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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Victims and Survivors: Briefing by OFMDFM
Officials

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Victims and Survivors comprehensive needs assessment. At our last briefing, we gave some background on the changes that services to victims and survivors had undergone in recent years and the challenges associated with that. We also made it very clear that we recognise the urgency of dealing with the issues raised if we are to provide an appropriate and successful service to victims and survivors.

The programme board — or project board, as some members refer to it — has met on four occasions and continues to work through an agreed work plan. I take this opportunity to reaffirm board members' commitment to working together to address the issues that have been raised, identify the solutions and oversee their implementation. An action plan identifying the key issues to be addressed, and a time frame for improvements to be made, are in place. Significant action has already been taken to address the concerns raised in the plan, with a large number of actions complete. The board and its subgroup will continue to meet until all actions have been implemented.

The programme board recognises that listening to the views and concerns of the full spectrum of victims and survivors is essential if we are to improve the service provided. To that end, the board has met the forum services working group and will continue to have regular engagement with the group. Indeed, you have just received a briefing from members of the forum and the commissioner. Additionally, at the request of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, in collaboration with the Department, has jointly commissioned an independent assessment of the functions of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). That will provide expert advice to improve the service and inform future policy. It will provide a fresh perspective on the Victims and Survivors Service and its processes and enable us to make it better and deal with victims' and survivors' needs with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

As you are aware, the Victims and Survivors Service was planning to introduce a commission-based approach from April next year. However, concerns have been raised by the commissioner that it is too much too soon for the sector and for VSS to move to that commission-based model. In light of the concerns raised, I advise that the programme board has agreed that the introduction of the commissioning of services has been postponed.

As you know, the Department was successful in its bid in a recent monitoring round, and I am pleased to confirm that the allocation of additional funding has been agreed and that the Victims and Survivors Service has now reopened schemes that had been temporarily suspended. I know that the service was keen to re-establish those schemes, as it is its primary role to provide appropriate funding and assistance to victims and survivors.

With regard to the victims and survivors board, I am pleased to confirm that a permanent chair and board have been appointed from 2 December. The board will have an important role to play as we look forward to ensuring, in the short term, that the changes that come out of the independent assessment are robustly put in place. In the longer term, the board will ensure that the improvements remain in place and keep the work of the service on track and to the high standard that we are striving for.

Finally, I commend the commission, the service and, of course, my staff for the hard work and dedication that they have shown over the past few weeks to get to this point. We all remain committed to travelling down this road together to provide the best service possible to victims and survivors. We welcome this opportunity, Chair, to update the Committee, and we are now happy to take any questions that members may have.

The Chairperson: OK, Ricky. Thank you very much. Returning to my opening point, I do not want, and I doubt that any members of the Committee want, the devolved government to be defined by a woman having to go out and get three quotes for her own wheelchair. How did that happen?

Mr R Irwin: That was one of the key issues that the programme board has looked at. Swift action has been taken on it. A number of operational changes have been made. In relation to that particular point around quotations, the burden of proof should not be on the victim. VSS will now carry out the price checks and remove the obstacle that was created with the previous process.

The Chairperson: Do you accept that it was a design fault?

Mr R Irwin: I accept that it should not have been the way it was.

The Chairperson: Have you reviewed how that came to be allowed to happen, rather than simply rectifying it for the future?

Mr R Irwin: The programme board is working through a number of issues. Perhaps it would be timely for us to update you on some of the other changes that have been implemented and some of the issues that have been raised. I invite Cathy to go through some of those issues. It might help to inform members' questions.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that significant action has been taken to address concerns and that a large number of actions are complete?

Mr R Irwin: Yes.

Mrs Cathy McMullan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I have a list of things that have been done, so I will just work through it. Revised call-handling procedures have been put in place to ensure that same-day callback happens for queries. All letters that are to go out are quality assured by the client services manager prior to issue to groups and individuals. Targets are in place for responding to correspondence; a 10-day target for written correspondence and a 24-hour response to telephone calls. Additional resources were provided to process backlogs in issuing award letters. The Northern Ireland Memorial Fund files have transferred across to VSS. The supporting documentation requirements have been revised to reduce the burden on victims. The eligibility of some individual victims is now confirmed by groups through a declaration. There is a revised internal complaints procedure, although some further work is needed more broadly on complaint handling. We are talking to the commission about that.

