



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Victims and Survivors Service:
Commission for Victims and Survivors

5 March 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr John Beggs	Commission for Victims and Survivors
Ms Kathryn Stone	Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee the commissioner, Kathryn Stone, and the secretary to the commissioner, John Beggs. Commissioner, would you like to make some opening remarks, please?

Ms Kathryn Stone (Commission for Victims and Survivors): Certainly. Thank you for the invitation to meet you today. I know that you are acutely aware that the past eight days have been particularly difficult for victims and survivors, and I acknowledge that before beginning my commentary.

You will be aware that the independent assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) is now complete and that Ministers have accepted in full the recommendations that are in the reports. I will also take the opportunity to thank the Committee for its careful scrutiny of and close interest in the matter. I am confident that that careful scrutiny has been very useful and instrumental in moving this along.

I thought it might be helpful if, for your information, I summarised the independent assessment's main findings. Following my appearance at the Committee on 9 October, the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked me in November to carry out an independent assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service, making specific reference to the individual needs review. I have been very grateful to work in collaboration with departmental officials, as the First Minister and deputy First Minister requested that I do. I take this opportunity to publicly commend their commitment to delivering effective change,

understanding the priority to focus on victims needs, identifying limitations and, importantly, acknowledging where mistakes have been made.

The implementation of a programme board involving departmental officials, special advisers, the Victims and Survivors Service, the commission and, importantly, a representative from the forum services working group has been particularly useful in, for example, making decisions about monitoring and evaluation. I acknowledge the contribution of the forum services working group and of all those victims and survivors for the contribution that they made to the process, either individually or through their representative groups.

As you will have seen, the independent assessment that was conducted between December 2013 and January this year shows an organisation that is lacking in effective strategic governance, with weaknesses in communication and a model of service delivery that was process driven and not people centred. The independent assessment reports make for very difficult reading, with some tough messages. However, I want to be clear that it is not the intention to look for scapegoats and people to blame. The Victims and Survivors Service's board has responded to those reports — rightly, in my view — as an opportunity to make a real difference to an organisation that has the potential to deliver much-needed support to victims and survivors. It is working strategically to address the recommendations, and I acknowledge and welcome that.

The independent assessment covered four main areas of the service's work. Those are: interactions with individuals; interactions with groups; strategy and policy; and management of people and information. One organisation, WKM, was commissioned to consider the first and second areas. It made 23 recommendations. The board of the service has welcomed those as a template for change. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) was commissioned to consider the third and fourth areas. It made 32 recommendations. The chair of the VSS board feels that the reports are accurate and fair, and changes have already begun to be made.

I advised Ministers that both reports should be published in full to promote trust and confidence that government welcome critical scrutiny of their arm's-length bodies. That was done within a week of the reports being submitted, and it is a very positive outcome.

I will now briefly analyse my thoughts on each heading. The first heading was interactions with individuals. In my view, the contact of victims with the Victims and Survivors Service, particularly their experience of the individual needs review, is the most troubling element to have been highlighted by the independent assessment. There are, of course, many people who are very satisfied with their interaction with the Victims and Survivors Service and are pleased with the outcomes of the individual needs review. They are now receiving benefits, services, treatment, equipment and physical and psychological therapy for the first time, if they had not received those things before. However, many individuals took time to write letters or emails or to phone or meet the independent assessors. The commission also had previously received many other representations and met people, all of whom shared experience of very difficult encounters with the Victims and Survivors Service.

In the delivery of any service, it is unlikely that everyone will be happy all the time. Nonetheless, the process of the individual needs review has clearly left many people very unhappy. The report highlights many examples of people being very upset and feeling humiliated. It is clear, then, that this process had become something that it was never intended to be. It had become a process of assessing need rather than addressing need, and it had become a one-size-fits-all approach, with every victim, whatever their need, being subject to an intrusive process involving psychological screening. The original intention of the process was to provide a gateway to other services, based on informed choice. Until now, there has been no adequate screening process or way in which to prioritise victims' needs, nor has there been any adequate follow-up pending the uptake of recommended services, and there have been unacceptable and inexplicable delays in clients being informed of the outcome of their assessment. That was the basis upon which Ministers agreed to defer the individual needs review assessments, pending a fundamental and strategic agreement about what the process was actually for. As I said, changes are being made, and that must continue.

