



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Victims and Survivors Service Briefing

7 May 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 Leslie Cree
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mrs Anne Dorbie	Victims and Survivors Service
Mr Peter Gay	Victims and Survivors Service
Mr Oliver Wilkinson	Victims and Survivors Service

The Chairperson: We welcome Peter Gay, the chair of the board of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS); Anne Dorbie, chief executive; and Oliver Wilkinson, a board member. Peter, you can make some opening remarks.

Mr Peter Gay (Victims and Survivors Service): Good afternoon, Chair and Committee. Thank you for inviting us to come before you today. As you know, we were appointed in December, and, since then, we have been working very hard to get to know the work of the service and the stakeholders. We have also been working with the recommendations of the two reviews commissioned by the commissioner.

You will be aware that those reviews made 70 recommendations. As a board, we welcome those, and we have committed to implementing all of them enthusiastically. We believe that those 70 recommendations were accurate and fair and that they recognised the changes that had started but which needed to go on. Twenty-nine of the recommendations have been totally implemented. Twenty-three have been partially implemented, by which I mean that they have been implemented but have not been signed off by the board. Our board will meet next Monday, and we will sign them off then. Seven recommendations relating to the individual needs review have been delayed. I will talk about that later. It is going through a process of development at the moment. Eleven recommendations are pending confirmation, and they will come through at the end of May, the end of June and the summer. That is where we are with those.

The board is committed to ensuring that the VSS will be a person-centred organisation. We want to ensure that everybody gets the same high standard of service, regardless of where they are and how

they come into the service. It is our commitment to achieve that. Later, I will say a little bit more about how we are doing that.

One of the key issues that came out of the review was the revision of the individual needs review and its replacement, in early February, by the general needs review (GNR). The commissioner's review informed us that we need to make it easier for people to get into the service, reduce barriers, open more opportunities for people to come in, and make it much more user-friendly. As a board, we took that completely and decided on a temporary process — the general needs review. It is implemented not only by the service but by the groups with which we work. It has had a big impact. It has held the resolve in a short period and has enabled some 2,000 people to come forward to receive support. It is a very large number when you consider that we had about 3,500 before. Large numbers of people are coming forward. When that happened, as a board, we realised that we need to be sure that everyone who comes forward will be reviewed so that we are clear that they are fully eligible under the terms of the order. Therefore we decided that there would be a 100% checking of eligibility, which the service is doing, and that is taking time. Of the 2,000, 900 have come through the assessment so far. Of those 900, it is clear that the vast majority are eligible as victims. In fact, in less than 1% of cases we say that we do not have the documentary evidence to say that they are victims. It is very interesting that this new process has encouraged many more people to come forward, but it has also created a massive amount of work for the service. The service has been working long hours, and, in some cases, weekends to work through the very large number of applications.

I want to talk about the service working with people in the sector as a whole. I report to you that, with the kind support of the commissioner, with whom we work closely, the board was enabled to meet representatives of all the boards of the groups with which we work. We had a large event, and we wanted to have information sharing and consultation. As a board, we wanted to be accessible so that they could get to know us as people and for us to get to know them as people prior to a rolling programme over the year of going out and visiting all victims' groups across the country. That is something that we are committed to doing. At that meeting we talked about eligibility, and it was quite a lively discussion. I think that there was a consensus that it is important that the service ensure that everyone who registers and is recognised by the service is actually eligible. That is something that we are doing, and it is recognised as important. We also talked about monitoring and evaluation because we need to be accountable for public money and need to know how that money is being used in the groups and what impact it is having. So we engaged in discussion with them about that, and I think that we are in the process of putting together a final approach to monitoring evaluation, which the commissioner will then comment on.

We are talking to the boards and the staff of groups. Four of those meetings have already taken place. I have been to visit one of the large ones, WAVE, and I plan to meet all the groups in Omagh this month. My colleague Oliver has been to visit others in the north-west, and another colleague, Bertha McDougall, whom some of you may know, has been doing that in the south and south-west. We are getting out and about and making ourselves known.

The gateway process was intended to be only a temporary measure. You will have read the reviews, which talked about the importance of a triage approach. Such an approach would do three things. First, it would identify whether someone is eligible; secondly, it would identify their needs so that they can be met; and, thirdly, it would ensure that that is implemented and implemented well. That is what we are doing. Part of implementing well involves people coming to the service who have psychological or mental-health needs. We are concerned about those needs being met. We are not talking about us as a service meeting them ourselves but about ensuring that they are met through the provision of the health service. We have a role not just in signposting but in helping people to access the service.

It is probably known to you that, at ministerial level, there have been discussions between OFMDFM and the Health Department about how that might happen. Protocols are being worked on and prepared. Some high-level documentation is being analysed today on that. At our level, we are concerned about ensuring that, if somebody comes to us distressed and they have psychological or mental-health needs, we can have an intelligent conversation that recognises those needs and that we can see to it that those needs are addressed. That is what we want to see happening. We have been working on developing a replacement for gateway, as it was only ever meant to be short term to ensure that nobody was left out. We called it a health and well-being review. We have prepared it, and, at the moment, it is with the commissioner. There are meetings that will happen next week. We hope and believe that we will very soon be able to introduce it. It will be a better and more appropriate system than the current one. It will be fully compliant with what was recommended in the commissioner's reviews.

We are committed to working closely with the Victims and Survivors Forum; we want to listen to it and to learn from it. We, as a board, have made a decision that, every time there is a meeting between the service and the forum's representative group, a member of the board will always be there. That is partly to say to people, "We are here as a board. We're not remote from you. You can talk to us, and we will listen to you." It is also so that we, as a board, have a closer and better understanding of their needs.

