



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Victims and Survivors Service

8 October 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

### Victims and Survivors Service

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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 Alex Maskey  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr David McIlveen  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

Ms Margaret Bateson	Victims and Survivors Service
Mr Oliver Wilkinson	Victims and Survivors Service

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** We welcome Mr Oliver Wilkinson, who is the interim chair of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS), and Ms Margaret Bateson, who is the interim chief executive officer. On page 103 of your packs, members, you will find a copy of the interim chair's opening remarks. An impact paper begins at page 108, which outlines the financial position. The progress against those two reviews by WKM and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) is at page 112 and thereafter. Finally, at page 125, there is a response from the VSS to queries raised by the Committee regarding means testing for applicants.

Oliver and Margaret, thank you very much for joining us. Members have your opening remarks in their packs, but is there anything that you would like to highlight at this point, Oliver?

**Mr Oliver Wilkinson (Victims and Survivors Service):** Have members had an opportunity to read through the remarks, or would you like me to pick some of the key points from it?

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** If you go for the key points, Oliver, that would be useful. Thank you.

**Mr Wilkinson:** As has been mentioned, our chief executive and chair stepped down recently. That in itself has presented challenges for the organisation, but, more significantly, we are working in an environment where our financial circumstances are a lot less favourable than they have been in the past. We have had to make some very difficult decisions. We know, and we hear every day, that those decisions have had a significant impact on many individuals who live in very difficult circumstances and who carry lifelong injuries, both physical and psychological, and on our staff, who, each day, have to try to find sensitive ways to tell people that we are unable to give them all that they

perhaps wanted and, in other circumstances, that we are unable to help them at this stage. We are hoping that our budget position will improve now in October monitoring and will enable us to help those who have been bereaved and others who have a chronic injury. We are hopeful, but we appreciate the financial circumstances that all Departments are in.

Having said that, I will outline some of the good things. We now have a very good working relationship with the Department and the commission. We are well positioned to begin to do some real work in addition to that which we have already done. The work that we have done was in response to recommendations in the two reports that have come to us. There were something like 70 recommendations, of which 65 have been either implemented or partially implemented. That is at a time when we have had significant budget reductions and the difficulties that I mentioned with two key members of the organisation having left. I think that our staff should be complimented for the work that they have done in addressing the recommendations to the extent that they have been able to do so. In doing that, I have to acknowledge the support that they have been given by the Department and the commission.

Finally, over the past six months and more, we have seen it as a priority to get to know and work closely with the forum. We attend all its meetings at its request. In the difficult messages that we have had to get out recently, we have appreciated the fact that it has been helpful to us by understanding just how difficult it has been to get those messages out to people. We have explained as best we can to them why and how we are doing the things that we are doing. Tomorrow, I meet it again, and I am quite sure that, while we still will have difficult conversations, at least we are going in the right direction.

Beyond that, we are pleased to be here and are very happy to answer to the best of our ability any questions that the Committee might have.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I appreciate that, Oliver, thank you. You will understand why am asking this first question. Before I do, I just want to acknowledge that you may feel that you cannot answer it, perhaps because you might not know the answer or you may feel you cannot answer it because, while you might know the answer, you might not think it would be appropriate to say so in an open session. However, you may be able to shed light, so I shall ask the question. We have lost the commissioner, chairman and chief executive of your body. Is there any reason to believe those three resignations are related?

**Mr Wilkinson:** I will answer to the best of my ability. I am not aware of any direct relationship between one and the other.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** OK, I appreciate that. We will turn to the finances because I think there is some clarification required. Your briefing paper states:

*"The opening budget position for 2014/2015 was communicated to the VSS in May 2014 of £11.7m. Following June monitoring, this position was reduced to £10m and an additional bid of £1.6m at that time was unsuccessful."*

I have a letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister stating that the Victims and Survivors Service has been allocated a current resource budget of £10 million, which includes a 4.4% reduction applied across all Departments due to budget constraints, and that a bid of £3.1 million has been made in October monitoring. The Ministers seem to be saying that your opening budget was £10 million, but you are saying it was £11.7 million.

**Ms Margaret Bateson (Victims and Survivors Service):** Every arm's-length body is given a grant-in-aid letter at the start of each year outlining their budget position. The Victims and Survivors Service received that letter in May 2014. The opening budget position was £11.685 million. Based on that position, we entered into contractual arrangements and commitments for the year ahead.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Did you say £11.65 million?

**Ms Bateson:** No, it was £11.685 million.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** But this letter says it started at £10 million and, if the £1.3 million bid is successful in October monitoring, it will take it up to £11.3 million. That £11.6 million is not mentioned anywhere in the letter from the Ministers.

**Mr Wilkinson:** The £11.685 million is, I presume, rounded up to £11.7 million.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Which is your figure, but it is not the figure in the letter from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is £10 million plus £1.3 million.

**Mr Spratt:** Chair, maybe we could get some clarity. Do you expect to have the full amount at the beginning of a financial year? In previous years, you got it through in-year monitoring as well, so you might not have £11.65 million sitting on the first day of the financial year. That would come to you over the period of the year. I think that makes sense.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** No, Jimmy. Sorry, if you want to ask a question, please —

**Mr Spratt:** I just want clarity on it, but the clarity in the point that you are trying to —

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I am trying to seek clarity on this, Mr Spratt.