My advice to Ministers on that was to endorse the recommendations of the WKM report in full and to ensure that they were implemented in a timely manner; to agree with the Department and the service a change-management process to ensure an effective transition from an administrative model of delivery to a service model of delivery; and to ensure that the process of reviewing individual need is based on what is necessary to ensure access to appropriate goods and services without intrusive and unnecessary psychological assessment.

The second theme is interactions with groups. As the WKM report makes clear, many groups felt frustrated and irritated with many aspects of the Victims and Survivors Service. I know that many of you have had representation from groups about that. Groups have felt that the process of applying for funding, the expectations of monitoring and evaluation and the apparent lack of willingness of the Victims and Survivors Service to amend processes following suggestions undermined the groups' confidence that the service was willing to support victims and survivors in the most effective way. It must be remembered that many of those groups have been in existence since long before the Victims and Survivors Service came into being. They have been powerful advocates, for decades in some cases, for those who use their service. They are trusted by communities as their supporters and representatives, and they should be treated seriously and respectfully.

My advice to Ministers on that was to endorse the recommendations of the WKM report in full and to ensure their implementation in a timely way and to ensure that, if victims and survivors would rather access psychological support from groups, agencies and organisations, that must be facilitated. It is very helpful that there have been a number of discussions with other agencies, for example, the Health and Social Care Board, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others. They have already begun their discussions with the Victims and Survivors Service and with the Department. Most importantly, it was recommended that the Victims and Survivors Service should move away from an administrative model of delivery to a service model of delivery with groups.

Where governance, strategy and policy are concerned, I do not believe that any organisation that has a structure for governance in theory but not in practice can succeed. With no clear leadership, no clear setting of culture and values, no check-and-challenge function to the executive team, any organisation will develop by default rather than by design.

In my view, the Victims and Survivors Service board existed in name only from its inception in April 2012 to December 2013. The board was appointed from within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with departmental officials of the sponsor branch named in records at Companies House. It is my view that, although expedient, that was an error of judgement. The interim board of the Victims and Survivors Service was not constituted in a way that would allow it to fulfil its role and function effectively.

The appointment of other additional officials, who were then immediately stood down, compounded that error. Over a year later, following open recruitment, a board of independent directors was appointed to lead the Victims and Survivors Service on governance, strategy and policy. There are many and various risks evident in the lack of a suitably independent board, particularly for a company limited by guarantee and especially for a service where so much public money is being invested to serve some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

With a very real conflict of interest and without appropriate challenge from a properly constituted board, the Victims and Survivors Service had become something that it was never meant to be. Its behaviours and culture created the widely held perception that the Victims and Survivors Service was process driven and not people centred. The CIPFA report recommends that the new board be strengthened with more suitably qualified people. As the minimum, an accountant must be appointed to the board to ensure informed scrutiny of the way in which public money was being spent. Additionally, it is important to know that the new board has inherited that situation. It will need time, support and resource to lead the necessary change.

My advice to Ministers on that was to endorse the recommendations of the CIPFA report in full and to ensure their implementation in a timely way; to ensure, in setting up future organisations, that the requisite board is in place before the organisation becomes operational; to ensure that all board members of such bodies be appointed using the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland process; and, finally, to ask the chair of the board of the Victims and Survivors Service to provide an assurance that they are confident that the knowledge, skill and experience of the senior management team and the board are appropriate to deliver the changes that are necessary to meet the outcomes that are required for improvement.

Finally, the fourth area is management of people, resources and information. The Victims and Survivors Service is relatively new, and many systems and processes have been in place for just under a year. Staff at the service have been particularly forthcoming about weaknesses in process, and they have highlighted areas where they have already begun to implement change. That is to be welcomed. CIPFA is clear in its report that a functioning internal audit service should have been in place at the outset. It was not, and that has been procured only recently, some months after the

Victims and Survivors Service opened for business. The OFMDFM internal audit provided by DFP highlighted a number of weaknesses, including in procurement and in recruitment and selection.