We are talking about working closely with groups, the forum and the commission. We are getting a good, strong collaborative relationship with the commission, and I have been working hard on that. I have developed a very good relationship with the commissioner and key people in OFMDFM. That is essential if issues that arise are to be dealt with quickly and effectively. That is what we want; we do not want to see them going on. You will know that, on the programme board, which is meeting today, there is a member of the Victims and Survivors Forum service working group. That is very useful.

The Committee and the commissioner have raised concerns in the past about communication. The board is aware of that and knows that it needs to be improved. At our request, staff of the service prepared a communications strategy that we have approved and which is being implemented. It is on our board agenda every month that we ask the executive to tell us how that strategy is being implemented and what effect it is having. What is its impact and how is the message getting across to people? Are we, in turn, listening to what people are saying to us? Feedback from those whom we serve is important. We are open to it; we want to hear it.

Our core management system needs to be improved. The Committee will be aware that there have been times when people had difficulty in getting through to the service. One of the things that we, as a board, realised was that the telephone system was quite antiquated; it needed to be replaced with something much more fit for purpose. We have implemented that. Having a good system is one thing; it is equally important, if not more important, to have people answering the phone in an empathetic and human way. That is why we have insisted on training for all staff in knowing how to do that and recognising that, sometimes, when a member of staff is dealing with a victim, it is not an easy conversation. The individual can be under stress, emotionally upset and angry. We recognise that VSS staff need the proper skills so that they do not get emotionally distressed and can give genuine support. We have put that in place.

Moreover, because we anticipate a very large increase in the number of calls, we have put in place some flexibility. We can bring in people who are trained to answer. We do not want people ever to find that they cannot get through to us.

I mentioned feedback, and I also should have said that we have a complaints procedure. The board has been very active in looking at that and in ensuring that the results of the complaints procedure are reviewed at every meeting. I am happy to say that in the short time that we have been here as a board, we are starting to see complaints coming down quite dramatically.

I will say a little bit about the number of calls that the service receives. Every week, it receives, on average, about 500 calls from clients, and that does not include calls from groups, the Department or others. It can go up and down: it can be much higher. In addition, there are, on average, between 50 and 60 drop-in callers. Sometimes, those people are known to the service, and sometimes they are not. Often, they come in in a state of high distress and anxiety, and staff have to be able to deal with that. Moreover, every week, we get some 60 new requests for an appointment to go through the needs review process.

I want to get across to you that the service is dealing with a very large number of people who are, in many cases, distressed, anxious, emotional, traumatised and looking for support. They cannot be dealt with in a few minutes; they need to be dealt with in a very serious way. That takes time. That is a great deal of work, and that is why we have put in the training that I mentioned.

I mentioned mental health and the importance of ensuring that there is a smooth transition from the service. We do not ever want to be in a position where, as a service, we are saying, "Your mental health support is in the NHS. Off you go." That is not how we want it to be. We want to work alongside the person to help them through the process so that they get the support that they need.

One of the terms that we use on the board is "person-centred culture". That is what we want to create in the service. That is being incorporated into training and supervision. One of the points in the review was that there needs to be stronger supervision. That has been implemented. Everybody receives a monthly supervision meeting on top of the day and daily, week-in, week-out supervision.

Supervision in an organisation such as the VSS is, in part, what I would think of as traditional supervision, which is ensuring that people are doing what they have been asked and tasked to do. However, it is also about ensuring that staff have support, because sometimes people can meet an individual outside who is highly traumatised and come back distressed themselves and in need of support. It is a combination of those things.

I assure you that the recommendation in the review on supervision has been implemented. Not only has it been implemented, but, as a board, we ask for and receive a report on how it is going every month.

It is important to state that our chief executive has been through a period of rapid change. The organisation is changing dramatically as a result of the reviews, but these are changes that we, as a board, would have wanted to see anyway. One of the things that she has done is enrol in a high-level course with the Tavistock Institute in London, where she is working on how to manage organisations that work with vulnerable, distressed and traumatised people. She is meeting people who are at the cutting edge of that in the country and bringing that experience and know-how into the service. That is very important. I have also implemented the appraisal system, and the chief executive officer and I are going through that at the moment. She has a new set of objectives that relate to the type of organisation that we want to create, and she will be held accountable for that by me.

Turning to the reviews, we were happy that the accounts and annual report were published with the Comptroller and Auditor General certificate; that is to say that they were unqualified. All the issues that were raised in the internal Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) audit have been satisfactorily addressed. We have gone a step further and appointed our own internal audit function because we want to be ahead of the game. We want to be able to see those things that might cause concern when they are tiny and deal with them and make sure that effective action is taken. We have also appointed our own audit and risk committee, and we have set in place the scope of the audit. I have probably been talking for too long. That is as much as I should say. I will hand over to you.

The Chairperson: I appreciate it. Once again, I thank all three of you for making yourselves available. Let me begin with a point of clarification, if I may. With regard to the switch from the individual needs review to the general needs review, how many people did you say were on the GNR?

Mr Gay: I said that some 2,000 people have come through the GNR.

The Chairperson: In point 4 on page 108 of the papers that you submitted to us, it states that:

"The GNR has been successful in that it has enabled many (1300) to come forward".

Mr Gay: Yes, but there have been more since the original paper was written.

The Chairperson: When was the paper written?

Mr Gay: A couple of weeks ago. The latest information is that we now have 2,000.

The Chairperson: That suggests a rapidly rising graph. Are you saying that there have been 700 more people in the past two weeks?