As Ricky said, additional funds have been provided to reopen the schemes that were suspended: education and training, chronic pain, disability support, care for carers, respite breaks, psychological treatment therapies, and applications that came in before 30 June under scheme 6 for financial assistance. The requirement to provide quotations has been revised to reduce the burden on victims. Ricky mentioned that one. Monitoring and evaluation forms have been revised on an interim basis, pending the outcome of the independent expert assessment that is due to take place.

The Chairperson: To pick out a couple of those, you talked about targets of 10 days and 24 hours for written and telephone contact. What is the monitoring result so far?

Mr R Irwin: We recognised that the management information systems within the service were inadequate. We have been working with the service to put those in place. I do not have the exact results figures with me. New processes are in place so that if anyone who rings the service does not get their query dealt with straight away, they are dealt with and told that their query will be handled within the next day or however long it is going to take. That is happening with phone calls and correspondence.

The Chairperson: But you cannot say to me that 100% of calls are answered within 24 hours or 100% of letters in 10 days.

Mr R Irwin: I can tell you that the mandate given to the VSS from the programme board was very clear: these issues should be fixed. I do not have the exact figures with me.

The Chairperson: How is it being monitored?

Mr R Irwin: We have asked VSS to report on a weekly basis. I should be in receipt of reports from this week which will give us exactly the information that we need to measure performance across a number of key indicators.

The Chairperson: So you have not had the first report yet.

Mr R Irwin: No.

The Chairperson: OK. You heard the session with the forum members. The key issue is that no service user is on your programme board. Why is that?

Mr R Irwin: That is a matter that the programme board has considered. Of course, the commissioner and members of the commission staff are there. The board has met members of the forum services working group, and members of the group are invited to the next meeting in January. As officials, Cathy and I have been engaging directly with individual members of the forum. We will continue to do that. Clearly, this needs to be brought back to the programme board for reconsideration. There was a very strong message today in the evidence from the forum members that user participation on the forum is something they want to see. I am very happy to bring that back to the programme board at the next meeting. In the meantime, we will continue with our engagement with individual members.

The Chairperson: To be clear, the Victim's Commissioner recommended that a service user should be on the board.

Mr R Irwin: I think that was within the discussion at one of the first meetings, yes.

The Chairperson: Offering advice like that is one of her six statutory duties, and you chose to ignore that advice.

Mr R Irwin: Not me, personally, but, collectively, there are a number of people around the table. As I say, the message today is around user participation and victim participation. We have to bring that back now.

The Chairperson: I am just trying to get a sense of why the commissioner, in fulfilling her statutory duty to offer advice, had that advice ignored.

Mr R Irwin: I cannot answer that specifically, but what I can say is that the level of engagement between officials, VSS and the commission has dramatically increased in recent weeks, and we will maintain that engagement.

The Chairperson: I am very interested that the commissioning of services has been postponed. What are the implications of that announcement?

Mr R Irwin: The implications are that it should relieve some of the uncertainty that existed within the sector. There was a clear message from the commissioner, in advice that she had put to Ministers, that this was too much too soon and that this decision needed to be revisited. What needs to happen now is that the service needs to come back to the board with proposals on how funding for groups into next year is managed.

The Chairperson: So, on what basis was the original decision made — the one that is now being rescinded?

Mr R Irwin: I do not have the detail of the original decision for commissioning with me today, unfortunately. I would have to check that and come back to you.

The Chairperson: It seems rather important, given the decision that has now been made, that the commissioner — what was her argument?

Mr R Irwin: The advice to Ministers was quite clear that the sector was not ready and, with the issues that existed with VSS, it would not be a good time to introduce such a model and further work was needed. So I think that this was discussed and agreed by the programme board, and the postponement decision made.

The Chairperson: I do not want to hog this, members, but there has been almost a mixed message, Ricky. Earlier, you heard Mitch say that there are six groups on one street in Omagh, and there is an argument for questioning why we need six, and is some sort of rationalisation for the greater good? That process, which could have been assisted by going to commissioning, is not going to be assisted by going to commissioning.

Mr R Irwin: I think that now, with the announcement of the independent assessment of VSS and its scope, we need to be careful that we do not pre-empt the outcome. The commissioner said that February would be the time when that assessment would be reported on. Whatever comes back from that to Ministers, I imagine that it will include the need to look at how funding has been allocated to

groups within the service. Let me say as well that, with the introduction of a new permanent board, much-needed strategic oversight will be provided for VSS which has not been there before, and I would expect that that is something that will come up on their radar as well.