The monitoring and evaluation of outcomes has caused significant concern for groups. In contrast to CIPFA's finding, I have found in my conversations with groups no reluctance from them to record and submit outcomes. What has been found is a reasonable reluctance from groups to complete forms for the sake of completing forms, with no one really knowing what will happen to the information, what it will be used for and how it will be used to help improve services in the future. The programme board discussed that specific matter and agreed that the current monitoring must change. To her credit, the chief executive of the Victims and Survivors Service agreed immediately with that. I am confident that groups will want to work with the service, with the Department and with the commission to ensure that appropriate information can be captured sensitively while also demonstrating how the use of public funds is supporting victims and survivors in a positive way.

Additionally, the CIPFA report highlights the process for monitoring budgets in groups as being overly bureaucratic and burdensome. It recommends that the Victims and Survivors Service must find ways of monitoring spend in ways that are reasonable and proportionate to the degree of risk presented. For example, groups run by volunteers that deliver social activities to a small group of people must not be subject to the same degree of monitoring as much larger groups that have paid staff, unless of course there are exceptional circumstances such as a suspected misuse of funds. My advice to Ministers in that regard was to endorse the recommendations of the CIPFA report in full and ask for assurances from the board of the VSS that all matters of internal and external audit and control will be overseen by the audit and risk committee and reported back to the board.

In conclusion, this independent assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service highlights a number of areas for improvement. It demonstrates that Ministers were right to call for such an assessment and were right to ask that the process of reviewing individual needs be considered specifically. I am acutely aware that the reports will make for very difficult reading. However, as I said at the beginning, changes are being implemented, and we must work together to ensure the highest possible standards of service delivery for victims and survivors. My advice, and the reports of the independent assessment, are the beginning of that process. I look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with the Department and with the board of the Victims and Survivors Service to improve services for victims and survivors.

Finally, once again, I thank this Committee for its diligence and its careful scrutiny.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Kathryn, for that update. I declare that previously I was a commissioner for victims and survivors. The road map has been out there for a long time, Kathryn. Over four years ago, the Department published a strategy for victims and survivors which saw the building blocks as being the commission, the forum and the service. How did it go so wrong, when people saw it coming so long ago?

Ms Stone: I am not sure that I am in a position to answer that question. To extend the analogy of the road map a little bit further, we have a very clear direction of travel now, and greater clarity about the expectations and greater understanding of what the Victims and Survivors Service should and should not be. A very large number of people have contributed to the independent assessment and shared their views about what their expectations are, and feel involved in this process.

The Department has also, with the commission, the service and a member of the forum services working group, established a programme board that is overseeing in a very robust way the implementation of these recommendations and interim suggestions. So I am confident that the road map is there and is clearly understood.

The Chairperson: The WKM report states:

"the relationship between the VSS and OFMDFM seems to have been good initially. However, the appropriateness of this relationship must be questioned. There was no creative tension between the two bodies; this should have been in place to reflect the need for OFMDFM to exercise oversight and for the VSS to demonstrate effective accountability. OFMDFM was not robust in monitoring progress and development and the VSS seems to have been less than forthcoming in highlighting initial and ongoing problems."

Would you say that that was a reasonable reflection of what happened?

Ms Stone: That was the finding of the WKM report. As I said previously, the Department has absolutely acknowledged that there was a number of considerable limitations in the way in which the board was established that perhaps skewed the creative tension between the Department and the Victims and Survivors Service. Perhaps it would be better for the Department to respond more fully to that.

The Chairperson: The departmental officials will be with us shortly.

The lack of a properly constituted board leaps from the reviews. When were you first aware that there was not a properly constituted board?

Ms Stone: The board, and the arrangements for governance in the Victims and Survivors Service, was a topic of conversation perhaps from my arrival in autumn 2012; we had a number of different conversations about those issues. What has been clear is that there had been a different understanding about what governance is about. Governance is not just about checking money and being accountable for public money. It is also about setting the tone, the direction, the culture, the values and the behaviours of the organisation. I think that the Department has acknowledged that that perhaps was not the case with the board that was in place, which was made up of departmental officials.

The Chairperson: Will you share with us the argument that you made in autumn 2012 when you became aware that there was not a properly constituted board?

Ms Stone: It was part of an ongoing conversation about the way in which the organisation had been structured. It was part of the conversations and the responses that led to the perhaps frustrated and very difficult letter to the board, copied to the junior Ministers, which resulted in my appearance before the Committee on 9 October. Those were ongoing conversations about the structure of the board of the Victims and Survivors Service.