Mrs Anne Dorbie (Victims and Survivors Service): There have been 1,300 through groups because groups can do the GNR process, and 700 directly by service staff, making it 2,000 in total.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you. You said that of the 70 recommendations 29 have been implemented and 23 partially implemented. I am trying to be accurate about the categories. The 29 that have been implemented are all internal to the governance of the VSS.

Mr Gay: In the main, yes.

The Chairperson: Therefore nothing has been fully implemented in respect of interaction with groups and individuals?

Mr Gay: I think that we are well on our way to implementing those.

The Chairperson: So, you agree with me that they have not been fully implemented.

Mr Gay: I agree that they have not been fully implemented, particularly those that relate to individuals because they depend on the finalisation of the health and well-being review process, which will be how people come into the service.

The Chairperson: In respect of the funding review requirement, nothing has been fully implemented as yet, just for accuracy.

Mr Gay: Sorry, can you say that again, please?

The Chairperson: In respect of the funding requirement review, nothing has been fully implemented.

Mrs Dorbie: As you know, we are in a two-year programme, so when the service moves to a new programme from 2015 onwards, that is when we would look at fundamental issues regarding funding.

The Chairperson: In respect of monitoring and evaluation, nothing has been fully implemented.

Mr Gay: That is in consultation at the moment.

The Chairperson: In respect of the assessment process —

Mr Gay: That is in consultation at the moment with the commissioner.

The Chairperson: And communications and engagement.

Mr Gay: With regard to communications and engagement, we have our strategy and we are implementing it.

The Chairperson: But nothing has been fully implemented as yet.

Mr Gay: The website has been reviewed and improved substantially.

The Chairperson: What I am coming to here is a concern about time lines. I accept that there is much to be done on governance, and you have to get your ship aligned to sail in the right direction, but how are we on time lines? When will you say that the 70 recommendations have been implemented in full?

Mr Gay: I think that we will implement them all in the timescale in which they were set out, because a number of them are not due to be implemented until the end of May, and some are due at the end of June and some in July. So, I am confident that they will be implemented within the timescale that was given by and agreed with the Department.

The Chairperson: Peter, I see a lot of columns here. There is the summary action, the owner, the action that is required, the timescale and how you will measure the progress update. What about risk? Have you done any risk assessment?

Mr Gay: We do that within the board. We have a very sophisticated risk assessment procedure that we operate. Yes, we do have that.

The Chairperson: Is that applied to these 70 actions?

Mr Gay: It reads across all issues to do with the governance and operation of the service.

Mrs Dorbie: The chair is absolutely right about how the executive team reports to the board on a monthly basis. I am not sure what you are looking at, but there is an implementation plan for those recommendations. As the chair said, 29 of them have been fully implemented and some have been partially implemented. Really, that is just about providing the documentation around those implementations. The executive team goes through each and every one of the recommendations every month and attaches a corporate risk register and an operational risk register to that, all of which

are reflected in our own implementation plan by the executive team. I am very happy to share that with you if you would like to see it.

The Chairperson: Personally, I would. Take the first of the 70 on the implementation plan. The summary action is:

"Collaborative relationships should be developed further between key VSS stakeholders including the Victims Forum."

Do you have a risk matrix that says the likelihood of it happening and then the impact is if it does not?

Mrs Dorbie: Yes, we do. As the chair has already explained, a lot of that is already in place, with the board meeting the forum regularly and so on.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. Peter, you talked about going out and meeting stakeholders. That, of course, is absolutely right. As a former commissioner, I remember doing that process six or seven years ago and forming a very definite view on how I and the other three commissioners, as it was then, were greeted, particularly by groups. How are you being greeted?

Mr Gay: We are being greeted very well. People have been pleased to see me and my colleagues. I will ask Oliver to come in on that. I spent about four hours at one of the largest groups that we have. We had a very cordial time. I will not pretend that there were not issues of disagreement, but it is inevitable that there will be. We are getting the message out there that we want to come and talk to you and to listen to you. We will not always agree with each other about everything that we say, and, perhaps, to some degree, we are in a honeymoon period at the moment. I am certainly enjoying it. Do you want to come in, Oliver?

Mr Oliver Wilkinson (Victims and Survivors Service): Chair, I have noticed, as I am sure that you found from your experience, that some of these groups are very direct. They tell it to you as it is, and there was and is a sense that they perhaps could not speak openly in the past because there was a feeling that maybe that might have meant that they would not have got the money that they needed to run their services. We have certainly encouraged them to be as open and as direct with us as possible, and, if, they want to criticise, let us hear it; be confident that you are talking to people who will not allow your funding to be reduced in any way if you say something that we do not like. We are trying to get across the message that we want complaints if there are complaints. We want to hear what will make this service better. We are up for that, and people are giving it directly to us without fear or favour, and it is really good to go out there, as I am sure that you found.

The Chairperson: Yes, I think that they are admirably direct. In my experience, there was no personal animosity, but there was a kind of scepticism and cynicism in the sense that, "You are far from the first group to come and say that you are here to help us, and I am sure that you will not be the last". Indeed, we were not.