**Ms Bateson:** Last year, we received an opening budget position of £11.3 million and then we bid in-year for an additional £1.1 million to bring us up to £12.4 million. Towards the end of the year, we were also allocated some departmental underspend of £400,000, so the budget available to us was £12.8 million last year.

The opening budget position in terms of the grant-in-aid letter to the service for the financial year that we are in was for £11.685 million, which is where the £11.7 million in the paper comes from. The first that we were aware of a £10 million budget was in the last week in July of this year. It was at that point that we started to take cost-efficiency exercises internally to try to maximise the amount of expenditure that we could allocate to the programmes and minimise the corporate costs of the VSS.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** The figures, Margaret, that you are quoting for the financial year 2013-14 tally with the letter from the Ministers — £11.3 million, then £1.1 million in monitoring, which is £12.4 million in total — but the figures for this financial year do not add up.

I want to ask you about the 4.4% reduction. You have had to ask the groups that you fund to absorb 4.4% reductions in efficiencies. How has that played with those groups?

**Ms Bateson:** We communicated in writing with the groups at the start of August to outline the pressures across the Northern Ireland Executive and the impact that they would also have on the service. During August and September, each of our project officers went on site with each of the groups to assist them in identifying where they could make savings, with the priority of maximising front line delivery and trying to ensure that most of the savings could take place in administrative costs. As a result of that, officers reported back in September that all the groups would be able to find 4.42% with the exception of three organisations. We are working with those three organisations to see what we can do to help them further. One organisation has stated that it would have to close a regional office. We only fund development workers in the other two organisations, so that will amount to one person's salary.

In summary, it has been difficult for the organisations, and they will face the same difficulties that we have internally. It is about the timing. Asking an organisation to find a 4.42% saving halfway through the year is like asking them to find 8% or 9% in the second half of the year. However, as is normal, most commitments are entered into at the start of the year, so contracts are signed and staff contracts are in place, and it is extremely difficult for them to find those savings.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Are those savings coming off administrative costs only, or are programmes being affected as well?

**Ms Bateson:** Programmes are being affected as well. Like the service, the organisations have also seen increases in numbers coming forward across all areas, including health and well-being and social support. The difficulty is that the current letters of offer were insufficient to support new individuals who have come forward. Secondly, when it comes to the individuals who are being

assisted currently, the organisations are having to find some of the cost savings in front line delivery. For the reasons I outlined, a lot of the corporate running costs were already contracted and committed at the start of the year.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** It has also impacted on the work of the VSS. I believe that seven agency staff have been laid off.

**Ms Bateson:** Seven agency staff were laid off during July, August and September.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** In your briefing paper, you state:

*"In the short term, the Department has provided an additional resource to ensure statutory and governance arrangements can be met."*

Can you tell us what that additional resource is?

**Ms Bateson:** The additional resource is an accountant from the Department who is working in the service three or four days a week. That individual is not undertaking any operational role; it is really in terms of internal and external audit recommendations. We have made a commitment that we would review policies and procedures, strengthen systems and make efficiencies across our IT systems. That individual is assisting us with those types of activities as opposed to an operational role.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Can you describe what a working day is like in the VSS? Is it a pleasant place to work?

**Ms Bateson:** VSS staff would agree that their working day is extremely busy. We have tried, since I started at the start of August, to ensure that the workload is manageable. I am aware that staff are under an immense amount of pressure, and the criticism that comes externally has a direct impact on staff morale. We have put mechanisms in place to ensure that staff are supported, and we have one-to-one supervision meetings on a monthly basis. We had a staff planning day on 2 September, the purpose of which was to ensure that the workload was spread evenly across the organisation and to identify where individuals from different teams could assist in the front line, particularly in call handling to try to minimise pressure on individuals and individual teams.

**Mr Wilkinson:** If I can, Chair, I will put some figures and, hopefully, some sense to those. We have approximately 500 telephone calls per week. That could be someone who is making a quick telephone call to say, "Can you send me out some information?", but, equally, it could be someone who is very distressed and needs very careful handling on a lengthy telephone call, which is stressful for the individual making the call and for the staff member who is dealing with that.

In addition and what people often miss is that at least 50 people each week walk in from the street. We have not met maybe 60% of those people before. We do not know who the individual is or what level of distress the person is bringing with them. Some of those conversations are with people who are very damaged. That can be expressed in grief, anger or whichever way. There is not a moment that I go into the office and there is not one or more than one person sitting there waiting to be seen. It is not just an administrative office that processes paper; real people walk in every day in very distressed circumstances, and our staff have to deal with them. I am very grateful to them for what they are able to do, but they are under severe pressure.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I think that everyone around this table, as constituency MLAs, and their staff will be aware, from dealing with the public, that there are people who need a significant input of time.

**Mr Wilkinson:** I am quite sure that that is the case.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** It is very difficult for the individual to come forward, and it is also very stressful to be the recipient of the information that the individual wants to offload.