One of the things that is really important to note is that that has changed, and changed significantly. There is now an independently appointed board in place, and the chair of the board is very keen to make sure that all the recommendations are implemented and that there is a properly calibrated relationship between the Department, the commission and the forum. Those things have now been shifted. There is a very clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities, and that is being monitored by the programme board that has been put in place.

The Chairperson: Are you in any doubt that there is now an acceptance of the need to move from this administrative and process-driven regime, as you have described it, into a service delivery regime?

Ms Stone: Absolutely. There is no doubt at all that the board is very keen to move to that. Indeed, that phrase — moving from an administrative model of delivery to a service model of delivery — is one that I first heard from the chair of the Victims and Survivors Service board. Perhaps I should properly acknowledge him as the reference for that.

The Chairperson: Are you confident that the knowledge and the determination exists to make that happen?

Ms Stone: That is why we have recommended that Ministers ask the board. It is for the board to give an assurance about that. It is responsible and, now that there is an understanding of the proper relationship, it is for the board to reassure Ministers about that.

The Chairperson: The board is quite thinly populated; I think that that was noted in the report.

Ms Stone: Yes. There is a very large budget for the Victims and Survivors Service — about £11 million a year. It has been noted that there is no accountant on the board at the moment, and arrangements are being made to recruit one. It is also a very small number of people to consider the whole range of matters that need to be brought to the board of an organisation not only with that amount of budget but which is trying to provide a service to the number of people that the Victims and Survivors Service provides services for.

The Chairperson: You have been asked to take a particular specific look at scheme 6, the financial assistance. What are your thoughts?

Ms Stone: Let me hand over to John; that is his specialist subject.

Mr John Beggs (Commission for Victims and Survivors): At the moment, the Department has asked us to look specifically at policy advice around scheme 6, which is not part of the independent assessment. We have looked at that and consulted our forum on it. We also looked at the complaints and feedback that we have had directly to the commission on the back of scheme 6. We have also taken account of feedback that the service itself has collected on how scheme 6 has rolled out and what needs the scheme has been addressing. We have looked at all that information. In the last couple of weeks, we have issued advice to the Department, and it is with it for consideration. Our early suggestions on it are that the scheme in its current format is largely retained. The big issue with the scheme is the fact that it is constrained in budgetary terms and the demand for it is very high. As an interim solution for the incoming financial year, we suggest that the scheme rolls out largely in its current format but with some refinement, particularly around the fact that a number of the people who have receipted that scheme this year can be carried forward into the next year with, ultimately, a self-declaration of their circumstances having not changed, therefore not putting them through the bank statements, the verification of income and all of the hurdles that many of the victims raised issues around this year. That is our advice on it.

A big issue last year was the fact that the scheme opened and closed quite quickly, and a number of individuals were not aware that the scheme had opened and had closed. Therefore, they felt aggrieved that they did not have the opportunity to apply. This time round, we are making recommendations around how the communications plan is advertised and managed so that it is a lot more transparent and publicly available, so that nobody is left out of the scheme. That is our advice as it stands. As I said, it is with the Department for consideration, and it will then advise the service on how to roll it out next year.

The Chairperson: With regard to the backstory, this was effectively a scheme that was operated by the old Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, which was ported or transferred across. Did you consider any changes at that time?

Mr J Beggs: I am not sure what you are asking, Chair.

The Chairperson: When you looked at the scheme and you brought it across from the memorial fund, did you look at it and think that it was perfect, or did you discuss any potential changes to it?

Mr J Beggs: To be honest, in its current format, it is largely in line with the memorial fund and how it ran out.

The Chairperson: With regard to the issue of household rather than individual income, is it fair that an individual who, through no choice or fault of their own, has become a victim or survivor of the Troubles is disadvantaged because somebody else in the household is a high earner?

Mr J Beggs: We looked at the individual and the household test. We are still recommending that the household test is maintained.

The Chairperson: Why is that?

Mr J Beggs: It is largely down to budget. We cannot lose sight of the fact that only £2 million is available for the scheme. If it were opened up to that extent, the whole victims and survivors budget could effectively be spent on the scheme.