Mr Maskey: Thank you, Peter, and your colleagues for your presentation. It is good to hear virtually all of what you have said so far about dealing with the recommendations and the outworking of all of that. For me, it largely focuses on governance issues and management issues and getting the systems in place. That is all very important, and I am glad to hear that. At what point will we be able to tease out more of the substance of the programmes and how they might evolve? Obviously, when you have had discussions with groups, there has clearly been a lot of complaints and criticism about the management processes. Ultimately, the process is there only to provide services that are appropriate. I am keen to get the governance, management and all of that right and in place. We will continue to tweak it as needs be. However, at some stage, we will need to have some discussion. For example, you are talking about groups. At what point will you say that you will continue to support groups? What are the criteria for that support? For example, if there are there two groups in the one street in some places and none on any street in other places, how do we get to grips with that? That is the first thing: at what stage are we likely to get that? I still hear people questioning issues around breaks, respite and what that really means; how many people have it and how many do not; who is eligible; and so on. The issue is really the substance of what you are there to do and provide when you have the system in place that will allow you to do that efficiently.

Mr Gay: Thank you for your question. On the question of governance and management, I think that you have heard that we are really on that as a board. We are also very aware of the issues that you

have raised, because we are hearing that from people. I am aware that, over the next six months, the Commissioner will look carefully — well, the commission will — at the kind of services that should be provided. So, I think that she has got that firmly in her sight. It is something that she is looking at. We, as a board, have told her that we want to work with her on that, because we are hearing an awful lot from the people whom we serve that we want to put back into that.

Also, as I say, we go to the forum. At the last forum, members were actually saying some of the things that you have just been saying. Given the fact that more and more people are coming into the service because it is now easier to get in and it is more accessible than it used to be, there is the question of whether you can continue to do everything. The forum itself has come up with ideas and is saying, for example, that it thinks that respite breaks should only be for carers, the seriously injured or the bereaved. It is not our role to say yes or no to that: it is our role to listen to that and feed it into the work of the commission, who will be the body that gives advice to Ministers — saying that actually you would be better using your money in this particular way. Our job is to listen and pass that on and to be close to the victims, the forum and the groups.

The other question that you raised was about the groups. Yes, there are a lot of groups. I know that there are places where there are a lot of groups in the same vicinity. At the moment, our view as a board is that we are not here to change that; we are here to know and understand how it works. I am still at the stage of getting to understand. For example, I mentioned that I am going to spend a day in Omagh and see six groups there. I know that there are six groups in Omagh, but at the moment I do not have a handle on what they all do. In a way, it is not for us in the service to say there should or should not be, because we are implementing a programme that Ministers have said they want us to implement. Obviously, however, we will have a view on what we hear, and we will feed that back into the commission and to the commissioner. It will be for them to say, "Well, actually we think you should be doing this with groups, and we should be doing this with services."

Mr Maskey: Thank you for that, Peter. I have a final point. Earlier, you referred to a communication strategy. At what point will people have an understanding of where that circular process starts and finishes, if you get my drift? People are making the arguments and saying what should perhaps be done. You have direct experience and engagement. You are delivering on the mandate that you have been given. If that needs to be changed, at what point will people have an understanding that their input is meaningful?

Mr Gay: When we meet people, we tell them what our role is, because sometimes they do not understand what it is. Sometimes, they think that we set policy. We do not; we implement it. So, we always explain that. We also say that we want to hear their experience. We will then pass that on. I say to people that it is something that is going on with the commission at the moment. I expect that it will be well into the autumn before it comes up with proposals. It will then consult widely on them and come back to the forum and the sector as a whole. That is the message that I give when people ask me.

Mr Maskey: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Peter, can I develop this a wee bit? I think that it is a key issue. We will not focus on Omagh, where much has been made of the fact that there is a multiplicity of groups. Let us say that an event occurs in a defined geographical area and 100 people are injured. It is just the way of it that maybe 20 of them will want truth and justice, but another 20 may just want to move on and forget about it. Therefore, if you start with a group of 100, you will immediately have two groups. And then you may have a third group who are saying, "The 20 of us, it is our physical pain relief that is the issue." And then there are others saying, "Well, actually it is mental health and well-being," and maybe the fifth group are saying "No, it's my children and my grandchildren and their education."

Mr Gay: Is that bad?

The Chairperson: Exactly. That really is policy, so it is for the Department rather than the Victims and Survivors Service. What is your input into that?

Mr Gay: Anne, will you explain how the groups come to work with the service?

Mrs Dorbie: The groups apply to the victims support programme and have to provide evidence of need and a needs analysis that go to an independent panel for selection. That is all marked on the application itself.

On the geographical location of some of the groups, we are satisfied that there is no duplication of services in those areas. It is not that clients are moving from one group to another and getting the same thing in different groups. You are absolutely right that people go to different groups for different things, and we are satisfied that those services are provided. The groups provide quarterly monitoring and evaluation reports that are signed off, and we are very comfortable with that. The board has asked the executive team to provide it with a geographical spread of services, and we are in the middle of doing that, to inform the commission and policymakers about how they may want to do that.

So we are very mindful of that, but also very satisfied that there is no duplication of services. Again, it is about client choice and where victims feel comfortable accessing services.

The Chairperson: The converse of there being no duplication is whether there are any black spots where you are not geographically providing funding.

Mrs Dorbie: Yes, that would be correct. There are some that we identified in the past, and we are very pleased to see some new groups enter those areas in the last 18 months. However, as you said, there are certainly areas that could have better coverage.

The Chairperson: How do you address that? You are awarding money on applications that are judged against strict criteria. If a group in that geographical area does not meet your minimum standard, it will not get funding and there will be a black spot geographically.

Mrs Dorbie: That is correct. We will look at that and inform the Department and the commission about it. All the letters of offer have been issued to groups, with the exception of the small grants scheme. It is something for us to learn, moving into 2015, and inform the Department and the commission about how that may be addressed.

The Chairperson: Who would build the capacity of the groups so that they would come back with a robust application?

