



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Victims and Survivors Service

13 June 2012

some key messages with our stakeholders. If anything jars with you, please let us know, but we have been getting good feedback and amending as we go along.

The infrastructure of the landscape for victims and survivors has changed quite considerably in the past three years. I will not go into the detail of the infrastructure, because I am sure that the Committee is aware of how it all operates. There is some confusion in that landscape, and we always try to firm up those messages when we are out.

I am the part-time manager of the transition team. We are based in Millennium House in Great Victoria Street, Belfast and have an outreach office, which is currently the outreach office of the Community Relations Council (CRC). The intention is to retain the lease on that for a further year to maintain that outreach office, and the board and Ministers will consider where any office of the Victims and Survivors Service should be located. At present, there are only 10 temporary staff, including two assessors.

Since opening, we have completed the registration of all who intend to provide services through the Victims and Survivors Service. We have more or less completed the mapping of all that service provision across groups currently funded through the strategic support fund, development grants given to the CRC and anyone else who wishes to provide services to victims and survivors. We are almost closed on a review of counselling and psychotherapy qualifications to validate the qualifications of those registered with the service. We ensure that supervision is in place, and we check out any relevant statutory requirements. We are about to do the same with complementary therapies, and we have done quite a bit of corporate governance work with victims and survivors groups and on how the service would like corporate governance to operate in any future schemes.

I know that the Committee looked at the area of individual assessments and wanted more information. We have developed an assessment model. Since 2 April, our assessors have carried out over 75 assessments. On average, we have 20 appointments in advance and generally see people within seven days. One of the reasons why the service was put in place was to reach out to hidden victims, and, to date, our experience of their coming forward is of people who did not seek help in the past from groups in the statutory sector. These are people who have never told their story before and are coming forward for the first time, and we have been quite struck by that. Thus, hidden victims are one of our three identified themes.

The second theme to arise was the reduction in eligibility of funding for, for example, siblings, grandchildren, short breaks and personal development. Those schemes were once run by the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund but were removed from the latest round of funding. That, undoubtedly, created a lot of angst among victims and survivors and is very much a recurring theme.

The third theme was that welfare reform changes, such as those to disability living allowance (DLA) and incapacity benefit, are causing great concern. In response, the service will host an event on 27 June, pooling key people from Citizens Advice and Advice NI, as well as working with the Social Security Agency. The aim is to put people in touch with individuals and groups from which they can seek support.

We have completed the consultation process on the employer Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) obligations with the fund and the CRC. Our next stage is to have direct negotiations with staff. Our timeline for the transfer of staff under this arrangement is the second quarter of the current financial year, so some time from 1 July for staff in the CRC and victims unit and in the autumn for the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund staff. We are very keen to work with the two organisations to ensure no interruption in business. We are being careful not to impinge on the issuing of grant awards, cheques, and so on, so we are working very closely with both organisations.

In building the infrastructure, we conducted a full business process mapping of both organisations to determine how we bring the function over to the service. Again, that is about ensuring service continuity, and so on. We are scoping IT provision and accommodation. We have started the accountability meetings and have a temporary board in place. Fairly soon, there will be a move to recruit a permanent board.

I have conducted many regional meetings with various groups about communication. I have also had many bilateral meetings with statutory agencies and bodies, putting out the message that the Victims and Survivors Service is in place and working with them on how best to get the message out to individuals and groups. Our website is under development, and we have done a series of quiet advertising in local newspapers to get the message out to the public. We have done that in a gentle

way so that people are not concerned about any particular issue with the Victims and Survivors Service. From now to the end of March, the key areas are working with the Department on scoping new schemes; a new round of funding for individuals and groups will be launched at some stage in the autumn; and we will implement and monitor an evaluation system. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.

Mr Clarke: I welcome you to the Committee. I should declare an interest in that I have family members who are victims and registered with victims' organisations. I welcome the change in the ambition of the new service. Groups have been set up in the past to champion the cause of victims. However, my perception, on the basis of the area in which I live and my family's experience, is that access has always been difficult.

Your last three key messages state:

"We will work to improve the standards of services provided to victims and survivors; be consistent, transparent and accountable in all our dealings with victims and survivors; and become a point of contact for all victims and survivors seeking support."