You indicate in the paper that:

*"VSS aims to return all calls within 24 hours, with some more complex situations taking up to 72 hours."*

I am seeking clarification on that. If it is a complex case, and we assume, therefore, that you are talking about a particularly vulnerable person, are they left for 72 hours, or are you saying that there would be a number of phone calls to reassure them that their case is being processed but that it could take 72 hours to get to the result?

**Mr Wilkinson:** Maybe you will help me with this, Margaret. In a certain month, we dealt with over 4,200 telephone calls that came into the centre. We have six people dedicated to dealing with those. There were occasions when we simply were not able to deal with the call, so we were having people ring and then drop off. We had to do something about that. At that point, we did the best that we could do in the circumstances: we linked the individual up with NI Direct. That is not the best solution, but it is a solution. It has provided a very good service to us at a time when we needed it to do so. We are pleased to advise that the projections are that, from the end of September, we will be back to dealing with those calls ourselves and ourselves alone, and that every call will be responded to within 24 hours.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I will ask the mirror question that I asked Margaret. You are chairing a board. CIPFA said that you did not have as many board members as you would need given the pressures and the demands on that board. Since then, the board has shrunk because of factors beyond your control. Where does that leave you? How easy is it to chair the VSS?

**Mr Wilkinson:** In a curious way, there is strength in very small numbers because you gather together and support one another, but it is not a good situation. We need to increase our board members so that we have sufficient breadth and range of expertise to give the leadership that a very challenging organisation like this needs. There are three of us, which means that we are quorate, but, if one of us disappears, we cannot make a decision. That is where it gets very serious. I am pleased that the Department has been working with us for quite a while to move that forward. Applications are currently in the press for new board members. That will take a number of months, but at least we are going in the right direction. We are just about able to cope right now, but the challenge to us is a lot less than it is to our front line staff.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I have two more questions before I bring in other members who are keen to talk to you. There is a bid for £1.3 million in October monitoring. The background indications seem to be that it has a good chance of success. What will that money be used for?

**Ms Bateson:** The money will be used for two key areas. We are aware that the senior management team and the board had to make some very difficult decisions during the month of August. As a result of those decisions, we are aware that, under the individual needs programme, the deferment of the education and training and the respite breaks have caused considerable distress, particularly to the bereaved. The decision that we had to take at the time was to prioritise chronic pain needs. The priority for that funding would be to ensure that there is access to services for the bereaved. We are also aware that, due to the budget restrictions at the time for the injured, it has been limited to those who are on disability living allowance (DLA). We are aware that there are other injured people out there who many have ongoing chronic pain needs. Those are our first two priorities.

In addition, we have some internal priorities in the service in terms of vacant positions that we need to fill to strengthen front line service delivery. We also have some corporate governance costs in relation to the implementation of the Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVS) recommendations, such as strengthening the number of members on the board and the internal and external audit function. Of that £1.3 million, £1 million would go directly to front line service delivery.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Would it cover some of the efficiencies that you have made, such as suspending training for staff?

**Ms Bateson:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I am conscious of the staff, the pressures that you have mentioned and the criticisms, including those that have come from this room. It seems like a double blow to then find that you cannot even get training to potentially rectify any valid criticism. That will be back on course.

There is a second and bigger bid of £1.7 million on top of the £1.3 million. What would that be used for?

**Ms Bateson:** As I said, the bereaved and the other injured are our pressing priorities, but we are also aware that, last year, we opened up the schemes to a much larger number of people. The £1.7 million was to ensure that the same value of funding went back into the individual needs programme as in the previous year. It was also to ensure that other vacant positions that were critical but less critical in terms of the VSS could be fulfilled. Also, in terms of the victim support programme, we know that the groups out there are also seeing increasing demand. In some cases, it was to reinstate the 4% efficiency saving where it had had an impact on front line delivery. Secondly, nine organisations have been through our independent assessment panel and their applications have been approved, but, due to the budget restrictions, we have not been able to issue letters of offer.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Are any of those likely to close if the £1.7 million bid does not come through?

**Ms Bateson:** We understand that two organisations in that group are likely to close at Christmas. They are currently operating from reserves.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Can you tell us who they are, or is that confidential?

**Ms Bateson:** I think that it is pretty much public knowledge who the groups are. They are Ards Phoenix group and the Pat Finucane Centre.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** There are ministerial commitments in that second bid that will be unmet if the money does not come through, such as the 24-hour telephone callback.

**Ms Bateson:** The 24-hour telephone callback is something that we monitor weekly. We had a three-week period in September where we were not able to meet that, which was due to the capacity on the front line to respond to the calls. That is why we put in the temporary solution of NI Direct. We issued communication to all our groups to ask for their assistance in helping us support individuals who called the service. As of last week, we are back on the 24-hour key performance indicator (KPI). Our concern is that, when additional funding becomes available in October, expectations will be built again, and we will again see peak-activity in telephone calls. That may mean that we are not able to meet the 24-hour KPI. That is something that is managed weekly by the officer responsible for that team, and the situation is reported weekly to the senior management team.

**Mr Moutray:** I wish you well as you move forward from a very difficult immediate past.

**Mr Wilkinson:** Thank you.

**Mr Moutray:** In relation to the staffing reductions that the Chair referred to — the loss of seven agency staff — what is the total complement, and what is the nature of the jobs that have been lost?