Mrs Dorbie: The service. Our project officers would look at that. Indeed, they do, and the fact that we have an independent selection panel has freed our guys up to be able to do that and to provide support to new groups and to groups that are thinking of doing things in certain areas. We are very keen to support people to do that and to provide whatever information we can. A number of new groups have come forward in the last 18 months.

The Chairperson: Excellent. Thank you.

Mr Wilkinson: Chair, I think that there is an issue of timing. At the stage that we are at, we want to get out a message that we respect the work of organisations that have been working to support people for many years with very little resources, and doing a marvellous job. We need to establish the right kind of partnership with them so that we support them in what they are doing, advise how they can do it better and, if needs be, extend that in the way that Anne has mentioned to include areas they are not quite able to reach at the moment. A year from now there will be a question for us on that matter, but right now we need to value, support and build good partnerships.

The Chairperson: I understand that if you are giving public money to a group, it must be held accountable for how it uses that money, but, if we think about the origins of these groups, we see that it tends to be people whose loved ones were hurt. They did not get involved because they had a competence in human resource or accountancy; they did it because they felt a moral obligation and common humanity. I suppose that that is the balance.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. The question that I was going to ask has sort of been covered. It was regarding how you decide to fund which groups, referring back to the Omagh example where you have several groups on the one street, potentially offering similar services. How do you measure the outcomes in the delivery of services of those groups? I know that the Chair made reference to potential gaps in other areas.

Mrs Dorbie: With regard to the letters of offer that groups receive, they have to meet particular criteria, and that would have been detailed in their application. If it is mental health and well-being, it is about how someone has exited from that particular course of treatment. If it is social support, how did they find that event? Has their quality of life improved as a result of that? All of that information is captured. As Peter said, the gap monitoring and evaluation tool is under review. The commission has agreed that process, and it is with the programme board. Over the next few weeks, we will go out to consultation with stakeholders to get their views around that and on how that information is captured. We do quarterly monitoring returns with groups, and we capture the information — has the individual's life improved? Where it is mental health and well-being, the outcomes are actually very well monitored by the groups. They are very responsive in how they do that. There are well-qualified tools, such as — *[Inaudible.]* Groups use a number of tools that we can monitor. All of that is fed back into this system.

There was also a question on the number of groups in Omagh. We are satisfied that individuals are not having a duplication of services. Each of the groups in that area is very valued by its clients and members. We do not have an issue around that. It is about where people feel comfortable going. There are a number of groups in Belfast as well. It is about trying to make an easy access point for individuals to get the services through groups, and, more recently, to be able to avail themselves of the GNRs, which have been a tremendous success in getting access for individuals to the services that we provide.

Mr Gay: On the subject of monitoring and evaluation and measuring the impact, I have to say that groups, in the main, understand clearly that that needs to be done, but they want to be part of the decision on how it is done. We want them to be part of the decision on how it is done. We want to have a monitoring and evaluation system that they do not perceive as something that is being done to them. We do not want them to perceive it as something that is overly bureaucratic, but as something that is useful in helping them understand the impact they are making, and to be accountable for the money that they get. I think that there is an openness between us on that.

Mr Wilkinson: We have begun to ask groups how they should be monitored and evaluated. It is very interesting. They are not saying that it is a numbers game — how many people come through the door. They have really good information on how Mary has progressed over the past year, from a point where she was not able to go out, not able to socialise, not able to pick up an educational opportunity and so on, but is now able to do that. They have that information. So, the better way is for us to get that from them and to inform ourselves and you as to how public money is used, rather than imposing something on them.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation so far. We have had a number of questions about governance and staffing. I am going to ask you a couple of questions in relation to operations. The VSS website states that:

"Applications have not yet opened for the period 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015. A review of this Scheme and the policy that has been governing it for the last number of years is currently underway. A move to a more streamlined approach in the administration of this Scheme will be developed as part of this review."

Can you give us an update on the current status of the review and when the scheme is likely to reopen?

Mr Gay: I can. The decision has now been made. First, scheme 6 is the one that provides a payment, and it will be a one-off payment that people will receive this year. It will not be a quarterly payment: it will be a one-off payment. That scheme has already been opened to those who are seriously injured. Those are in the process at the moment, and people with serious injury will be getting their money very soon, if they have not already done so.

That takes us to the others. A decision was taken last Thursday that the scheme would be opened under the principle that it should be made as fair and as open for everybody as possible. There were a lot of problems with the way the scheme was implemented last year — I was not here at that time. It was heavily oversubscribed, there was a closing date, and many people applied after that time. It was not considered to be a good experience. In order to avoid that this time, the decision has been taken that everybody who wishes to apply and is eligible to apply will have a time period in which they can make that application. I will ask Anne to tell you the exact timeline in a moment. The way that it is going to work is that there will be a global amount of money available for scheme 6 applicants other

than the seriously injured, and we will not know the individual amount that each person will receive until we know the number of eligible applications that are received; one will be divided into the other, and that will determine the grant to be paid. That decision was made by Ministers, and we were informed of it last Thursday. We are now in the process of implementing it.

Mrs Dorbie: I apologise that that is not up on the website. It will be in the next couple of days. We are just finalising our documentation around it. The budget for scheme 6 is £1.8 million. Around 300 people who are on the higher rate DLA care component and are known to the service are not means-tested, and they have been written to ask them to complete a self-declaration form to confirm that their circumstances have not changed. On receipt of that, we will issue them with a cheque for £1,000.

