, in particular, in relation to the needs of those bereaved, siblings and, in particular, the over-60s, who require a more flexible and practical approach to awards. For example, the over-60s have little desire for personal education and development. Some may desire it, but, in the main, many have reported that they need more practical assistance for their home. We have highlighted the need for an over-60s payment. That was available under the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, and it should be reintroduced. We also continue to highlight the

needs of the siblings of those who died. Siblings are in the main excluded, yet many now carry the burden of dealing with the past in relation to family issues. They are the people who take that forward, yet they are excluded.

We welcome the Committee's ongoing commitment to victims and survivors and that of the Department and VSS. We have no doubt that the findings of the review will shape how VSS moves forward. I will now hand over to Mitch Bresland to talk to you about communication issues. Thank you.

**Mr Mitch Bresland (Victims and Survivors Forum):** I add my thanks to the Committee for inviting us along this afternoon and giving us the opportunity to make our presentation to you.

Communications have been highlighted as a key area of concern. We can report that there has been some notable improvement recently, and we welcome that very much. However, we caution against cosmetic changes or innovation to tackle problems that do not address the fundamental ethical issue of treating victims with respect and compassion. In order to support the need for the ethical, compassionate and professional treatment of victims, the forum identified the need for bespoke training for those working in the sector, whether they are paid or volunteers. The forum was to lead by example in this area, and the commission identified appropriate training. Six forum members, of whom I am one, are in the process of completing a level 4 diploma in working with victims, survivors and witnesses. We would also like to ensure that any changes made to the design and delivery of services are communicated to victims and survivors, ensuring that there is clarity and understanding about the processes that we are being asked to engage in.

We have some concerns over possible gaps being created in some geographical areas and constituencies by some groups failing in funding applications. We have asked what scoping and monitoring has been conducted to ensure that there is no duplication of services in some of those areas. There are new and emerging groups receiving funding in areas where funding is already in place, leading to a duplication of services and lessening the impact of already valuable resources. For example, we know that, in Omagh, there are six providers in one street.

We have asked who decides whether a group is to get funding that they have applied for, and, if they are successful in getting through that, who decides how much they actually get? If there is a decision to fund multiple organisations in one area, has it been equality proofed? In our opinion, a strategic overview should be taken of the services and groups funded, rather than it depending heavily on a group's capacity to successfully fill in a funding application. Sometimes, it seems to be about who can fill in the best application.

We have also recommended that the programme board takes cognisance of the services being delivered to victims and survivors that are not funded through the VSS. For example, my group, Phoenix, is taking referrals from the VSS for complementary therapies. However, we do not receive any funding from the VSS for those therapies. We are funded by Peace III.

In our opinion, meeting need should be the key driver for decision-making, and no other reason. Many victims benefit from using an advocate in their dealings with VSS for a variety of reasons. The working group recommended improvements on this issue to the VSS. We are aware that it has made some improvements, but we would like to ensure that the VSS communicates those improvements to the advocate and the victim so that they experience as little uncertainty and anxiety as possible. We have found evidence that that is happening.

The process of verification of meeting the definition of a victim is causing great distress and upheaval to many victims and survivors. We appreciate that there must be a level of accountability. Therefore, in January 2013, we suggested that a notary public should be used to verify victim experience, similar to that in use for signing passports or driving licences, for example. However, victims are still being asked to carry the burden of proof for meeting victim status. We have asked the programme board to address that action as quickly and efficiently as possible to ensure the minimum upset for victims. I will hand over to Eibhlín now.

**Ms Eibhlín Glenholmes (Victims and Survivors Forum):** Good afternoon, and thank you for your time. We are not here today to highlight problems that you are already aware of. We want to identify key areas where we believe that effective change can be made and to offer you some suggestions that we have discussed and come up with.

I should start off by saying that we, as a forum, collectively believe that the engagement between the forum services working group and the VSS needs to become more meaningful. We acknowledge that we have met the VSS on three occasions since December 2012, and we appreciate that some suggestions that we have made have been used, such as the production of an information leaflet to be given to victims and survivors, the ability of victims and survivors to be assessed in a place where they feel comfortable and the presence of a victims' advocate in the room to provide support during the assessment. Those were all suggestions that the VSS accepted from the forum. However, we believe that engagement to date has not been particularly productive. The VSS could have engaged with us in a much more meaningful way. We have found the VSS to be unresponsive to constructive and positive suggestions that the forum has brought to it. We have asked questions from the VSS that have remained unanswered almost a year later. For example, we raised issues around the criteria for decision-making, discretionary awarding of funds, the complaints procedure and the recruitment of adequately skilled staff, including the recommendation that male assessors must be used, and there are none. To date, none of those issues has been answered satisfactorily.

In January 2013, the forum issued a short questionnaire to fellow victims and forum members to seek feedback of their experience with the VSS. Once the VSS became aware of it, it immediately asked us to stop circulation. We suggest that the VSS should have worked with us, as that would have provided valuable customer feedback to the VSS and would have been incredibly useful in establishing emerging issues. We believe that it would inform the VSS — we are also making this recommendation to the Committee — if a single point of contact between the VSS and the forum services working group were established to ensure that engagement is meaningful, consistent and productive. It is impossible to gauge whether change is taking place if the forum has no direct contact with the VSS.

It is timely to remind everybody here that the commission, the service and the forum are all part of the victims strategy. No part is more important than the other; all parts are equal, and all need to work together with the common approach to benefit victims and survivors. We need to do that with compassion, respect and dignity, keeping victims at the heart of policy design and service delivery.

The members believe that the appeal process is not adequate and lacks independence. Individual victims and groups do not feel that they have any recourse to decisions, as they do not want to jeopardise their chances for future applications or awards. We also have concerns over the application of criteria. In light of that, we have requested the release of the appeal process and the release of the criteria.