**Ms Bateson:** We have an approved staffing complement of 31 staff for the current financial year. It is probably important to see that in the context of the previous financial year, when we had an approved complement of 37 staff. The assumption was that the activities would decrease in year 2, but we have not seen that.

The current staffing number is 27, so we have gone from 37 to 27 over a six-month period. The seven agency staff were individual needs programme claims processors, a client services manager and a client services staff officer. We have restructured internally. We started that process with staff on 2 September at a staff planning day. We met again last week and yesterday with the team leaders, and we have reallocated staff from corporate services and programmes into the individual needs programme and front line delivery to make sure that that 24-hour callback can be maintained.

**Mr Moutray:** Oliver, in your opening statement, you referred to the improved relationships with both the Department and the Commission. It is early days, but how would you assess the relationships with the users, given what has happened in the immediate past?

**Mr Wilkinson:** It is always going to be difficult, because we are the ones who are saying to the individuals, "We can either give you funding, we can give you some, or we can't give you any." So, giving many people the message, "I'm sorry but can't provide you with funding at this stage", is always going to be difficult. We fully appreciate that in those circumstances individuals will feel the need to blame us in some cases. I want to defend the staff in VSS on that issue. They have been blamed for

too long for things that were not their responsibility. It is a difficult message to send out: there is a responsibility on them to deliver that message professionally and well. They have to do that, and we constantly monitor that to make sure it is done properly. I am confident that it is being done properly.

We invite people to complain — we encourage them — but, importantly, we have spent a lot of time on getting our website right so that we are giving information early to people about what is happening. The criticism in the past was that things were happening and people did not know. We are also working very closely with the groups, as Margaret said, to make sure that they explain to people who are coming through their doors what is happening. The forum has been a very important resource to us over the past six months. Obviously, we are working with the Department and the Commission to make sure that a consistent and straightforward message is being delivered rather than three different messages coming from different organisations. We are trying to make sure that the right message gets out in the right way. I appreciate that it is hard to tell people that they will not get something this year that they had last year.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation; it has been good to hear from you today. I am going to use OFMDFM figures to avoid any criticism. The OFMDFM figures say that the opening allocation for you in May was £11.3 million and that you were advised in July that that was reduced to £10 million. Any organisation that experiences that level of in-year reduction has my sympathy. It is important that we extend good wishes to you and all the staff in the service who are working under those extremely difficult circumstances.

In the short time that we have, will you give one or two examples of the way in which those reductions have impacted on someone experiencing the service? You say in your brief:

*"There are many victims who availed of services last year which we are unable to provide again this year."*

Will you give an example from the individual needs programme of what that means in reality to a victim and survivor?

**Ms Bateson:** One key example would be the bereaved, where people have lost a loved one and, for a number of years, have been able to avail of a respite break or education and training. With both those schemes closed, there is certainly frustration and anger and distress among those individuals who translate that as them not being treated as a victim any more. That is an extremely difficult message for staff when they are working with individuals and are coming in to give that message. If additional funding becomes available, the bereaved are one of our key pressing priorities.

Likewise, last year, we carried out the individual needs reviews on the basis of need. Individuals who came forward were provided funding to address the chronic pain that they needed. There is no cap on that, so it meant that people could have had a package of care. That package could be physiotherapy with counselling sessions with a respite break. There is a holistic package provided. This year, due to the budget restrictions, we have had to make the difficult decisions to cap those amounts. That means that individuals are having to choose which services are most valuable to them. I do not know if Oliver wants to add anything to that.

**Mr Wilkinson:** On that last point, if someone has been receiving a form of therapy, complementary or otherwise, and it has helped them to sleep better at night and that stops, that is a very difficult situation for that individual to find themselves in. That is as personal as it gets. It is important to understand that others see the funding they receive as an acknowledgement that they are a victim or a survivor. Taking away something that they have seen as a proper and dignified acknowledgement of them as individual victims and survivors has significant emotional and psychological consequences.

**Mr Lyttle:** I know how difficult it is to persuade and convince some victims and survivors that there is a new service in place after many, many years of not being able to access any type of assistance. I can only imagine the challenge that you have to communicate that change in service provision and try to retain victims and survivors who are willing to avail themselves of those services on an ongoing basis.

Finally, there are two programmes: the victims support programme, which is for groups, and the individual needs programme for individuals. How is the budget split between those two programmes? Who decides how that is split?



**Ms Bateson:** A business case for funding was prepared over a two-year period, I think, in 2011 and 2012. As a result, budget allocations were assigned to each of the programmes. So, £10 million a year was allocated for programmes — £6 million for the victim support programme, and £4 million for the individual needs programme. In addition, there are VSS corporate costs that have to come out of the total budget. The difficulty this year is that we have £10 million, which must also include the VSS costs.

The victim support programme is issued over a two-year period, so those contracts for the two years were issued, in the main, in April 2013. We are now in year 2; we are 18 months into a two-year programme, so those contractual commitments were already made. In reducing the letter of offer, the victim support programme is still maintained at around £5.6 million to £5.7 million, which means that there is £2.8 million this year for the individuals at this point in time. Obviously, any funding that we get in October monitoring will be prioritised for that programme.