The remainder — approximately £1.5 million — will be distributed across the number of people who have successfully means-tested and are eligible at the end of a four-week period. We are looking to open that four-week period on 2 June. At that point, we will advertise for new applicants, and they will get an application form to complete. They will have to complete bank statements and so on as they did last year, but that is for new applications only. Anybody known to the service will receive a self-declaration form where they will be asked to say whether their income and outgoings have changed in the past year and sign that off. That will make the process much more streamlined for anybody already known to the service.

As Peter said, at the end of the four-week opening period —

Mr Lyttle: Can I ask a quick supplementary? Do those known to the service include those who had applied previously outwith the deadline and were unsuccessful?

Mrs Dorbie: No. However, we will be doing road shows later on this month, along with information sessions and advertising to make it as open, fair and accessible as we possibly can.

Anybody who received scheme 6 last year will receive a letter from us and a self-declaration form. Anybody else will contact us to get an application form. At the end of the four-week period, we will know the number of eligible applications having gone through the means test. As Peter said, the £1.5 million or thereabouts will be divided by the number of applications, and the amount will be awarded in a one-off cheque. We are looking at payments in and around July.

Mr Lyttle: Do you think that four weeks is long enough? I ask that question from the point of view that the deadline approach last time around proved to be a significant difficulty to many people. Do you think that creating a four-week window will address that difficulty?

Mr Gay: We want to announce it very quickly so that there will be a period between now and when the window opens for people to get themselves prepared. It is not the case that we are going to announce it, and they will have four weeks from now. We will be publicising it from this week onwards, so that people are aware of it and will know that it opens on 2 June, and they will have four weeks. I also want to say that, if people want to call in to the service with their paperwork and ask whether they have done everything right and got everything that is needed, the service will be there to help them.

Mr Lyttle: It is about using a limited amount of money.

Mr Gay: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: It is apparent that the Department still does not have a clear idea of the full scale of the demand for that type of assistance.

Mr Gay: I think that it is more a case of the budget being limited. It is being said to us, "That is the budget. That is what you have". We want the money to be made available to as many eligible people as possible, and we want the process to be open and fair. That is why we have the period between now — still relatively early May — and 2 June, when we will be notifying people about it. People will therefore have time to think about it. During the four weeks, both our offices will be open to allow people to come in and talk to our people to make sure that they are satisfied and we are satisfied that they have completed the paperwork properly. We do not want people not to get their money because they do not complete the form correctly or miss out something that they need. We do not want people to be disappointed in that way.

Mr Lyttle: I have reservations about limiting the application period to four weeks, but that is where we are at this moment in time. To help address some of the concerns, it would be good to know a bit more detail about the communications plan.

Mrs Dorbie: I am happy to do that.

Mr Lyttle: The Department has also advised us that the Victims and Survivors Service has been asked to produce a paper for the victims and survivors' programme board on the impact of the cessation of Peace III funding on victims and survivors' groups. Has that paper been produced and, if so, what are its findings or recommendations?

Mr Gay: A paper has been produced and was tabled today at the programme board.

Mrs Dorbie: I will pick up on the point about Peace III, and Peace IV, which is, as you are aware, not known yet. The service was concerned a couple of months ago that, should any of the groups fold because they no longer have Peace III funding, victims would remain unsupported in the period until the new victims support programme (VSP). As I said earlier, all our money has been awarded at this stage. We have nothing further to add.

Potentially, then, six groups could have their funding ended, resulting in victims and survivors remaining unsupported. The service is very keen to understand the volume and capacity out there in order to pick up anything that should happen. As we said, we have prepared a paper for the programme board. Ultimately, if the programme board supports it, the service will need to submit a bid in the June monitoring round to avail itself of some funding. We do not really know until we put that paper in or, indeed, whether the programme board will support it, but we are very keen to ensure, as far as we can, that no victims and survivors are left unsupported and that there is no gap in future funding.

Mr Lyttle: Are there groups that are close to folding in June? Should this not have taken place in the February monitoring round?

Mrs Dorbie: When the victims support programme opened in November 2012, groups applied at that point. In theory, it is up to a group to ensure that it has funding and to apply for funding that will take it right through to 2015. It became apparent only around November/December that the money was going to run out, but, ultimately, the funding issue is a matter for the group. Our concern is that people will be left unsupported.

Mr Lyttle: OK. This is my last question, Chair. One of the main requests from the recommendations was to ask the chair of the board to provide an assurance that the board is confident that the knowledge, skills and experience of the senior management team and the board are appropriate to deliver the changes necessary to meet the outcomes required for improvement. Can you give that assurance today?

Mr Gay: Yes, I can. The board met in camera. We had a full and frank discussion about it, and all four of us are of the view that the senior management team has the skills, knowledge and experience to implement the required changes. It has been through a difficult time, but now, in the new situation, there is an independent board to support it through the management processes that will be implemented, such as appraisal and regular monthly meetings between the chair and the chief executive. Taking it that those normal management tools are being implemented well, the skills, experience, knowledge and structure are fit for purpose.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks to the team. My question is about accessibility. Peter, you talked earlier about having two offices. Are both in Belfast?

Mr Gay: No. We have an office in Dungannon, although it is not normally open to the public for them to drop in. They can come in by appointment. The office in Dungannon is to serve people.

Mr G Robinson: My concern is how you get the message out to the general public, groups, and so on, about where you are based. Would it not be better to have satellite offices? Northern Ireland is a fairly big area to service.

Mr Gay: Good question.

Mr G Robinson: Quite a lot of groups out there need to know that you are there and how to get in touch with you. There is the telephone, email and all that sort of thing, but I am sure that lots of people prefer to speak to you face to face.