The forum services working group would like to see, as a matter of urgency, the annual report and accounts of the VSS. Our understanding was that the establishment of the VSS would be cost-neutral. The organisation was established in April 2012, and we would like to ensure that it is the best use of the victims funds and value for money. We have other concerns over the arbitrary awarding of funds with no clear priorities and transparency of criteria, which can cause disharmony and even acrimony among victims. That also compounds the perception that there is a lack of recognition of the individual needs of victims. We also remain highly concerned about information security. We are concerned that data collected before the forms were changed is being held for no purpose. We reiterate the fact that we are very concerned that individuals' information is being sent — contrary to what the VSS states — to external organisations, such as the Housing Executive. Also, as you know, there is the disappearance of people's files.

The group has also discussed whether the assessors are the people best placed to engage with victims and survivors. Do they have the knowledge and experience of working with victims and survivors of conflict? How was the job specification designed, and how was it informed? Many experienced people in the victims sector are leaving the sector due to the uncertainty and lack of job-funding security. That is a great loss of knowledge, skills and experience, and we encourage the VSS to consolidate the expertise existing in the sector.

We believe that the engagement between the VSS and the groups needs to drastically improve. The relationship between the VSS and the groups is poor, unproductive and unhelpful to victims and survivors. The VSS needs to ensure that those relationships are meaningful, productive and ongoing.

I will finish by commending the swift and effective action taken by OFMDFM, and we look forward to a positive and productive engagement with all parties concerned. We also commend the Department for its proactive engagement with the forum. Ricky Irwin and Cathy met each member of the forum individually, which was unprecedented, and this is the first time that the forum has had a chance to meet Committee members. I now hand over to Jennifer. Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Jennifer McNern (Victims and Survivors Forum):** Hello, and thank you very much for inviting us along today. The members of the services committee feel that current individual financial schemes provide more flexibility and meet the needs of the severely injured in more specific ways through disability needs and help with house management and so on. Our work plan for the coming months will include looking at the appropriateness of the schemes across the breadth of victims' experience. However, we have to say that this is the case for those who have managed their way through an emotional and demanding assessment and then a complex system of bureaucracy, with estimates, invoices and phone calls, not to mention having to explain to the supplier why they need the estimate and invoice and why the payment will be sent directly to the supplier. That could be greatly improved if each service user were assigned a case worker at their point of contact and throughout the client pathway through the service.

Individuals have to tell their stories to complete strangers and explain what the VSS is and what it is about. Is the Committee aware that a victim must complete a procurement exercise, including getting three quotes? For example, for wheelchairs, you have to travel to three different suppliers and have fittings at all three. That takes quite an amount of time, and it is quite undignified to have to go round different places and tell your story. However, I must say that that sort of depended on how challenging you were with the Victims and Survivors Service. For example, if you said that you were not going to do that, that was also OK. Again, it was up to the individual. We argue that that is not the way that victims and survivors should be treated in this day and age.

Staff in the community-based groups currently assist victims and survivors with that process. We argue that that structure should be formally recognised and supported. Members of the services committee also felt that less time and resources should be spent on policing expenditure and more on helpful and productive face-to-face meetings with victims and survivors to find out more about their needs. As one person explained, it is like being called into a social security office to have to explain who else lives with you, what their relationship is to you and what your earnings are. Is the Committee aware that the VSS has asked victims to supply three months' bank statements for everyone who is living in their home and, in some cases, to provide birth certificates?

The language that is used in the forms is too strong. On the respite award letter, words such as "verification checks on a regular basis", "site visits to ensure quality and delivery of services and goods", "claw back funding" and "reporting to the police criminal proceedings" are used. That language should not be coming into people's homes. Advice about the terms under which people will receive an award could be given at face-to-face meetings in a more caring and supportive fashion, if at all.

We argue that bureaucracy needs to be massively reduced, as it would free up resources. For example, the care for carers scheme used to award £500 under the memorial fund, and individuals who were awarded £500 received £500. Under the Victims and Survivors Service, the award is now £1,000, but those who are awarded £1,000 have to explain why they need it, and they have to get estimates and invoices. The award should be given directly to the person who cares, and they should be afforded the respect to decide how they use it. The respite break scheme used to, and still does, award £400 for two people. Again, we suggest that, if an award is approved, that £400 should be given to the people concerned. We also argue that no time constraints should be applied to respite breaks.

Individuals who seek help through the VSS see it as recognition of what happened to them. They should not be made to feel that they have to jump through hoops to access help. They feel vulnerable, as it is the first time that they have had to ask for help in such an exposed way. More flexibility is needed, and a more caring and understanding attitude is essential when dealing with victims and survivors.

Members of the forum services working group have also expressed concerns about mental health provision under the Victims and Survivors Service. Recent statistics indicate that 68% of the Victims and Survivors Service's clients have identified mental health need. That is a lot of people presenting with psychological need. Are they assessed at the review assessment stage? What happens to them afterwards? What is their journey? Are mental health professionals working in the VSS? Do some people go there for treatment?

The forum services working group has asked that the programme board and the commission scope out the impact of meeting mental health need effectively. It has also asked about the impact that it will have on funding for other needs of victims and survivors, considering that schemes have now opened wider to the psychologically injured.