How do you intend to do that? I have always felt that there was a shortfall in real engagement with victims or their families, even from the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund when it was in operation.

Ms Dorbie: I absolutely take your point about engaging with individuals. In the past, there has been criticism of how outreach operated. One criticism of the Memorial Fund was that it used the same database of people. As I said, we have done some local advertising, and we are looking at different ways in which we can reach out to individuals. Undoubtedly, advertising in local newspapers has brought people out; but we are constantly looking for new ways. We are working with groups and trying to get the message out that we are here.

Mr T Clarke: Has there been any joined-up approach using your database and that of the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund?

Ms Dorbie: There absolutely will be. The Northern Ireland Memorial Fund has 11,500 people on its database.

Mr Clarke: I am intrigued by your reference to "quiet" newspaper advertising. I found that an interesting comment, given that we want to try to engage with people. The difficulty for many of those classified as victims is engaging with organisations, even the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. So your statement that you are doing "quiet" advertising, as opposed to really getting the message out there, concerns me. There has been a difficulty in getting engagement going, so I would like some assurance that there will be direct contact.

You said that the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund had over 11,000 names. So advertising is probably a waste of money, because you have 11,000 names to start you off. I would love you to contact those people directly. From conversations that I have had, I know that some people have lost confidence in the groups that were there. An awful lot of money was set aside for victims, and that was welcomed by the sector. However, the money is not getting to those on the ground; it is getting to organisations. I accept that organisations help to a degree, but they do not help the families directly.

In your presentation, you referred to the reduction in eligibility of funding from the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund for siblings to take short breaks and for their personal development. That reduction has caused pain. Means testing was also introduced, which means that you are a victim only if you are in a certain category of income, which I think is unfair. Millions of pounds were set aside to help victims, with no reference made to income or savings. However, when the programmes were put together, people were told that, if they had x number of pounds in their bank account, they would not get the money. That is wrong — it does not address the needs of victims. People should not be socially disadvantaged by having money in their accounts. We have far too many victims, which is unfortunate, but there is a large amount of money, and that should be given to the victims, as opposed to being used to prop up various groups all around the Province.

Ms Dorbie: I very much hear what you are saying. We see this as a transition year. We have been going for eight or nine weeks now. One of the reasons why we have not gone straight out to

individuals is that, as you will be aware, it was only in April that the Memorial Fund received funding approval. So we were conscious that we did not want to go out to individuals at that time because we were focused on submitting their applications to the Memorial Fund. However, I absolutely take your point that we now need to up the ante in reaching out to individuals, and we are looking at certain ways of doing that. One reason that I had the bilateral talks with various agencies is that, through the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee, we are working closely with them on getting leaflets and information out through GPs and on how best we can work with them. We work with the likes of the Probation Board, and we had bilateral talks with a whole series of people, including church groups, and so on, about trying to get the message out. We will up the ante on communications and look at how we reach out to individuals.

Mr Clarke: I have just one more question.

The Chairperson: May I follow up on your point and then come back to you, Trevor? Anne, I think that you are suggesting a transfer of data from the Memorial Fund to the new service.

Ms Dorbie: Yes.

The Chairperson: There are 10 years of data and 11,000 names. Will you reassess anyone on the memorial fund's database to determine whether you and the service consider them to be victims?

Ms Dorbie: No. In fact —

The Chairperson: Yet the Memorial Fund did not use the definition of victim under the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006

Ms Dorbie: The information sent out by the Memorial Fund on its most recent round of funding included a paragraph stating that the data would be transferred to the Victims and Survivors Service and asking whether people had any objections. People had to sign to give their permission. There were no refusals, so that information will come over to the service.

The Chairperson: Will the service use the definition of victim in the 2006 order?

Ms Dorbie: That is a policy issue for the Department but, yes, the service will work to the definition in the 2006 order.

The Chairperson: The Memorial Fund, however, did not, so it is possible that some people whom it helped will not meet the definition.

Ms Dorbie: I am not aware that they did not, so I —

The Chairperson: Given that the Memorial Fund did not use that definition, it is possible.