The Chairperson: So, it was not on fairness; it was on budget.

Mr J Beggs: That was a major constraint, certainly. We are recommending that we need to look more holistically at that. The funding for the service expires at the end of 2014-15, the incoming financial year. As part of the process going forward, we recommend that all schemes should be evaluated and the budgets that are set for all schemes should be looked at, as well.

The Chairperson: As we stand, going into the next financial year there is no significant additional budget for this scheme. However, when you open it up, you expect additional applicants.

Mr J Beggs: Yes, I think that there will be additional applicants.

The Chairperson: Will it be a significant number?

Mr J Beggs: If the communication is done properly, then there will certainly be more applications.

Mr Spratt: Thanks, commissioner, for the presentation and thanks to John. The reports do not make for good reading. I am delighted at how quickly it has been done. It shows that things can be done quickly when there is joined-up thinking from Committees and everything else in relation to it. I think that you said that, commissioner, in your remarks. I want to take up three points with you. You said that changes were already being made in relation to some of the recommendations. Perhaps you could elaborate a little on what those changes are. Then you talked about a change management process which needs to be put in place. I wonder exactly what you mean by that and what your views are on how quickly that needs to happen. The third area relates to what you said about an accountant — a lot of public money is involved — being appointed to the board to see how that money is spent. I assume that, by the time it gets back to the board, a lot of audits will have been done around groups getting money, etc. Do those audits include a process that makes sure that the money is getting to the victims groups that it is meant for? Would that be part and parcel of what the audit process, and indeed the board, would look at if somebody with a financial background was on the board?

Ms Stone: Changes have already been made. As I said, a programme board was established in December last year and began to look at some of the areas where, shall we say, limitations had been identified. A process has been put in place to track the changes that are being made. That programme board has on it special advisers, the chair of the board of the Victims and Survivors Service, John and me, and departmental officials. There is an absolute commitment to making sure that the service improves to deliver the very best services that there can possibly be to victims and survivors.

One specific change relates to the monitoring and evaluation that groups were expected to undertake. I said in my opening remarks that groups were expected to gather data and information with no real understanding of what that data and information was going to be used for. That has now stopped, and new ways of gathering information are being considered. It is absolutely imperative that information is provided by groups to enable the Department, Ministers and everyone to understand how public money is being spent and that, to answer your final question, the money is being used to deliver the very best outcomes for victims and survivors.

Another example of a change that has already been made relates to the individual needs review. That process has changed from being, as I described in my opening remarks, a one-size-fits-all process where everyone, whatever their need, goes through the same process, including psychological screening and so on, to looking specifically at what people's needs are and how they can be supported to access those particular services. Those are two of the changes that have been made.

As for a change management programme, when we look at this strategically we see that the programme board, and the different working groups and subgroups that sit under it, is delivering those changes. I am sure that my colleagues from the Department will be able to talk more specifically about how the structure of that is now working in practice. However, we are certainly seeing those changes being made. Another example is communication and encouraging people to make complaints and give comments about the service. The way that those are being responded to, addressed and dealt with is very different now.

I think that the accountant is now a matter for the board to make a decision on. As you will be aware, the board of a company limited by guarantee has autonomy in its decision-making. I am confident that it will make those decisions to make sure and satisfy itself that public money is not only being spent properly but being used to the best effect to support victims and survivors.

Mr Moutray: Good to see you here again, folks.

I want to pose two questions. The first relates to financial assistance for private counselling. Not everyone is able to talk in a group forum about what has happened in the past, especially people who have suffered from PTSD. To date, mixed messages on funding for private counselling from the

victims' service are still coming back; one person is told that yes, they can get funding for it and another is told that they cannot. There still seems to be an issue around continuity of advice from the Victims and Survivors Service.

Last week, I spoke to a victim who travelled from Fermanagh recently to the Dungannon office. Before leaving home, she rang the only number that was available — the Belfast office — to find out whether the Dungannon office would be open. She was told that it would close from 1.00 pm to 2.00 pm. She arrived at 12.30 pm and it was closed, with the shutters down. She returned on the Monday, and the same thing was the case. So, the two reports that we have had are damning of the victims' service. There is a long way to go. I appreciate the work that you folks have done, but when will we see things start to change?