We all want the best, and we all realise that victims and survivors deserve the best. I ask for your ongoing help to make as good a service as is possible. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you all very much indeed. Before drilling down a bit into your comments on the service, may I explore the forum's role a little bit? I think that it was Sandra and Eibhlín who mentioned the strategy that was produced in 2009. It seemed to me that that put in place all the architecture for helping victims and survivors. You have the Department in charge of policy and bringing out a strategy and the funding. Then we were promised a Victims and Survivors Service that would be the main point of delivery when using that resource to help victims. There was also the commissioner, with six statutory duties, who could be summarised as being a champion for victims who would promote their best interests. Then there was the forum, which, to a certain extent, was there to quality assure what was going on. I think that the legislation talks about discussion and consultation with the commissioner. However, I note that the paper of April 2013 states that the forum's powers include offering advice, which I consider to be stronger than consultation and discussion. So, as members of the forum, you find yourselves in an even more enhanced position of authority than the legislation envisaged. You are in a very powerful and important place. Can you give us some idea of what that means for your commitment? How many meetings do you attend? How many hours do you spend reading and doing research? What part of your life do you devote to this project?

**Ms Glenholmes:** I can give you one example, Mike. Two weeks ago, I had to take four days' annual leave from my job to attend to forum business. I took off Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and I took a half day on Friday. That was an extraordinary week; it is not the norm, obviously. At the start, we were advised that we would be expected to meet 17 times a year. Tina McCann will have the figures from the forum. We have met 70 times, to date.

**The Chairperson:** Seventy?

**Ms Glenholmes:** Seventy, to date.

**Ms McNern:** Yes, we meet once a month, and then we have the service's committee meetings. We also have extra service's committee meetings, especially at the minute. I think that, to help to inform them, members of the service committee also meet with groups and talk to them and speak to individuals about their work.

**The Chairperson:** For that, you are paid what?

**Ms Glenholmes:** We are not paid.

**The Chairperson:** You have had 70 meetings, and you have taken days off work.

**Ms Glenholmes:** Those are the official meetings, but we also have unofficial meetings. We have become advocates for victims and survivors.

**The Chairperson:** Jennifer, do you mind me pointing out that you have been a victim and survivor for 41 and three quarter years?

**Ms McNern:** Since 1972; you can work that out. I have forgotten.

**The Chairperson:** Are you in the place that you expected to be with the support and the structures that we just discussed?

**Ms McNern:** No. Since the Good Friday Agreement, we have had to deal with the memorial fund. When it started off, it was quite a precarious situation for victims and survivors to be in. However, I must say that it developed into something that victims and survivors could appreciate, at least to a greater degree. I suppose we are just starting off again with the Victims and Survivors Service. Although I think and hope that it will develop into something more concrete for victims and survivors, it is sad to see people being put through hoops, especially when it is not necessary.

**The Chairperson:** Can I ask about an issue that was brought up on an ethical approach from the Victims and Survivors Service? What could it practically do to assure you that it was taking an ethical, do-no-harm approach to its engagements?

**Mr Bresland:** I suppose that could happen in some of the communication. I touched on communication, which a lot of the issues that we raised involve. There are two sides to it: the administration and the actual delivery of the service itself. Sometimes what is on the tin is not what is in the tin, if that makes sense. You hear what the service sounds like, which is that it sounds absolutely fantastic, but it is a different matter when you get to the actual victims who feed back to you. I know from being in a group that communication is more difficult, and the victims service seems to want people to come to it so that it can say that it has a big individual uptake. However, some of those individuals have difficulty speaking for themselves. Sometimes they get the wrong impression, and we pushed for the advocate at the start, so communication through the group is more difficult now. I have found myself ringing up to ask questions to be told that I cannot speak for the member, even when that member was standing beside me. I have had to give the phone over and say, "Can I talk?", and then I would speak for them and try to explain it.

On the ethical side, the service could just be a wee bit more compassionate. Somebody mentioned compassion. The service needs to understand the issues. Sometimes, to understand that, it would be good to get more involved with groups such as ours to ask what the queries and questions are. On the ethical side, it could tone it down a wee bit, be a wee bit more compassionate, and talk to people and find out that it is not just about filling in a form, because it is horrendous for some of our people.

Somebody mentioned language. The language could also be toned down. Although it might be a necessity, it does not always need to be read from a form as though it were a formatted ticking exercise.

**The Chairperson:** When you make those points to the service and the Department, what reaction do you get?

**Mr Bresland:** None, usually.

**The Chairperson:** None?

**Mr Bresland:** We were waiting on some of the communication for over a year. So, I suppose "none" is a bit extreme, perhaps.

**The Chairperson:** Is there a difference between verbal exchanges and writing to the service formally?

**Ms Glenholmes:** We are great believers in getting things on paper and keeping them there so that we have a record. We have submitted written questions to the VSS, and I referred to some of them. I think that we submitted six questions a year ago, and there has been no response at all from the VSS.

**The Chairperson:** Do you raise those issues verbally?

**Ms Glenholmes:** We would have to see the VSS first to be able to raise them verbally. We reiterate our requests through the commissioner and the commission staff. As I said, the first engagement that we had last December was at our request, when we asked to meet the VSS. We had that meeting and a follow-up meeting in January, which, admittedly, was at the request of the VSS. At that time the meeting was to be about the release of the information on the individual financial needs package, which had not materialised at the time of the meeting, so it should have been cancelled. The following meeting was a few months later.

What we are trying to say is that we have been more than willing to work with the VSS, but it is like knocking at the door and knowing that somebody is in but they do not answer you. So, it has made the forum feel unappreciated, I would say, for the hard work that it puts in. The fact is that we were and are so willing to work with the VSS. We want to help the victims and survivors, because they are the people whom we represent. It would have made so much more sense for the service to have worked with us and to have accepted the advice and feedback that we were so willing to give to it.

**The Chairperson:** Before I bring Alex Maskey in, I just want to be assured that nobody believes that anybody who works in this area is out to deliberately do damage.

**Ms Glenholmes:** Absolutely not.

**The Chairperson:** As Mitch was saying, it is a question of tweaking it and of taking a different cultural approach to something with a bit more compassion and understanding of human nature. That is the area that we are in.