Mr Clarke: Is it the intention that the new Victims and Survivors Service will be the central point for victims, or will all the various satellite organisations still represent victims?

Ms Dorbie: If you mean groups and service providers, they will continue to provide services and be funded by the Victims and Survivors Service. If you like, the current function of the victims unit of the Community Relations Council is transferring to the Victims and Survivors Service, the intention being to continue that funding. A new funding stream, for which the Department is scoping the policy and criteria, will come online in the autumn.

Mr Clarke: Has the money spent on funding the different service providers ever been evaluated? Given the size of Northern Ireland and number of victims, it has always been a fundamental problem for me that we need so many people to distribute a small amount of money. Some organisations do an extremely good job, I cannot judge others, and some may be not so good. Surely, however, given the geographical size of Northern Ireland, having in a single location one simple service from a single service provider, which I hoped would be the Victims and Survivors Service, that distributed the money directly to victims would be better than involving all these other organisations.

Ms Dorbie: The current intention is to continue the strategic support fund under different criteria. There is no opportunity to change that at this point. That is not a matter for the service; it is a matter of policy for the Department. If it is any reassurance, the service is keen to ensure that the other groups work to a certain standard. We are working hard to make sure that those standards are in place. That may be a reassurance to you as far as counselling, psychotherapies and complementary therapies are concerned. We are ensuring that people get the right services delivered to the right standard, and the new monitoring and evaluation system will reinforce that.

Mr Clarke: That is not a reassurance because there have been so many providers but the money is not getting to the victims. It worries me that this is just a case of same old, same old. I would love there to be one simple, government-led point of contact to which victims applied directly. In that way, the money could be spent on the victims and those who deserve it, as opposed to organisations.

The Chairperson: Would it be fair to say that, sometimes, the one need of a group of victims is to get together and have a shared experience in a safe environment? That may involve six people who need only a few pounds to meet, have a meal and share their experiences, in which case, Trevor, that group has a function. The approximately 100 groups offer a huge spectrum of services, from something as simple as social contact to providing major services, including complementary therapies, counselling and befriending.

Mr Clarke: Chairman, that is the way it used to be. My wife has been a member of a certain group, which it would be unfair to name, for many years. In the early days, the group brought people together, and I found the family sharing experience that you outlined very useful. That has not happened for a number of years, and we just get the occasional leaflet through the door. The group is not making the effort to bring individuals together.

The definition of victim is up for debate, but I had an interesting experience a few years ago when various people got together in the same room and discussed how they had been affected. That sharing of experiences was useful, but it has disappeared during the past few years, which is disappointing. It was working, but it is not working now. That is my personal opinion.

The Chairperson: You say that you do not want to name the group, Trevor, but that might be a failure of that one organisation. Anne, do you envisage the service focusing on that?

Ms Dorbie: Yes, if there was a gap in provision. The service has started to map service provision to determine whether there are any gaps. Our experience of individuals who come to the service is that we need to examine service provision in some areas. That will form part of our strategy on how we bolster support services in those areas to which people are comfortable going. In the victims' sector, it is key that people should be able to go to groups where they feel comfortable and where they feel safe and secure in sharing their information. We cannot lose sight of that. We cannot make people go to places to which they do not want to go or cause them to lose the security of where they have gone traditionally. However, that is not to say that that cannot change to some degree. We are looking at gaps in service provision, and if you feel that those exist, we would be very keen to look at them.

Mr Molloy: Thanks for the presentation. I will touch on a point similar to the one that Trevor raised. My impression of the new service is that it will be a central, one-stop shop, with which everyone, whether there are involved with a group or not, can make contact.

I am sure that, in the past, all of the groups did good work in different ways. However, I think that there is a danger that the groups, like any groups with ongoing funding, spend much of their time looking for new funding sources and maintaining their own jobs and roles. That becomes a distraction. There is a role for local groups, and I think that you said that there would be some form of assessment or general guidance and that all groups would have to come up to a certain standard of provision. I mean no disrespect to any victims, but there is a danger of groups having to maintain the victims issue. We need to move towards an exit strategy for victims and look at moving the process along rather than prolonging it. I see that as a role for the Victims and Survivors Service. That is not about leaving anyone out or cutting off services to anyone. The danger is that to maintain their structures, groups have to maintain the victims issue. I hope that the Victims and Survivors Service will become a central body and that there will be less need for groups, or a different role for them, in the future. I also hope that that will be monitored and developed in that way.