Ms Stone: I am sorry to hear about that experience, Mr Moutray. I will look into that and discuss the experience with the chair of the board of Victims and Survivors Service and, if I may, write to you with a response.

Mr Moutray: It seems strange. We are told that:

"VSS has advised that it has taken the following steps to increase and improve the information available on the VSS website".

As of today, there is still no phone number for its Dungannon office. There is only the one phone number — for Belfast.

Ms Stone: And I know that Mr Attwood has raised that point about the website previously. I will respond on writing to you.

Mr Moutray: OK. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr Spratt: It would be helpful for us all to get a copy of that letter, because there are similar issues in other areas — if Stephen is happy enough with that.

Mr Moutray: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Will you respond the Committee, Kathryn, and we will distribute it on?

Ms Stone: Yes, of course.

The Chairperson: It is disappointing.

Mr Maskey: I again welcome you, commissioner, to the Committee, as other colleagues have. It has been quite a turbulent time for some time now from your end of it, and the Department and the service itself, particularly for those who need the services. We are all looking forward to the outworking of the reports and recommendations that follow the review. I wish to place on record our thanks to you for raising these issues in the forthright way in which you have and for working with all concerned to make sure that we get the required improvements.

We are all anxious, because some aspects of the report make for serious reading. I cannot get it out of my mind that the organisation is too young to have developed such a culture as is described in the reports. However, to leave that aside for a second, are you satisfied, commissioner, that we are on course to get the service fit for purpose in the way the victims need it? That may be a difficult question, but —

Ms Stone: It is a very easy question to answer, Mr Maskey, because I am absolutely confident that, with the board in place and hopefully enhanced, and with departmental officials, with the commission and with the forum, we are working closely together to ensure that not only are the recommendations and the points in my advice letter implemented, but that we continue to address issues such as Mr Moutray has just brought to our attention, because those experiences for that one victim and/or survivor diminish everyone. They just should not happen. So we will be looking very carefully into all of those issues as they come up.

Mr Attwood: First of all, I share the comments of Alex Maskey. If it had not been for you formally alerting people in September, and the narrative that developed thereafter, and how you, your team and other people came in to make these recommendations, we would not have the potential that we now have to get this right. Our gratitude to you, and your contribution and that of other people, has been quite immense. I also agree with Jimmy Spratt that it demonstrates that you can, in a tight time frame, do a rigorous exercise to get best outcomes — or hopefully the best outcomes. There is probably a bit of learning there about doing intense work where there are problem areas in order to try to rectify quickly what the issues might be, be it on the VSS or other aspects of public policy.

Although there will be one or two particulars, my fundamental question is this. There is a very high level of confidence in how you would take this work forward and monitor or assess how all these recommendations have been implemented; what the contribution of the Victims' Forum might be; and, hopefully, what the contributions of the board and the First Minister and deputy First Minister might be. However, I think that the doubt that endures is over whether VSS internally has the capacity to do the work that now needs to be done. Whilst there are high levels of confidence in you and in other areas around the VSS, at an operational level, it will be done by the VSS. There is doubt that this will be taken forward, as you said, in a timely fashion, comprehensively and fully. My doubt is whether the VSS internally has the management capacity and the right people to do that bit of work. I am not necessarily asking you to respond to that, but that is my concern.

You said in your advice to the Committee that, in your opinion, it was reasonable to expect that, with a professionally qualified accountant as CEO, an effective approach to audit and risk and performance management should have been in place. However, you say that that was not the case. Subsequently, you said that the OFMDFM internal audit provided by DFP, which is a report that we have not seen, highlights a number of weaknesses including in procurement, recruitment and selection. Those seem to me to be such fundamental requirements of any organisation led by qualified people that their absence is startling. Therein lies my doubt about whether, for all the great efforts that others are now making, there is the capacity within the senior management of the organisation to do all that has to be done.

Ms Stone: First, I do not think that it should have got to this point. I do not think that it should have got to the point of my having to raise concerns formally, but such was the overwhelming weight of information, anxiety, concern and representation, not only from individual victims but from groups and from MLAs and MPs, that it was necessary to do so. I would have failed in my responsibility as commissioner if I had not taken the action that I did. Difficult and challenging though it was for all concerned, it was absolutely necessary to do that.