**Mr Lyttle:** So, you have had to take more from the individual programme because there are contractual commitments on the groups' programme.

**Ms Bateson:** Really, that comes down the timing of the cut. If you know at the start of a financial year, you can start making savings more quickly, but when it is six months into the year, many of those contracts are already signed and legally binding at that point, so it is difficult then to —

**Mr Lyttle:** With regard to the Victims' Commissioner advice for groups, the WKM Solutions report refers to some groups perhaps holding on to victims and survivors for financial or political reasons. Those are not my words: they are in the WKM Solutions report. I am aware that this is a view held by others, and groups would be well advised to work to counter that perception. The Victims' Commissioner's advice goes on to say that the VSS should give careful consideration to reviewing the assessment of the quality of groups' applications and to consider how there is a separation of political activity from advocacy and welfare support. How have you responded to that advice?

**Mr Wilkinson:** We have excellent organisations right across our community. At a time when we are unable to help individual victims to the extent that we want, they are there. They were there before we were there, and they are still there providing excellent services. I hear the criticism that perhaps they are holding on to individuals. I would like to see that fully and properly researched and for that to be done in partnership with the commission, the Department, the groups themselves and with the information that we have to hand that we can make available to enable that to take place. I would welcome that. But, right now, at a time when individuals are getting less, I would not want to make any criticism of the groups that are out there and holding the line in circumstances where, just at the moment, we are unable to do so. After all, through the taxpayer, we are providing them with money to provide services. We expect them to do so, and, from what I see as I go around and meet them, they are doing exactly that.

**Mr Maskey:** I appreciate your last remarks. I think that we can all accept that there is a big diversity of views in the victims and survivors sector. It is not for any of us here, or any consultants for that matter, to say that somebody is hanging on to a victim. How can anybody hang on to a victim? I really cannot understand that idea. It does not cost money for somebody to make a publicity statement — it might, in some people's eyes, be a political statement. Your last point was that people get funding to deliver whatever they are going to deliver, and, providing they deliver that, that should be value for money and what they are there to do. Somebody might say something that I might not like, but that is tough. We have to live with the fact that there are people out there with very diverse opinions, some very strongly held, and why would they not be? I appreciate your remarks on that.

The limitations of the budget that we are talking about today have been fairly well covered. I raised a case recently — I appreciate that everybody round the table could also raise individual cases — and the Committee was very patient with it. It was by way of illustration, and I want to acknowledge that everybody could do likewise. You have covered it in a way. However, it relates to a person who is a member of a big family with quite a number of siblings. Yet and all, her father was killed, her brother was killed and another one was seriously injured, and she finds it deeply hurtful that there is different treatment even amongst the siblings. She is hurt and angry because she believes that she is not being considered a victim. The first thing that she asked me was this: "What is a victim and how do you define a victim? If I am not being treated in the same as my brother or sister or somebody else, why am I called a victim?". She said, "I would not care if we all got a fiver or a box of chocolates; I think that we should be treated the same". Those were her words, and she was not being flippant in any way; she was making a point. She was not saying that she wanted x number of pounds, but she

wanted some access to services on the basis that she had been bereaved. It causes divisions within families, never mind between groups or anybody else.

I raised that case by way of illustration. I know that you have already identified that you and your staff find it difficult to talk to people and families like that. I am just trying to work out what you say to them and what we say to them in those circumstances. You may not be able to answer that fully today, because it is an individual case. However, you have covered it at length. I appreciate the way in which both of you have presented here this afternoon. I have heard the way in which you have outlined a case, both eloquently and passionately. It was very well explained. I know that the Committee has indicated to you that it has been trying to take a more hands-on approach working with the Department, with you and with the commissioner before she resigned. However, we are also equally mindful not to be an additional burden to the work that you have to get on with, and you are very stretched. I wanted to put that on the record. I do appreciate your presentation today and the work that you are doing. I think that it is very difficult.

How do we address people who, in the case that I outlined, find themselves feeling very angry and hurt that they are not a victim, when in actual fact, unfortunately, they are?

**Mr Wilkinson:** I think that there are two ways. The first is that we continue to do what we are doing and additional money is provided to the service to develop the range of services that we have. Quite frankly, I do not think that that is possible. We need to sit down and seriously look at a different way — a better way — of providing the services that we are providing. That could and should be done with the Department, the commission, ourselves, our groups, the forum and others sitting down and saying that, on the basis of the information that we have so far, how can we better provide for the needs of victims and survivors for the next 10 years? Conversations are taking place at the minute on that.

I believe that it is not beyond the gift of all of us to come up with a better way to make sure that some people are acknowledged in some financial way and that others are just acknowledged by being recognised for who they are, but that, ultimately, the needs of individuals are paramount, and we are providing for that better than we have been able to do up until now. I think that the system has worked well up until now, but the numbers coming through the door continue to increase. Realistically, there will not be sufficient money in the years ahead to meet the needs of that increasing number; therefore, we need to think more creatively about how we can use the funding that we have to best effect. We can do it, and maybe the circumstances that we are in now will push us to put that right.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I want to follow up on Mr Maskey's point. Some years ago when I was in the Victims' Commission, there was a very famous case where a husband was shot dead in the kitchen of the family home. One sibling witnessed it because they were in the kitchen and the other sibling was upstairs in their bedroom. The sibling who saw it was helped, and the sibling who did not see it was not helped. It is preposterous to argue that just because you did not see it that you were not traumatised. As Mr Maskey said, it is the sense of an uneven playing field for members of the same family.