Ms Dorbie: We aim to address that exact issue over the next couple of months. The areas of counselling and psychotherapy attract the most criticism, and we will go out to the groups and ask

them for their client profiles. That will not necessarily mean that we will look into someone's personal information. Rather, we will look at the client profiles and ask the groups why they have adopted or continue to adopt a certain kind of treatment. If, for example, we look at client profiles and notice that someone has been in counselling for two years, we will challenge the group. We will ask why that person has been in counselling for so long, whether the group has thought about an exit strategy and why that person is not maintaining or improving his or her mental health. We are looking at that area and will challenge groups on their continued use of a certain type of treatment and ask them whether they would consider something else, or tell them that they should. That challenge function will be introduced over the next few months.

The Chairperson: So there is a 10-year strategy for victims and survivors, and the endgame is mainstreaming.

Ms Dorbie: I could not possibly say that. That is a policy matter for the Department, but there is a move towards contracted service provision.

The Chairperson: Recently, the WAVE Trauma Centre commissioned research on the injured by Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, who is a nationally, if not internationally, recognised expert. The people whom she surveyed said that the Memorial Fund was the best organisation that they had come across in their experience and that the staff and expertise must not be lost. Will those people be disappointed?

Ms Dorbie: No. The Northern Ireland Memorial Fund staff's functions will be transferred in the autumn, and with that transfer comes rights for certain individuals.

The Chairperson: Are you confident that the staff will come across?

Ms Dorbie: We will enter direct negotiations with staff within the next few weeks. It is a personnel matter at this stage.

The Chairperson: Are you confident?

Ms Dorbie: I am confident that the function is transferring.

The Chairperson: OK.

Previously, groups went to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) or to CRC. They said that they provided a service for x number of clients and were given, typically, a year's grant. We know that there were two key difficulties with that. The first was that groups would not share information or best practice with a sister group, because doing so would have made it a rival in the next funding round.

The second difficulty was that, if the service for which a group receives an annual grant needs expertise, it may have to employ someone, but it can only do so on a year's contract. After nine months, that person might start thinking about his or her children's education, the mortgage or the need to change the car, or see a job in a statutory service advertised in the 'Belfast Telegraph' and leave. Effectively, you are taking your members up a ladder and down a longer snake.

Is it possible to consider a different model of funding? Could you identify a good service, fund it on a rolling basis and give six months' notice of any intention to end funding? In that way, a service has the potential to go on for years with some certainty?

Ms Dorbie: Absolutely. We are sitting down with the various bodies and the Department to consider the new funding stream. I am certain that we could feed that into the mix. One reason for setting up the service is that it will focus on an individual's needs, and the groups and service providers are the way to do that. Our service will focus on making sure that those needs are met. When looking at the profiles of providers' clients and members, we will also consider what support services are needed, rather than what has been on offer, which is what you are implying. There will be much more focus on need. The commission's comprehensive needs assessment has provided a vital tool in directing services to those in need.

The Chairperson: The Victims' Commission is based in Windsor House, which is a hub for commissions, quangos and arm's-length bodies. It is easy to walk into Windsor House without anyone knowing why you are there, as there are a dozen possible reasons. Millennium House is a little different. That building, with its glass front, has a prominent position on Great Victoria Street. You get the impression that victims are walking in with a virtual sandwich board that says, "I am a victim".

Ms Dorbie: That has not gone unnoticed and is one reason for our ongoing review of our accommodation needs. There are two entrances, although that is not an excuse, because I take on board what you are saying.

The Chairperson: You will know that the commission has six statutory duties, one of which is to review services. Here you are, setting up the key service body, after which you will, potentially, revert to the commission to review what you have just done. Is there no conflict of interest there?

Ms Dorbie: Well, this is a transition year, and it is all about the set-up of the service. The board has not been appointed yet, but a board will be established, and a new chief executive will be in post. At present, I do not see any conflict of interest, because I am there just to set up the service and get it on to a good footing.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.

Ms Dorbie: Thank you.