**Ms Stone:** I wonder whether I could just pick up on that, Chairperson. It is important to reiterate some of the points that have been made here. There has been a shift in approach, and I think that that is a direct consequence of the Committee's interest in what is happening with the Victims and Survivors Service and how the relationship between the Department, the service, the commission and the forum is being managed.

As I said, there have been some improvements. There is still some considerable way to go, and my colleagues explained what needs to be done. However, I would not want you to go away with the impression that things are not being improved. They are being improved, and a programme board has been established to oversee that. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have taken the time to write and ask me to undertake an independent expert assessment. That assessment will consider, very carefully, the purpose of the individual needs review, the ways in which people are communicated with and the way in which information is used, managed and kept. It will also consider bigger-picture things, such as the governance of the organisation and the role of its board, and it will highlight what improvements need to be made in the future.

We hope to be able to report back to the First Minister and deputy First Minister by February. After that, we will, of course, be able to come and share the findings of that review with the Committee and answer any questions that you have on it. Improvements are being made.

**Ms Peake:** The creation of the Victims and Survivors Service is positive. It is about a commitment to victims and survivors to give them the very best. The fundamental issue may be to do with the policy of the 100% assessment. In the past, people could make an application to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund in private and without having to come out of their home or community environment. We have now moved to a system of 100% assessment, which was face to face but now takes the form of a telephone enquiry. I think that the difficulty is that that highlights some of the problems that individuals have faced along the way.

If the process is proving so difficult, which the review will pick up, is it right that it should continue in its full form and, if so, does it need some adaptation? I think that that is the difficulty for individuals. They have to answer questions on a 36-page form. For some individuals, that is the first time that they will have engaged in such a process, and the questions are such that they can take people aback. Yesterday, we listened to stakeholders who reported the distress that individuals faced when they went through that process. Quite frankly, some will not do it; they have said that they will not go through the process. That is not connected to their needs, it is simply that they could not face it.

**Mr Maskey:** You are welcome here this afternoon. Thank you for your very detailed presentations. I am taking it as a given that there is a consensus in the forum on the grievances and concerns that you expressed and that all your representatives share the suggestions that you made.

**Ms Glenholmes:** Yes.

**Mr Maskey:** I am comforted by the view that progress is being made. I share the Chairperson's view that there is nobody in this process who wants to do anybody any harm and that everyone wants to serve the sector's interests. However, I take that at face value only up to the point where the problems that have been articulated are addressed. I do not give any slack to any part of the sector that is not meeting needs and properly addressing the concerns that have been raised. We have said this before, but as far as I am concerned, the fact that some of these matters have been outstanding for this length of time is unacceptable. I know that my colleagues would say that.

If I remember correctly, I put it formally to Denis McMahon a few weeks ago that I wanted to ensure — I think that this reflected the wishes of all the Committee members — that the victims would be involved in some structured way with the programme board to address those issues. I am quite perturbed to hear today that that is not the case. If it is not the case, we will take why not up with the Department, because we were given an absolute assurance that it would be. As far as I am concerned, it is inconceivable that the victims, and in this instance, through the forum services working group at the very minimum, would not have a structured, formal and organic role in all this. That is

because, as somebody said earlier, you cannot do it without the forum and the commission, the services group and the VSS. Those are the three component parts of the strategy, and it will not work unless each of those is working properly and together in a structured, formal and organic way. As we move forward in an expeditious way, I am interested only in all the issues that have been raised. People may not agree with all the issues and the ideas and recommendations. However, by the same token, we made it very clear to the Department and the programme board that we want to see a list and a systematic approach to this. My little brain tells me that people identify a grievance or a problem, and somebody has to address that and tick off whether it has been sorted out.

My view is that we could spend another year at this, although we do not intend to. I presume that you do not intend to waste your time like that. Nevertheless, I want to be assured that each of the grievances that you raised will be formally addressed and marked off as having been dealt with. That is what I want to hear. I do not mean that that is all that I want to hear, but that, essentially, is the process that I want us to be advised of, if you know what I mean. That does not mean that I or anyone else has to agree with every individual point, because some matters are policy and others are clearly operational. I think that you would describe those as ethical. So, I am pleased to hear that there is progress, and that is essential. I would not expect it to be any other way, to be quite frank, given the very candid discussions that we have had here in recent weeks, based largely on the concerns that you and the commissioner raised.

I commend you for the very diligent approach that you are taking. You have also been very patient and generous. However, we want to make sure that the issues that you are raising and the grievances that you are putting on the table are formally addressed one by one. We made it very clear to the Department that we want to see the best, and I am assured by all concerned that they are working to do that. However, I am a bit concerned about some of the evidence that I heard today, because it does not suggest that it is entirely addressed in the way in which I want to see it addressed. As I said, I want to see all the issues on the table addressed one by one and ticked off as having been dealt with, one way or the other, to people's satisfaction.

**Mr Spratt:** I have picked out two or three points, and probably one particular point that everyone made. First, the commissioner said that she assumed that there were rumours or whatever going about that the forum was not useful. You said that you heard that. What evidence do you have for that? That is my first point.

**Ms Stone:** Sorry, what evidence?

**Mr Spratt:** What evidence is there for that? What evidence is that based on? You made a sweeping statement, but you did not give us any details. So, I am trying to probe for more details.

You said that you hoped to have the independent assessment finished probably by February. I assume that you have been in discussion with the programme board on some of the issues that Mr Maskey and the rest of us raised over a period of time. I think that you indicated that some of the issues were fairly quickly sorted out, but you said that there was still a distance to travel. Can we have some more indications of what the outstanding issues are?