**Mr Wilkinson:** The needs of those individuals might be different, but they should be acknowledged, and that is what we need to address.

**Mr Spratt:** Thank you for the presentation. I know that you have a very difficult job, and in your presentation today you have been very frank in answering questions. That has been very helpful from our point of view. I want to go back to the telephone calls and the other issue, which was emails, which were basically not being answered. It is almost a year since the last time you were before the Committee, and then flowed all the recommendations. Good on you for trying to implement or partially implement most of the recommendations that came from the Department and the commissioners. Are you answering folks quickly by email, even if it is only a holding email to say that you will be in touch with them in the next 24 hours?

**Ms Bateson:** I understand that emails are being treated the same as telephone calls.

**Mr Spratt:** So it is done quickly.

**Ms Bateson:** Yes, and if you have examples that are not, I would be happy to take them back —

**Mr Spratt:** No, it is just that that was one of the issues that the forum people raised with us the last time they were here. It is good to hear that there is a big improvement. I think that you said that telephone calls would be back to 24 hours before the end of October, is that correct?

**Ms Bateson:** They were back to 24 hours from last week.

**Mr Spratt:** And you are completely, totally dealing with them now?

**Ms Bateson:** Not until the end of October. We do not want to do anything too quickly, based on just one week. We want to make sure that we do it in a structured way, so each week we will decrease the number of calls that go through. At the minute, a percentage goes to NI Direct and a percentage goes to us. By the end of October they will all come to us, but we want to do that gradually, week on week, to make sure that we do not create another problem and react too quickly.

**Mr Spratt:** Oliver, I think you made the suggestion that in the last while you have had about 50 people per week walking in off the streets and about 60% of those folks were new. Are you seeing a fairly substantial increase in people who are not involved with any group? That is something that I have always raised — people who do not want to be involved in groups or anything else, but who have been victims — some of them very serious victims — of the Troubles. Are you seeing more and more of those people coming in with individual needs?

**Ms Bateson:** We were recording that information systematically a year ago when people were coming through the service, and at that point one in four was not part of a group. At the minute, when people come in we explain to them how the schemes are currently open. Obviously, they are open only to a very small number of people, and we do not want to raise people's expectations by asking them for lots of information, so we are not capturing that. I would say that, of the people coming in, 60% are new to us. I would say that 60% are also not part of a group but are new individuals coming forward.

**Mr Spratt:** So there is an increase in individuals. I think that one of the reports that we got from the research people for the debate yesterday showed that groups have increased by one third over the past 12 months, is that correct?

**Ms Bateson:** I would need to come back to you on that figure. I am unsure where that comes from.

**Mr Spratt:** Perhaps you will come back to us on that, because that is one of the issues. If there is an increase in the number of groups, that suggests that there is less money. If there is a pot of money and there is a one-third increase in the number that you have to divide it into, that is one of the issues. There is also some suggestion that groups have been breaking up — in other words, that there have been disputes within groups and they have broken into a second group. That may account for some of that one-third increase. Will you perhaps give the Committee some information on that?

**Ms Bateson:** I cannot relate to the one-third figure. For me, it is a handful more. There was a two-year contract issued to all groups in April 2013, so the vast majority of groups will have had a two-year contract, so the number in this year is roughly the same as last year. There is a handful of extra groups, and they are small community organisations, because the scheme stayed open for small community organisations. So, it would be organisations that bring people together to go on respite breaks or personal development courses. They would generally not be community groups that are actually funding salaries or things like that. We will come back to you with the exact figures, but one third seems extremely high.

**Mr Spratt:** I want to make one final point. I think that I am right in saying that people who are on high-level disability living allowance (DLA) get up to £1,000 for chronic pain relief.

**Ms Bateson:** One thousand five hundred pounds from 1 September.

**Mr Spratt:** The additional £500 is for a carer, making a total of £1,500.

**Ms Bateson:** Yes.

**Mr Spratt:** Those who are on small-rate DLA get about £600; is that right? For chronic pain?

**Ms Bateson:** Not for chronic pain. Under scheme 6 for financial assistance, those who were on high-rate DLA were not means-tested and received £1,000. Those who are under phase 2 receive £650. The chronic pain scheme, which is a separate scheme for support for the injured, is open to those who are on high-rate DLA or the high-care component or the middle-care component. Before the budget reduction, we continued paying treatment plans until 31 August. From 1 September onwards, those who were on the high-rate DLA high-care component had a £1,500 allocation until the end of the financial year to continue with those treatment plans or whatever other needs they may have.

**Mr Spratt:** How do you deal with those in chronic pain who are not on DLA?

**Ms Bateson:** At the moment, they are a priority for additional funding becoming available in October.

**Mr Spratt:** Are they individually assessed by your assessors?

**Ms Bateson:** We do not have assessors. Well, we have one assessor in-house at the moment. When individuals who come in on a daily basis are experiencing high levels of distress or anxiety, our assessor is always on hand. We have reduced the administration around the schemes to ensure easy access. At the moment, the assessor would usually have a short conversation with the individual, face-to-face or by telephone, rather than carry out a huge assessment.