Mr Gay: You have put your finger on something that the board is looking at. We are thinking very hard at the moment about where we should have our premises. That is one of the things that we are definitely going to be looking at over the next few months. Everything is in the mix. There are arguments for why we should stay where we are and arguments for why we should move. There are also very good arguments for saying, "We should be more accessible in other parts of the country". We need to look at all that and at what is realistic and affordable. It will take us some time to work our way through that, but I promise you that it is on our agenda.

Mr G Robinson: I appreciate the financial aspect of what you are trying to do. There is quite a lot involved. However, from the groups' point of view, the more accessible that you are, the better.

The Chairperson: Peter, do you have any research on the percentage of victims coming to you who do not mind being seen and known as victims engaging with the service and those who prefer to do so anonymously?

Mr Gay: I will hand over to Anne in a second. The benefit of a city centre office, where people can walk in off the street, is that there is a degree of anonymity involved, and that is an advantage. As I said, we get between 50 and 60 people coming in regularly.

Mrs Dorbie: We do not have any actual statistics on how people prefer to approach us. What I can say is that, of people who live in Derry, a number of them say that they want to come to Belfast to be seen. They do not want to be seen locally, or else they want to be seen off-site. We have done assessments in libraries and health centres. Anonymity is important to victims and survivors, and we respect that. As Peter said, bizarrely, although Great Victoria Street is extremely busy, it presents a huge degree of anonymity. It is very accessible from trains, buses and the like. It is certainly something that I will look into. My colleagues may know better than me how we might be able to capture that.

The Chairperson: It is an interesting question. One of the reasons that the four commissioners chose Windsor House was that not only was it in the city centre and because of public transport links but, if you walk into Windsor House, you could be going to see one of over a dozen public bodies. If you jump in the lift, nobody really knows.

Mr Wilkinson: In this year, one of the things that we will aim to do is to draw up criteria from which we will determine the best place or places to be. There is a lot to be said for the city centre. There is a lot of people, so you are anonymous in the crowd. Fifty to 60 people, some of them very ill, are walking in off the street every day into an office that many, I think, would perceive as being one that simply processes paper, but it is dealing very well with some very damaged and difficult individuals. I do not want to lose that, but I do take George's point on how we can make accessibility even greater?

Mr G Robinson: Particularly in the north-west.

Mr Gay: We are thinking about that.

Mrs Dorbie: I think that one of the successes, if you will, of the GNR process was that, although we are talking about anonymity, 1,300 victims and survivors felt more comfortable going to a group's premises and undertaking a conversation there. It is not to be lost.

That goes back to the earlier point. Like in Omagh, this is about providing access points where victims and survivors feels most comfortable, safe and secure in accessing the services. It is about finding a balance as well. However, 1,300 conversations were conducted through groups on groups' premises, and that has to be commended.

Mr Cree: I was interested to hear your answers about the numbers game. It always comes back to that. How fit for purpose do you consider your budget to be?

Mr Gay: Let me put it this way: I do not think that the budget is going to change over the next year. I think that, given the increasing numbers of people who are coming forward, that is clearly going to put

pressure on the service. Decisions will have to be made as to where the priorities lie. It is interesting that it was the Victims and Survivors Forum working group that came to us and said, "Well, actually, we are aware of this, and we think that these are areas that you should be looking at". It identified a number of areas that it felt should be priorities and some that should be lower priorities. That is very helpful, and we are very pleased that the working relationship that we have with it and the commission is allowing that kind of discussion to happen. Ultimately, however, it is the programme board that will make the decisions.

If you were to ask me whether the service will be able to carry on operating in exactly the same way, with a large number of new victims who are eligible and meet the requirements of the order, I would say that it is clear that it cannot, so there has to be some reprioritisation. That is something that has to be done in consultation with the victims' forum and the commissioner, and then through the programme.

Mr Cree: Do you see yourself preparing a draft budget, bearing in mind the consultation?

Mr Gay: Yes.

Mr Cree: When do you hope to see that?

Mrs Dorbie: We are in discussions with the Department at the moment around our draft budget. We have not received our draft budget for 2014-15 yet. On receipt of that, which should be in the next couple of days, we will be able to have a proper assessment and then make recommendations to the board.

Mr Cree: I am actually thinking of the next financial year, because June monitoring is around the corner and the draft budget for next year will probably be done in September, so you really need to get in early before those things firm up. A much better way of doing would be — if you can in some way do so, and I know that it is not easy — to quantify the actual moneys that you may need so that you do not have to wait on a handout and then divide it by x. The current system is not really ideal.

Mr Gay: No, it is not.

Mr Cree: It ignores need, does it not?

Mr Gay: What we want to do is to have those kinds of discussions. I think that reprioritising within the overall budget is likely to be necessary, but it has to come through the consultation process, and it is good that that has started now.

Mr Cree: Very much so. Thank you.

Ms McGahan: Do you feel that the board has the capacity to implement the outstanding recommendations? I think that the review made a recommendation about increasing the board's membership.

Mr Gay: It did, and that is for OFMDFM to do. I understand that the recommendation is with OFMDFM, and it is working on that. We are a board of four people, and it was a recommendation from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) that we should be eight — I think that I am right in saying that — but that is a recommendation that sits with OFMDFM.

The Chairperson: How do you feel, Peter, chairing the body, given that the lack of a fully constituted board was the primary criticism of the report from WKM Solutions? Now that you and Oliver have stepped into a public service role, at an extremely high tariff, I suggest, with four of you when there should be eight, are you exposed? What impact does that have on the hours that you have to put in?