Sandra, where your evidence to the Committee is concerned, we had previous discussions about the number of forms. My understanding was that some progress had been made on the forms etc. You used the words "evasive process" on some of the questions. When we first took evidence from the commissioner, there was the issue of retraumatizing people by simply asking them, after years, for things such as a death certificate and stuff like that. Can you tell the Committee where you are with that?

Mitch, you talked about communication and said that some notable progress had been made. I assume that there is continuing progress. Interestingly, you made a point that has been made a number of times by quite a number of people. You used Omagh as an example, where there are six organisations on one street. Are you aware of exactly how many organisations there are? Obviously, the more organisations there are, the more thinly the money is spread out and it is more difficult to do the work that you want to do. That needs to be looked at.

You talked about the complementary processes that you are being asked to do. Can you explain more fully where those requests are coming from? You told us that your funding comes from Peace III.

I just want to make another couple of quick points. Eibhlín said that files have disappeared; has that been sorted out? There were files with the Memorial Fund, and stuff like that. There seemed to be duplication; the whole process was starting all over again, re-traumatising people and asking them questions, yet the computer information had not been passed from the Community Relations Council. Has that now taken place and has it helped to ease the situation? How many files have disappeared? Is it one file, 100 files or 200 files? It would be interesting to hear that.

Finally, Jennifer, it is appalling that anybody has to ask for three different quotes for a wheelchair. That is just unbelievable. Mr Attwood raised that point at one of the first meetings that we had on this issue. Asking for three estimates is a nonsense, because someone could look up the cost of an item on a computer. I assume that you have no issue with an invoice being paid directly and no issue with accountability. There needs to be accountability because it is public money. We all have to be accountable for money in this place, so there is no issue around accountability. I would like you to clear that up as well. The Department is under scrutiny, and we put it under scrutiny on issues like that daily, as do all the Committees in the Assembly. I have made a number of points. Perhaps one person can clear them up.

**Ms Stone:** I will take the point about the forum and its level of agreement, or disagreement. I am very privileged to work with a group of people who give up their time for no remuneration. You have heard that they attend many meetings and spend a lot of time preparing, thinking, discussing, consulting and writing to make sure that other victims have a better experience. That is the best possible type of public service.

During my process of engagement with groups, I hear people saying that the forum is not much use because it cannot agree on anything. That has been said to me by individuals as I am out and about on my public engagements. It is patently not true. People from a very diverse range of backgrounds are sitting before you today, agreeing absolutely. Alex, you asked me whether I was representing the entire forum when I say these things. Yes, the forum services working group represents all members of the forum. They are representing their own experiences and those of their colleagues, friends and relatives when it comes to the delivery of services. So people do agree on these things. Obviously, there are things that people do not agree on, but, as I said in my opening remarks, the forum has come to an understanding that, although it might not agree with a person's view, it respects that that person has a right to that view. That is fantastic. I think that the forum has provided a model, a framework and a way of working that understands, acknowledges and accepts differences across communities, focused on delivering better outcomes for, in some cases, some incredibly vulnerable, fragile and frail victims. I think that we, as a society, need to commend it for that.

When I said that there is still some distance to travel, I meant that I do not think that anyone sitting around this table or members of the public would consider for one moment that things are as they should be. Jennifer spoke very movingly that, 40-something years later, she is not in the place that she expected she would be. Other victims also say that. We have a collective responsibility, with this Committee in its scrutiny of the way that services are being designed and delivered, to make sure that those services will be the best that they can be. We are not there yet. There is some distance to travel.

I am confident that people from OFMDFM will give you an update on progress that has been made, but please be assured that members of the forum services working group, members of staff at the commission and I will be keeping a very close eye on progress and making recommendations for better implementation of services. We will be reporting back to you, as a scrutiny Committee, and we expect to be held accountable by you. We are accountable to you. Most importantly for me, I am accountable to victims, and I need to be able to sit and look them in the eye and say that I, the staff at the commission and members of the forum have done the very best that we can for them. That is what we will continue to do.

**Ms Glenholmes:** On the question about the files, I refer you to the social policy report, which I know you all received from WAVE. We would say that one file going missing is one too many. It should never happen, given the stringent conditions that the VSS told us that it would use. I was just talking to Sandra about this and, offhand, we know of seven cases. We assure you that we will collate that information as far as we humanly can if people come forward to us and report it, because it is a hit-and-miss affair. People can tell the forum, and they can go to the commission so, sometimes, it is through word of mouth. We have an obligation not to report anecdotal information. We have to go and speak to that person, which I do, so that we can stand over every word of evidence that we give you. We will try to collate that information.

**Mr Spratt:** They have disappeared through the VSS. Is that right?

**Ms Glenholmes:** Yes.

**Ms Peake:** On monitoring, we have been heartened that the Committee and the Department have been proactive in taking on the issues that have been presented to you from the beginning of October. That is important, and it is important not to lose sight of that. We represented the issues. In many ways, the system was being imposed, and that brought difficulties in relation to practice. We are pleased that the monitoring systems were very quickly stood down and that new systems are being considered. No one in the sector is opposed to monitoring. No one is opposed to accountability. It is about how it is done and how meaningful it is. We were happy to share those forms with you, and you could see the problems.

On the point about intrusion and invasive questioning, many people do not want to be taken back to have to re-explain what happened, and, sadly, that is what has happened. We understood that, in March this year, Memorial Fund data was being transferred. An injured person said to me, "I have not grown my legs back since the last time I told them I have lost my legs." That is true. Why should people have to re-explain, and why should they have to be taken back? I think that people have found that invasive, and I think that people have found having to re-explain what happened, how it happened and when it happened difficult. We have heard very distressing stories about people who have had to produce death certificates to prove who their child was.

