



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Draft Five-year Strategy for Victims and
Witnesses of Crime: Consultation
Responses

7 March 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Ms Maura Campbell	Department of Justice
Mr Maurice Campbell	Department of Justice
Ms Veronica Holland	Department of Justice

The Deputy Chairperson: I invite the officials to the table. I welcome Maura Campbell, who is the deputy director of the criminal justice development division, and Veronica Holland and Maurice Campbell, who are also from the criminal justice development division. The session is being reported by Hansard, and the transcript will be published on the Committee web page. I invite Maura to make some opening comments, and then I will leave it open to members to ask questions.

Ms Maura Campbell (Department of Justice): Thank you very much, indeed. The purpose of our appearance today is to brief you on the outcome of the consultation on a new strategy for victims and witnesses of crime. We have engaged with you a number of times on this subject, including when we provided evidence to your inquiry last year, and we welcome the Committee's continuing interest in this area of work.

We are pleased to have got to the point where we are now, we hope, close to launching the strategy and embarking on a major new programme of work to improve services for victims and witnesses. That work has the full support of senior leaders across the criminal justice agencies, and it will be delivered in partnership with the agencies and our delivery partners in the voluntary sector, that is, Victim Support and the NSPCC, who have played a really important role in getting us to this point.

Your pack includes a summary of the consultation responses; a copy of the revised strategy, which incorporates a number of changes in response to the consultation feedback; and the first action plan under the new strategy, which sets out what we want to achieve over the first two years.

Paragraph 6 of the covering paper lists the main changes that we have made to the strategy. In the interests of time, I do not propose to go through all those now, but we would be very happy to elaborate on any of them during questions. I think that it is fair to say that the response to the consultation overall was positive. There was strong support for the overall aim of the strategy and the

proposed themes. Effectively, the responses have endorsed the conclusions that were reached in your inquiry report and how we have transposed those into the new strategy.

Most of the changes that we have made to the text have been about finessing and clarifying it, just to make it absolutely clear what it is that we are trying to achieve. We have asked the Plain English Campaign to go through the strategy for us and help us to simplify some of the language before we publish it, since some areas are probably still a bit technical. So, there may be a few more presentational tweaks before we publish.

We also received a number of helpful comments on the proposed actions. In response to that, we have included some new actions, which include publicising and promoting the new statutory victim charter and, in addition to creating the new charter, making sure that there is full public awareness that it now exists. We are continuing our engagement with representative organisations and reviewing the impact on victims of the youth conferencing process. In response to the feedback, we have also brought forward a couple of actions into the first two years. Those relate to information sharing, reducing waiting times at court, improving communication with witnesses while they are in court, and addressing victim and witness apprehension about court attendance.

Overall, the main message that we have taken from the consultation has been that we now have a clear consensus on what needs to be done. That ground has been comprehensively covered, and we now need to get on with doing the work. We have been using this business year as a foundation year, so we have already made a good start in a number of key areas. I should make the Committee aware that, in relation to one of the actions regarding registered intermediaries, we have included April 2013 as the target date for the commencement of the new registered intermediaries pilot schemes, but that is dependent on the Criminal Justice Bill receiving Royal Assent. If Royal Assent for the Bill is slightly delayed, it might be May before we can commence those schemes. It is a short delay, but I thought that it would be best to flag that now.

In respect of the next steps, subject to members' views, we are hoping to launch the strategy and action plan in April. We will come back to brief you again on the provisions to be contained in the Faster, Fairer Justice Bill, including the new statutory victim charter. We will also be happy to report back to you on other key pieces of work and how we are delivering against our action plan generally. We are happy to take any questions.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much. I will open up with a couple of questions. It seems to be the intention to have a separate victim charter and witness charter. Part of the strategy outlined that, in many instances, victims are witnesses, so I would like to hear your rationale as to why those should be separate. Do you not think that, if that is the way that it is intended to be taken forward, it may create a degree of confusion?

Ms Maura Campbell: We will have to make clear that if you are attending as a witness but are a victim of crime, it is the victim charter entitlements that apply to you, because those will be higher-level entitlements. We had indicated before that we are not as far down the track in respect of witnesses. We already have a victim code of practice, which sets out what standards should apply within the agencies. In creating the new victim charter, we need to overlay that with the higher level of entitlements that should apply to victims and put that on a statutory footing. So, we have quite a bit of work done in that area, and we want to get on with that. We do not want it to be held up by trying to do the corresponding work first on the detail of what would be in a witness charter.