**Mr Spratt:** You have lost seven agency staff. It has always been acknowledged that that is a more expensive way of employing people. Why did you employ them through an agency and not on a proper contract at the start? There has been downsizing in Coleraine, for instance, where there were staff who were surplus to requirements in some Departments. Have there been any discussions with the Department in relation to the possibility of getting staff from some of the other Departments?

**Ms Bateson:** Staff were on agency contracts at the time because under the business case for funding, which is over a two-year period, the staffing structure and headcount is set in stone, in black and white. Once the service was up and running, as you know, things never work the way the paper said they would three years ago. We identified emerging pressures, which was, essentially, removing staff from the corporate service function and putting them into front line delivery. At that time, in September of last year, we resubmitted a staffing paper to the Department, saying that we would stick with the same headcount but showing where we actually needed people. For that reason, we had seven staff in temporary positions until that was approved. At that point, we were superseded by the CVS review. We presented a new staffing structure this week for our interim needs between now and the end of the year.

**Mr Spratt:** Have there been any discussions with the Department about where there might be surplus staff?

**Ms Bateson:** Yes. On your second point, the Department has already provided assistance in the form of the accountant for three or four days a week. We are in discussions at the moment for an additional member of staff to help us to merge our IT systems, because we feel that we could find some efficiencies there. We have been discussing our needs for the next six months and for the future with the Department as well. I should acknowledge that the commission has provided us with administrative support for the research project that it is doing; it is helping us to consolidate information on that. The commission and the Department have been working closely with us; they are aware of our staffing pressures and constraints and are proactively helping us with them.

**Mr Attwood:** A number of members have, rightly, commented that you have been helpful to the Committee in answering questions. That is in some contrast to the situation a year ago when, after the Victims' Commissioner formally alerted people about her concerns, there was a sense of denial in a number of places in relation to the gravity of the situation facing the VSS and the impact on victims and survivors. My view is that whoever was involved in the planning for the VSS did not work through resource requirements properly.

One of the results and intentions of the VSS was to reach out to hidden victims. Your evidence today has been that people are beginning to present. Sixty per cent of your client base is new, and that is replicated in other organisations. It is clear that those who were responsible for creating this whole new organisation did not work through the resource consequences properly.

You, in part, are living with the consequences of that. There might be a lot in-house that I think you should be doing, but you are certainly living with the consequences of all that, which fell primarily to the responsibility of others.

I go back to the question that the Chair raised. At the beginning of this financial year, you were operating to a baseline figure, which you were then advised in July was wrong. Is that the case?

**Ms Bateson:** We were operating to a baseline figure of £11.685 million per a grant-in-aid letter. We made an additional bid at that point of £1.6 million in June monitoring. Then, at the end of July, we were advised that our bid for £1.6 million had been unsuccessful and that our budget had been reduced to £10 million.

**Mr Attwood:** Who told you that your budget baseline was £11.6 million in April?

**Ms Bateson:** That came down as a standard grant-in-aid letter from the Department.

**Mr Attwood:** So you got a formal offer to be then told that there was not the funding for that. Was that a consequence of the reductions following July monitoring or a consequence of a false baseline in the first instance?

**Ms Bateson:** I am unsure. I know that the Department will be able to answer that.

**Mr Attwood:** What do you think it was?

**Ms Bateson:** I do not think that I would like to guess.

**Mr Attwood:** We will see what the officials say, but it seems to me that there is a question about whether you were led to believe that a certain figure was secure only to discover that it was a false baseline to begin with, independent of the consequences of June monitoring. If that is the case — and I am not saying that it is, although we will hear shortly if it is — I go back to what I was saying earlier about people not getting the resource commitments right in respect of the VSS generally.

You referred to the implementation of the audit recommendations. I am saying this for the record, and this was raised before in the Committee: we need to see where we are with the implementation of the recommendations. You indicated where you are with top-line implementation. We need to get that information sooner rather than later; otherwise we are into a vacuum. We do not know where things are.

When you drill into it, how much is going into the corporate function of the VSS in overall percentage of your budget line? How much is going into groups and services for individuals? What is the overall ball-park figure?

**Ms Bateson:** I will take last year as a full year. Last year, we spent £12.8 million — £2.1 million in corporate and £10.7 million in programme costs.

**Mr Attwood:** I think that about £6 million went in grants to groups last year. How much went to individuals?

**Ms Bateson:** Four point four million pounds — actually, I think it rounds to £4.5 million — went directly to individuals last year.

**Mr Attwood:** So, in terms of money going into the lives of victims through groups or to individuals, it was over £10 million.

**Ms Bateson:** It was £10.7 million.

**Mr Attwood:** Do the administration costs cover all the management costs, assessments that are done and any consultants who are brought in?

**Ms Bateson:** Economic appraisals and independent panel costs are all in the corporate costs, even though there is a direct relation to the programmes.