The big issue is that it is not an optional process. Individuals have to go through that process to get an end result at the other side. We want the review to tackle that very firmly, quickly and speedily. That is a central issue. It has not been optional for anybody who needs financial respite support, and it is an invasive process for some. However, others have engaged with services that they previously would not have accessed. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that that was the intention of the Victims and Survivors Service, and that has happened for some people. It is important to point out that balance.

**Mr Bresland:** Jimmy, I picked up on three points. If I miss one, you can remind me. The first one was on communication, and how we know that it is better. That is one of the issues that we discussed in the forum. One of the big issues that we face is that, when we feed something through the system, if they pick up on it, like advocacy and allowing someone else in the room, no one ever comes back and tells us that it has changed. We are fishing around and hoping that, somewhere along the line, someone will tell us. We do not know. The slight improvement that we mentioned has happened because we have actively asked people and tried to get them to tell us. However, as I said earlier, the VSS encourages individuals to come along. Some individuals, quite rightly, do not want to be associated with a group, and that is fine, but a lot of the people I send from my group appear as individuals, and I receive no feedback. As I know that I have sent them, every so often I will ask them for feedback.

I received an e-mail the other day — I will not read it. My confidence was soaring and I thought that, today, I would be able to say that lots of changes had been made but that e-mail took me right back again. I received that e-mail five days ago, and it said that nothing has improved on that side. The evidence that I have is mainly anecdotal, but it seems that, if you get the right individual, things happen. I have difficulty in finding things out, and I sit on the forum. As I always say, what hope does somebody in Portaferry have who does not even know what the forum is or what this Committee is? How do they get help?

There has been improvements, and I have been told so by two or three individuals who went through the system. However, as I said, the big problem we have is that there is no system that feeds back to us and tells us that something was a good idea so that the VSS can make changes. My question is how they communicate when they do make a change. The last that I heard — I do not know how right this is — the assessment form had been amended something like 10 times this year, but I have not been told that officially. I do not know how that is communicated, and that is one of the issues and problems that we have.

We have also talked about the need to have an overview that tells us how the VSS is supposed to work. If it does not work in that way, there should be a mechanism so that we can feed that back. From asking around, none of us actually know what is expected so, if there is a problem, we do not know if it is right or wrong; we do not know whether that was the intent. We need someone to tell us how it is supposed to work and, if it does not work like that, we should be able to let them know.

However, that is not happening. That is the big problem with communication. Small changes are being made, but that is because we have asked people for information and they have given it to us.

Your second point was about Omagh. Yes, there are six groups in one street. Those groups are not all funded by VSS. Some are funded under Peace III and some by the Victims Service. Some time ago, we asked for a mapping exercise to be done. From talking to others, I know that several new groups have been started and funded. This is not a self-interest thing; I just mention it because I know about it, but a new group has started and is located literally down the stairs from our group. It does exactly the same work as we do up the stairs, in the same building. The VSS is funding that group and Peace III is funding the group up the stairs. There is an issue. We asked for a mapping exercise to be done to try to tie all those people together. Like-minded people could surely go to other like-minded people for services. That is the type of exercise we have asked for, but, as far as I am aware, it has not happened. We have not seen any list of groups that got funding, so we do not know all the new groups that have been funded. However, through knowing people in those groups, we are aware that at least four new groups have been funded and are doing similar work. On the point about complementary therapies, we send somebody for an assessment, they go to the VSS and get that assessment. They say to the person, "What would you like? You need complementary therapy. OK, we will refer you to Phoenix". If I had wanted them to get complementary therapy in the first place, I could have sent them next door. We have a room where we do complementary therapies. Why go through all that assessment just to end up coming back to the same office? Apart from that, the ethical side is that we will never turn anyone away. If they need treatment or therapy, they will get it, but what is the point of putting them through that, hoping that they will get something different that will move them on, when they end up back where they started after the assessment?

The other thing, of course, is that we offer therapy funded by Peace III. That means that someone who is not a victim and is getting money from the Victims Service is missing out because that person is taking a place that is funded by Peace III. Obviously, we cannot bill the VSS for work that we are already funded for. Those are the types of issue we have. It is a bit complicated. I suppose it is more of an ethical thing than anything else. It means that someone else who is not entitled to Victims Service money is missing out on a place because it has referred them back to us to get complementary therapies. I hope that makes sense.

**Mr Spratt:** That is fine. I think the wheelchair issue was answered, Jennifer. I think Evelyn answered that.

**Ms McNern:** I would just like to say a little bit about that, with regard to accountability for public money. I am very much for accountability, but I think it is important that people are able to keep their privacy if they want to.

**Mr Spratt:** Absolutely.

**Ms McNern:** Some people do not have a problem with telling a particular service what has happened to them, who is paying for it, and all of the rest of it, but there is a way of doing that without every Tom, Dick and Harry knowing your business.

**Mr Spratt:** And not three times.

**Ms McNern:** For example, you could get the invoice or estimate, get paid for it, and then pay the service deliverer yourself. There are ways and means of doing things, if someone wants it done that way.

**Mr Lyttle:** I will keep my comments fairly brief, hopefully. I just want to thank you for being here today to make your presentations. I pay tribute to the work that the Victims' Commissioner, the forum and the victims themselves do. It seems that victims have had to fight for every process and piece of assistance that they have received, despite the fact that they have borne the brunt of all that is wrong due to the conflict in our neck of the woods. I thank you for the work that you do, whether it is relation to the issues that the Haass process is dealing with at the moment or in relation to services or reparation. The victims are leading the way on ideas for how to deal with these issues. They are coming together and finding agreement, despite the diverse backgrounds that they come from. I thank you and pay tribute to you for the work that you do.