We are also mindful of the fact that there are numerous types of witnesses, including expert witnesses, so we may have to differentiate between the different types of witnesses and the standards that would apply or the types of services that would be available to each category of witness. So, rather than wait until we have done all that work and produce a single charter, we felt that it was better to move on very quickly with the victim charter. We have the opportunity with the Faster, Fairer Justice Bill to get that in place as quickly as possible, and then provide the enabling power to create the witness charter but have it developed in a slightly slower time frame.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. In many ways, it is understandable that you do not want to hold back that aspect, given that it is well advanced and the other one is not. Do you intend to harmonise them in the future as one catches up with the other? As it is written, it looks as though we will have two charters and that is how we will go forward. If it makes more practical sense to harmonise them in the future, would that be your intention, or have you ruled that out?

Ms Maura Campbell: We can certainly look at that. Although we might make separate legislative provision for a victim charter and a witness charter, as we develop that in the future, we could bring those together in a single document. If that was more user-friendly for victims and witnesses of crime, we would certainly be willing to consider it.

The Deputy Chairperson: In respect of the timescale for the evaluation of facilities for victims and witnesses, the action plan states that it should be around March 2014, but later on in the commentary, it states that that has been moved back from three to five years. Is there any particular reason for that?

Ms Maura Campbell: Apologies; I am just trying to find the relevant bit.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is OK. Perhaps it is a bit technical. You might want to come back to us on that.

Ms Maura Campbell: We will check that. Obviously, we will want to make sure that whatever was said has been transposed correctly in the action plan. We will check the timescale.

The Deputy Chairperson: In one part of the text, it says one thing, and then later on, it contradicts itself slightly.

Those are all my questions. Will members indicate whether they wish to speak?

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, Chair. Thanks for the presentation, Maura. The strategy has to be welcomed after all the work that has been carried out.

I have a number of questions. First, who will oversee this — I know that it is laid out over a five-year period — and ensure that it is driven forward and implemented? Secondly, when we met victims and witnesses during the inquiry, we found that delay — this is obviously tied in with faster, fairer justice — was a huge problem. What happened with a recent case was interesting. A vet from Ireland was murdered in Wales on 15 October last year, and the man responsible has already been sentenced — just last week — to life. That happened in just months, and yet it takes years here.

So, my questions are on those two issues and the culture that exists. A huge cultural change needs to take place, because a lot of different agencies work in silos. How do you propose to deal with those? I will have one more question after that.

Ms Maura Campbell: I will start with the point about oversight. The Minister has taken a very close personal interest in that issue. We will report on a regular basis to the criminal justice delivery group, which he chairs, and on which senior leaders from the main agencies are represented. We will also report to the Criminal Justice Board and work with the victims' champions, who are the senior-level people appointed in each of the agencies. They have all seen, and had the opportunity to comment on, the strategy action plan, and they are very supportive of it. Hopefully, we will see that carried through into the individual agencies' business and corporate plans as well, because this needs to be very much mainstream. That is part of the culture change that we are looking for. We do not want to see the treatment of victims and witnesses set off to the side. It has to be part and parcel of the normal way of doing things.

You are absolutely right: delay comes through, time and again, as one of the chief concerns of victims and witnesses. So what we have been trying to do, through a unified faster, fairer justice programme executive, is to make sure that linkages are made between this programme of work and the other programme of work on speeding up justice, on which we already report to you on a six-monthly basis. We can have a think about how best we report on those two programmes of work. If you want, we can give a single report on those every six months or we can report on them separately.

Mr Lynch: On the issue of the victims unit, some of us, including the Chair, visited Bradford and saw the concept there. Can you give more detail on what sort of concept and model you are thinking about?

Ms Maura Campbell: Certainly. The victim and witness care unit is already being piloted in Belfast Magistrates' Court. It is due to be extended to the Crown Court in April; that is still on target. The plan is to achieve full roll-out by December 2013. At action 7 in the action plan, we have expanded the

action in relation to the victim and witness care unit to set out the list of key services that it will provide. Rather than running through all those, I will just signpost you to where that detail is contained. That is taking some of the learning from Bradford, but there is additional service in there. Over the course of the project, we will also look for opportunities to enhance that. At the moment, the agencies are seeking to do as much as possible through the recycling of existing resource. However, if additional resources were available through the victim of crime fund, for instance, we might look at ways in which that service could be enhanced.

The Deputy Chairperson: As no other members have indicated, I thank you, on behalf of the Committee, for your evidence here today.