Mr Gay: It is certainly having an impact on the hours that we are putting in, that is for sure, because we are all putting in far more hours than we are budgeted to do. However, there are also some important skill sets that we do not have that we would like to have on the board. For example, it would be good to have a board member who has a good understanding of a public body that deals with members of the public in large numbers, because that is what we do. It would be good to have somebody who has that skill. It would also be good to have on the board somebody who has public

sector finance and accounting experience. Those are just two skill sets. Therefore, yes, there are other skills that it would be helpful to have on the board, for sure. However, it is my understanding that that is something that the OFMDFM people are working on.

The Chairperson: Before I bring in Stephen Moutray, I have one more point to raise. There was a recommendation that all appointments should be consistent with the code established by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. You have that down as having been implemented, but a commentary is attached that says that there were specific problems in that case.

Mr Gay: I am sorry, Chair. It is not for us to implement that recommendation. It is something that OFMDFM has to implement. It is a recommendation that lies with it, not with us.

The Chairperson: Can you tell us what the specific problems were? No?

Mr Gay: I do not know.

The Chairperson: Right. That is fine.

Mr Moutray: I just want some clarity on the office in Dungannon. Can you expand on what the status of the office is? Peter, you said that people could go to either office to have their forms checked or whatever, and then Anne said that the office is not open and that you have to make an appointment. On your website, there is no phone number for the Dungannon office.

Mr Gay: There is not?

Mr Moutray: Anne, I think you are aware that, in the past, there has been some confusion around that. Can you just clarify that point so that everyone is clear about it? Moreover, perhaps you can give us an indication of how many staff are employed at the Dungannon office out of your total number of staff?

Mr Gay: Anne, I think that you had better give that information.

Mrs Dorbie: Please be clear: the Dungannon office is not an open office; it is not a public office. You go there by appointment, and that is why there is only one number provided, which is that of the Belfast office. We can patch through on that number. For the purposes of scheme 6 opening, the office will be manned nine to five to facilitate anybody who wants to bring in their forms and have them checked. All of that will be very widely publicised at that point. Three staff have been recruited and are in post at the Dungannon office, and they were TUPE'ed over from the Community Relations Council (CRC).

Mr Moutray: Is it expected that that office will remain in the long term?

Mr Gay: That is something that we will have to look at. We have to think about where we should be in order to give the best service. We have not really made very much progress on that, to be honest.

Mr Moutray: Chair, let me just make the point that, despite what we say about the anonymity of going to a city centre office in Belfast, if you are coming from west Fermanagh, it is a day out.

Mr Gay: Yes, we understand that. That is why we have given you an indication of our thinking, which is that we need to make ourselves as accessible as possible. We need to look at how we use what resource we have when deciding where we put our office and our people. That is a job that we have to get ourselves into this year.

Mr Cree: Can I just ask you whether the four board members share the salary of the eight? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gay: No, they do not. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: What a mercenary question.

Mr Cree: It follows the logic of the distribution of funds that we are talking about.

The Chairperson: OK. We have just three or four points that we need to make to finish on the two reviews. CIPFA recommended that the programme board should be put into abeyance, effectively to let you get on with your roles. Where are we with that? Have you a view on when that would be appropriate?

Mr Gay: I was discussing that with a senior person in the office this morning. He told me that he had proposals on the programme board's agenda for this afternoon about a change in the way in which it handles its business. Therefore, I think that it is likely that the programme board will not continue in its present form. A paper was tabled today with some outline proposals, so we will see what happens as a result of that.

The Chairperson: Again, CIPFA's report said that the Department of Finance and Personnel undertook an internal audit, the findings of which were reported in November last year. CIPFA said that the DFP report:

"included a schedule of recommendations that were largely accepted by VSS management."

Can you tell us which recommendations were not accepted?

Mr Gay: They were all accepted.

Mrs Dorbie: They were all accepted, and, just to be clear, Chair, a follow-up report has been done, and we are just waiting for clearance from the Department on that.

The Chairperson: That is a quotation from the CIPFA report that states that they were "largely accepted".

Mr Gay: We accepted them all, Chair.

The Chairperson: OK. The WKM Solutions report, to use its language, stated:

"Incredibly, all Assessors told us they had had no formal training in using the INR. The VSS have since countered that training was given. There is clearly a lack of shared understanding of what constitutes 'training'."

Is there anything that you can say to enlighten us about that?

Mr Gay: I can talk only about what I know from this year, and what I can say is that a lot of training has been given to staff who are carrying out the reviews, and that training will continue to be given. The board will insist that that happens; will ask to see the results of it; and will be seeking assurance from the Executive that everyone who is coming out of these reviews has been trained and achieved certain levels of competence. We will insist on that.

I will have to ask Anne to tell you what happened before we took up post, because I do not know.

Mrs Dorbie: To be clear, Chair, when that recommendation or finding was raised, we were able to provide evidence that the assessors had indeed provided the training. They had signed them off at that time. I am not quite sure why it did not follow through into the report, but the evidence is there.

The Chairperson: Ok. If members are content, I will thank Anne, Oliver and Peter and wish them well for the future. I think that, when the Committee took a look at this a few months ago, we did not think that we would be returning to the subject quite as frequently as we have done. I hope that you will take our doing so as a sign of our committed interest in getting it right. I do not think that anyone has felt at any time that anybody has been out to do damage. Certainly, there has been a feeling that sometimes things could be done better, and it is appropriate for the Committee to examine that. I am sure that some people feel quite bruised. Unfortunately, that is part of the nature of public service.

Mr Gay: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Once again, Anne, Oliver and Peter, thank you very much.