There are, obviously, a number of issues in relation to the Victims and Survivors Service, whether it is assessment, information sharing, communication or even, as Mitch has just said, understanding

exactly how it is meant to work. I hope that the independent review will be a significant way to really and fundamentally deal with those issues. Kathryn, given that one of the key concerns is about getting access to information and information sharing, are you content that you will get the access to the information that you need to ensure that that review adequately addresses the numerous and wide-ranging issues that are in play?

**Ms Stone:** I have absolutely no doubt that there has been a renewed determination in the Department to ensure that the commission, the forum and the independent expert assessors have access to all the information that they need to ensure that the outcome of the review is the most valuable and useful way of making services better for victims and survivors. If I feel that we are not being given access to that information, please be assured that I will be back here to ask for your advice about how to go about getting it.

**Mr Lyttle:** We will be glad to assist you if that is the case. I noted and am encouraged by the comment that you made about the fact that the Committee, in whatever small way, has played a constructive role in trying to get to the bottom of those issues and to make the system work for victims and survivors as well as possible.

**The Chairperson:** One other issue that was raised in your paper was a meeting some time ago with the Minister for Social Development and an arrangement or a discussion about cooperative working to assess the impact on victims and survivors of welfare reform. Is there an update on that meeting, which, I think was in November 2012?

**Ms Stone:** We do not have a specific update for you today, Chair. We can make that available for you. I can give you a verbal update and say that there have been some very positive conversations subsequent to that meeting. Individual members of the forum have reported very positive discussions with officials from the Department for Social Development with regard to their own specific circumstances. I am conscious that people in the Department for Social Development have been out to meet individual forum members and the forum as a whole on at least one occasion. There is positive engagement, but I can give you a more formal update at some point.

**The Chairperson:** No, I am perfectly content with that. I note that this is one of three working groups. I imagine that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that we will request an engagement with the other two.

**Ms Stone:** I am sure. There is a dealing with the past working group, which has had very positive engagement with Dr Haass and his team. The dealing with the past working group and other members of the forum met the panel of parties' representatives and have, indeed, met members of this Committee following a meeting with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We also have a building for the future working group, which is particularly concerned with the trans-generational impact, the impact on children and young people and, in particular, the concerns about mental health and how we promote positive mental health. The idea of a trauma centre and how we work to manage mental health distress is very important to that group. Each of those groups would be very happy to come and make a presentation to the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** I have a final question. Do you think that people in positions of power in the Executive and Departments understand that the legacy goes down through generations?

**Ms Stone:** From the engagement that we have, I think that people do. I think that there is a very real understanding of the trans-generational impact of the Troubles. There is a very real emerging understanding of how that affects people's mental health.

**Mr Attwood:** I apologise that I was delayed. It was due to Haass-O'Sullivan meetings. I have missed at least half, if not more, of what was said. I think that I have picked up the tone and tenor of things. Partly because of the issues of the VSS and the Haass-O'Sullivan talks, but mostly because of you and the people you represent, it is my sense that this is our best chance to deal comprehensively with the legacy of the past and victims and survivors' needs. Where those needs have not been answered properly in recent times by the VSS or in respect of any other matter to deal with the legacy of the past, this is our best opportunity. Therefore, if we do not take this opportunity and do the work to remedy issues with the VSS comprehensively and boldly, it will be hard to recreate that opportunity on the far side of this time.

I acknowledge that progress has been made. However, I expect no less. After the withering commentary on the VSS, or aspects of it, if, two months later, there were no tangible, real changes, anecdotal or systemic, I would be very surprised. I do not think that that is really the issue. The issues are more fundamental than that. In order to give the project board its place, my question is about whether you are satisfied. I have said this before at a Committee meeting and I say it now, because I understand that, besides Sharon — besides Kathryn, there is not a victims' representative at the — sorry about that.

**Ms Stone:** She is my older, less glamorous sister.

**Mr Attwood:** Sorry. My mind is in at least two places at the moment, so apologies for that.

**The Chairperson:** I do not like the other place your mind is at.

**Ms Stone:** Nor do I, Chair.

**Mr Attwood:** I suspect that I will have to live with this for a while.

**Ms Stone:** What about me?

**Mr Attwood:** I really apologise for that. Given that the problems around the VSS were in part or, in my view, fully the consequence of those who were involved, be it on the official side or the VSS human resources side, and given that all these issues gathered and were the consequence of the decisions and the approach that they took, how confident can you be that — given that the Victims' Commission is the representative of the victims' voice, if you like, at that project board — that project board, which is populated by people who in whatever way or shape have contributed to the difficulties, can be remedied by those same people? Is it not an imperative that victims' representatives be much more fully and deeply involved in the project board, if the project board is being presented as a potential remedy to a lot of these issues?

**Ms Peake:** In our paper, we have argued that the victim and survivor user representation should be very central to this, that it is a missed opportunity and that, given the difficulties that have been in place, not to take it on board would be foolhardy. We feel that they must be there and that they must be central. They have a very, very clear role to play.

In relation to the difficulties, we are heartened by the review and by its independence. Had that not happened, we would have been calling very clearly for that, and you will see that in our advice to the commissioner. We are heartened that that will take place.

The difficulty is — and it was highlighted earlier this year — that the structure of the Victims and Survivors Service, in this review, is to be considered, because on one hand you have individuals, on another you have assessment, and on another you have the mechanisms in relation to group initiatives and group support through service provision. The difficulty for many individuals is that they had not felt able to talk about the difficulties of the process, when that may have been seen to influence the outcome that they achieved.

I think that that shows where there needs to be clear transparency in relation to how those decisions are made. There also needs to be very clear transparency in relation to what the criteria are, because, at the minute, we have people who are going through a process but do not know what the criteria are. When they are turned down, they do not know why. So, I think that there are clearly issues in relation to the policy of 100% assessment, the policy in relation to how decisions are taken and what is available, the exclusion of siblings, where the bereaved sit and how the system is governed.