It is not for me to comment on the competence or otherwise of the Victims and Survivors Service staff team. In the reports, members of staff are commended for their commitment, and in my advice they are commended for their commitment to being involved, etc. One of the things that has been said in my advice is that it is for the board to now give an assurance to Ministers that there is an appropriate mix of knowledge, skills and experience across the piece in the service, both within the staff and the board, to deliver on the recommendations. That will be a very important assurance, and I am confident that the chair of the board will do that very quickly.

Mr Attwood: I welcome those comments. I do not differ from you on anything that you have said today. However, I am just saying that, if some issues were so fundamental to the internal organisation and structure of the VSS and yet were not there, I have this enduring doubt about whether this pathway forward will be implemented fully, effectively and in a timely fashion. That is my enduring concern around all of this. I want to ask you about psychological support from other agencies and organisations. You recommend that victims and survivors who would rather access psychological support from other qualified people should be able to do so. That is, I think, fundamental because one of the great strengths of the victims and survivors network in the North is that other centres of excellence provide support, including psychological support. I know that this is probably outwith your responsibility, but do you know how these discussions, which have commenced, are progressing?

Ms Stone: I am not able to give you specific detail on the discussions being held by the Health and Social Care Board and other agencies, but I am happy to write back to the Committee, or perhaps departmental colleagues will be able to give you more information on that specific matter.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks very much for your presentation, Kathryn. Given all the revelations and so forth last week, just how difficult a week was it for you, your team and, more importantly, victims?

Ms Stone: As I said in my opening remarks, it has been a very difficult week for victims and survivors across the piece. I do not want to get into a discussion about the rights and wrongs, but, for me and my colleagues at the commission, it was another example of how it is perceived that victims from all sides have been denied justice and access to justice. Those are such important, fundamental rights, and the perception now is that, yet again, they have been taken away from a particular group. Whether or not that perception is accurate, we will have a judge-led review. It is an experience common to victims and survivors from all communities, and one that everyone can identify with. It has been a very challenging time, with a lot of very angry, upset and hurt people feeling — this word has been used — betrayed. It also makes me think about how we will look at dealing with the past.

There was a deeply regrettable irony following a conference that we held last week, which some of you attended. The conference was very successful in its respectful and dignified consideration of how we deal with the past in a more strategic way. It was summarised as being optimistic, hopeful and respectful. However, people drove away from that conference listening to news on the radio about something else that led them to be concerned, anxious and worried. Thank you for your concern. It has been a very difficult time.

The Chairperson: You lost a member of the forum.

Ms Stone: We did indeed. It was very sad to see Errol go.

The Chairperson: I am aware, Kathryn, that truth, justice and acknowledgement comprise one of seven areas of need in the comprehensive needs assessment. The other areas are important, and I am glad that we had the opportunity to discuss how the Victims and Survivors Service will deliver on those.

This is my final question. As you said, you came here in autumn 2012. That was only 18 months ago, but I am sure that, at times, it seems like 30 years ago. Previously, you worked for many years with victims of crime and abuse, many of whom, I think, had learning difficulties. When you came to this system, what was your first impression of the structures, the resource and the funding available?

Ms Stone: It is very difficult to draw comparisons on the funding because we are not comparing like with like. However, there is a very real similarity. My previous work was with victims of sex crime, usually children or people who had learning difficulties or were otherwise vulnerable because of a mental health need or communication impairment. Those individuals have much less opportunity to access justice, and their families, quite reasonably, are passionate about getting justice for what happened to their loved one. The similarities and parallels with here are really quite stark, with people fighting, in many cases for decades, to have access to justice for what happened to their loved one.

The Chairperson: Kathryn and John, thank you very much indeed. We will, I hope, see you reasonably soon, when you will, I hope, be saying that things are much, much better.

Ms Stone: Let us hope so. I am confident of that.

Mr Spratt: Chair, I wish to place one comment on the record. It is purely from my perspective; I do not know what other members think. Mr Attwood referred to the senior management team in VSS. Can it be reflected in Hansard that those are his views? I did not hear anybody else stating similar views. They are certainly not my views, and I have no wish to turn up at a tribunal.

The Chairperson: Does anyone else care to comment?

John and Kathryn, thank you very much indeed.