**Mr Attwood:** I have three quick questions. You will probably be able to deal with them all. A new generation of issues is beginning to emerge around the VSS that may be financial in nature, but they might actually be administrative in problem. The first issue is the question of specialist equipment going to severely disabled people; we are getting reports of people being denied access to appropriate wheelchairs. Secondly, questions are being raised about groups getting funding where a proper audit of their eligibility was not done, and about post-event eligibility assessment and checks being done. Thirdly, people who were offered a grant not being able to take it up being told — this is a breakdown in communication — that the grant was time-limited and that, if they did not take it, they would not get it. People say that they were not told. I could give you cases that evidence all that. What would you say to that?

**Mr Wilkinson:** You mentioned wheelchairs. That comes down to how much money we have that we can give out. You heard the figure of what we have. I come back to something that I said earlier: we have to find a better way of dealing with situations like this; we have to find a way of linking more of what we do with Health and Social Care. We could not, right now, pass the problem across to our Health and Social Care colleagues, but we could work towards a position whereby that could happen and a more effective service be provided for people in that category. That is what we need to do if more money cannot be provided to us to do what we were able to do last year or previously.

**Ms Bateson:** The eligibility refers to the gateway to services process that was opened in February.

**Mr Wilkinson:** Just after the individual needs review (INR) stopped.

**Ms Bateson:** At that point, to improve access to the schemes, the groups carried out the gateway to services process. Where a group had signed off on a gateway to services process, the VSS did not conduct any further eligibility checks. If someone came directly through the service, the VSS carried out the normal eligibility checks. That was on the basis that the group had applied under the victim support programme. As part of the assessment process under that, the independent panel assessing the application would have had to satisfy itself that it had checks and balances in place to ensure that the services that it provided were to victims and survivors.

Concerns were raised during that period that some of the individuals coming through may not have been eligible for the individual needs programmes, and there were concerns about the volumes coming through. We have carried out eligibility checks on those, and, at the minute, 92% of people presenting themselves through the groups or the service are eligible. We are not seeing a difference between what comes through the groups and what comes through the VSS. My point is that they both show roughly the same percentages, which suggests that there were not significant issues with the eligibility of individuals coming through groups.

**Mr Wilkinson:** You appreciate that that change took place on foot of the recommendations from the commissioner that the assessment that we were conducting prior to that was seen as too onerous and stressful. A simplified form had to be developed. I think that there was a period of a few months right at the beginning where we were learning how to get it right. We may not have managed to get it right in all circumstances.

**Mr Attwood:** And the grant offer?

**Ms Bateson:** Yes, the third point was on the grant offer. I think that that might relate to letters of offer that were made to individuals around February or March time towards the end of the financial year. The commitment that we made at that time, following criticism externally, quite rightly, was that they should not be time-bound; individuals should be able to uptake the grants when they want. During April, May, June and July, we continued to process those grant offers, even though, technically, the letter of offer was up until 31 March 2014. Unfortunately, with the budget reduction to £10 million at that time, we could not afford to continue with those grant offers. Again, with the small budget that we had available at that time, and the fact that we prioritised chronic pain needs, we had, in August, to say, "Circumstances have changed, and unfortunately we're going to have to cease these letters of offer".

**Mr Attwood:** Does it say explicitly in the original offer that it expires on whatever date?

**Ms Bateson:** Yes; 31 March 2014. If you have examples where you think that that is not the case, I would be happy to look at them, but, certainly, the system at the time —

**Mr Attwood:** OK. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I will finish with one question about premises. Mr Moutray highlighted concerns about Dungannon. Have those all been addressed?

**Mr Wilkinson:** I will answer in two parts. We, as a board, are looking at the issue of premises because, yet again, we are asking ourselves, "Can we move to premises which are cheaper than what we currently have?".

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Is this headquarters?

**Mr Wilkinson:** Both. We are actively looking at that. We can see that there is a much cheaper option for headquarters, and we are planning to move. Due to the usual contractual commitments, it will probably be by April of next year. We are looking at Dungannon to see whether there is a cheaper option there. If there is, in talking to our staff and the Community Relations Council (CRC), which also has an interest, we will try to find something that saves some money so that we can put more of that money into the services that we are trying to provide.

**Ms McGahan:** If you contact Dungannon district council, it will have a list of vacant properties in Dungannon town. That may be helpful.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** I acknowledge, as others have, and thank you not just for coming today but the tone and spirit in which you have engaged with the Committee. I want, Oliver, to end on as optimistic a point as possible. I ask you to leave the resources to one side; we have acknowledged how important they are and how they are impacting so negatively on what you aspire to do. In the big picture, I have always felt that we wanted to establish a flow, where you would have a strategy, which we have; a commission, which we have; a service, which we have; and a forum, which we have. Leaving aside the fact that maybe there is not enough money flowing through, are you optimistic that the structure — the architecture — is in place and that it is the right architecture, and that, if there were enough resource, this is the model that will work and will deliver for victims and survivors?

**Mr Wilkinson:** This is the model that will work. It is not all about money. Now that we are working in partnership with one another, we can share ideas about how we can do it better. Over the next year or two, that has to be the priority for all of us. Although this is a very difficult position to be in, we are, nevertheless, in a good position. I have quite a positive view of how things can be if we put our minds to it over the next year.

**The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt):** Oliver and Margaret, thank you both very much indeed.