**Mr Attwood:** There is not a word on which I, and many others, would differ with you. I welcome, in particular, the review that you are taking forward. But my question was: given that the Victims' Commissioner formally alerted OFMDFM in relation to this matter, the VSS and the multiple issues around the VSS, and given the very clear voices that are coming from victims and survivors, is it not a matter of concern, now that we have the project board, that, a couple of months later, it seems that the penny still has not dropped in certain places? For the project board to do what it is meant to do, you and people like you are required to be at the heart of its discussions and how it conducts its affairs.

Yet, the project board, and those who are responsible for the project board, do not seem to have yet grasped that central point, which, ultimately, is the central point of all of this.

**Ms Glenholmes:** We agree with you. In her presentation, Sandra explained to the Committee our concerns about the absence of someone from the forum or its ilk on the board. We represent a sector that has no choice but to be optimistic and hopeful. We cannot afford to be anything else, or where would we go? We trust. We hope. We sleep with one eye open just to see what is going to come down the road. We have respect for the people who are undertaking this responsibility on the board. We respect them and trust that they will listen to our voice; we would like to be at the table because we think that we have earned the right to be there. Let us wait and see. We will be hopeful and expectant and as helpful as we possibly can.

**Mr Attwood:** I too am relentlessly positive. I get criticised in my party for being too relentlessly positive. However, it seems to me that, unless the project board is grounded in what you say and with you in it, there is a potential risk of missing things or not getting everything done that needs to get done, given this very particular moment, when we are dealing comprehensively with the past and issues around the VSS. Somehow, that could get inadvertently missed.

**Ms Glenholmes:** We agree with you 100%.

**Mr Attwood:** I have two other questions.

In terms of the work of the project board, has the board advised you that each and every issue that you have identified — I heard your presentation, Eibhlín — because you named about 20, and there are others, is being addressed in a dedicated and specific way, be it around human resources, auditing or reforms and so on and so forth? To borrow an example, when the Patten report was being implemented, the oversight team had 675 performance indicators to ensure that nothing was missed. Are you satisfied that, in the work programme of the project board, it is adopting the same discipline to ensure that nothing is missed?

**Ms Glenholmes:** Yes, in a nutshell, we are. I make reference to the fact that in this new departure — the new relationship between the Department, the forum, the Commission and the VSS — there seems to be a realignment of good wishes from everyone. The representatives from the Department, Ricky and Cathy, are visiting every single member of the forum. We did not see their predecessors ever; we never met them. That is another signal to us of a well-crafted, well-intentioned approach. They are seeing every member of the forum individually and asking for their opinions, suggestions and ideas. They come to the forum meetings and attended our engagements with the political parties. We would say that it is best practice to have a service user on that board, and we believe in the good intent and absolute commitment of the Committee and the Department to rectify that.

**The Chairperson:** We will take that issue up with officials in a minute.

**Mr Attwood:** I have one final question, which is a structural one. Having talked to individual victims and groups, I am open to persuasion that some of the specialist work done by the VSS should actually be done by a properly regulated and audited group. You made the point, Mitch, that somebody seeks support, goes off and gets assessments, comes back to the original place and then is told to go next door. Rather than put people through that, it seems to me that they should just be told to go next door. Consequently, I am open to persuasion. I think that there is a lot of merit in some of the work that the VSS does actually being done by the groups that have the authority and are properly regulated. What I am worried about is that the VSS project board may end up maximising the shape of the VSS without considering that there is a better shape to deliver services in the first place.

**Ms Glenholmes:** I think the project board will be open to open to looking at that in the round, taking a holistic approach and not coming in with, "Well, we made it, so we can't fix it". I think there is that credibility about this Committee, the project board and the Department.

**Mr Bresland:** I agree with you, Alex. I can understand, and I am not advocating getting rid of groups, but if we just keep forming six groups every year, the money will get thinner and thinner, and the service will be reducing and reducing. That is why we are asking for a mapping exercise to try to consolidate the groups that we have. Sometimes, it looks as though groups are formed where the money is instead of where the need is. We are just saying, "Look, if there is a need in one area and it is being covered by a group, what is the point of another group?" I do not know what the reasons are,

but that is what it looks like from the outside. The groups could deliver that service providing they do not keep depleting the money.

**Mr Attwood:** I appreciate that point, but my point was more whether some of the groups should not, if they were properly regulated and audited etc, be actually doing the front line delivery themselves, rather than VSS?

**Ms Peake:** The reality is that they are. There are groups that are providing those front-line services and, potentially, individuals are being assessed by those groups, have a pathway of care that is standardised and have a casework process in place. The key issues are regulation and inspection. If nobody in the sector from individual groups could meet that, then they would need it. Others who do not meet it know where they can be benchmarked and could be supported to meet it. It is about maximising availability of support in the community.

We met the project board once and are meeting it again. We were heartened that it listened fully to our presentation. We are not fully aware of what is on its list. Potentially, maybe we should or should not be. Hopefully, the issues that should be taken on board will be taken on board. I suppose that we are looking at an effective commissioner in relation to advocating clearly to us if that is not happening. The issues are now before the Committee, and we ask you to keep a clear watching brief on this.

**The Chairperson:** I am keen that we allow time to put the points you have made to the officials who will now join us. If everybody is content, I will finish this session by saying, "Thank you" to Jennifer, Mitch, Sandra, Eibhlín and, indeed, the Stone sisters. *[Laughter.]* I take away the amount of time that you put in on a voluntary basis. It is phenomenal. So, thank you very much and merry Christmas.