The Chairperson: As you say, you have now appointed the board for the Victims and Survivors Service, as distinct from this programme board between the various organisations. Is there a service user on the VSS board?

Mr R Irwin: I can tell you the individual members.

The Chairperson: I am content with a yes or no answer.

Mr R Irwin: I do not know their specific backgrounds, to be fair, Chair. I know that one was a former commissioner.

The Chairperson: Bertha McDougall.

Mr R Irwin: Yes.

The Chairperson: But you do not know whether there is a service user. Who would hold that information? Who would have made an assessment of whether there should have been a service user?

Mr R Irwin: The board was appointed by Ministers.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation. Why was the level of activity and work that is now occurring not in place in advance of the Victims and Survivors Service being established? Do you think that, if it had been, the difficulties that have been experienced could have been avoided?

Mr R Irwin: There is that possibility. The reason that there is activity now is because, when the commissioner wrote to Ministers in September — actually, she wrote to the interim chair of the board of VSS and copied Ministers in — they were alerted to the fact that urgent action was needed. That resulted in the establishment of the programme board. The Committee had a role to play in that as well. We can now show that there has been significant improvement, but very clearly, there is a considerable distance to travel, which is the exact phrase that the commissioner used, and there are a number of issues that we need to continue to work through, and we are working through them. I will invite Cathy to say something about some of the other issues that we are working through in order to provide some more information to members.

Mrs C McMullan: Some of the actions that are ongoing include regular programme board meetings, regular subgroup meetings that sit underneath that and regular trilateral meetings between VSS, the commission and the Department. There is increased sharing of information between VSS and the commission. Standard wording on correspondence is being reviewed by the commission to be more user-friendly, and a revised management information system is being established, which Ricky referred to a little earlier. There is increased engagement between the forum services working group, the programme board and the Department. The commission has organised a round-table event for later on this month that will be extremely useful. The data protection issue that was mentioned is under review by the commission. Clearly, information on victims and survivors should be gathered only if required for a specific purpose by VSS, and information should be held securely and not shared. Those are things that we are still looking at together.

We have ongoing discussions with the primary healthcare sector regarding meeting the acute needs of victims and survivors, and we have set up a formal advice approach with the commission to seek formal advice from it on subjects as and when they come up.

Mr Lyttle: I have another question. At our Committee meeting of 23 October, I asked officials who took the decision, as far as I understand, to exclude people under threat from paramilitaries as being eligible for funding from the Victims and Survivors Service. We have not yet had a response to that question. Is it possible to answer that question today?

Mr R Irwin: I know that that response is still under consideration in the Department. However, it is a very serious, current issue. As Cathy said, it is one of the issues that we have formally sought advice from the commissioner on, and the commissioner is seeking legal advice on it. She will then provide that advice to Ministers. That is the position that we are at now.

Mr Lyttle: What you are saying is not clear to me at all. I am asking who took the decision to exclude people under threat, and you are saying that you are seeking legal advice from the Victims' Commissioner.

Mr R Irwin: The issue of whether individuals under paramilitary threat are entitled to receive support under the Victims and Survivors Service is one that is now being looked at. The decision, I imagine, was an operational one, if a decision to exclude people was made. I am not aware that that operational decision was made. It is a live issue, it is an important issue and it is an issue that we have formally sought advice from the commissioner on.

Mr Lyttle: I asked the question on 23 October. If it is such a serious issue, why are you not able to give more clarity than you are giving today?

Mr R Irwin: I believe that Ministers will want to get the advice from the commissioner, who is seeking legal advice on that.

The Chairperson: You do not know why the decision was taken by VSS.

Mr R Irwin: I was not party to the decision, and I do not have the details of the actual decision. It is an operational matter that VSS must have looked at. It is probably a question that needs to be put to VSS, which obviously I am very happy to do.

Mrs C McMullan: It comes down to the interpretation of what a victim is and what a survivor is, as set out in the legislation, and that is a matter for the commissioner to interpret and advise us on. Some people who are under paramilitary threat clearly will meet the definition as it is set out currently. For others, it is not so clear that they meet it, and that is a matter for the commissioner to advise on.

The Chairperson: Indeed. Chris, sorry to cut across you. This is saying that, because an individual is subject to a threat from a terrorist organisation, that individual is being discounted. How could you allow that to happen? How could you allow a terrorist organisation to define whether someone can or cannot have access to services for victims?

Mr R Irwin: What we are saying is that that is being looked at now.

Mr Lyttle: To build on what on what the Chair said, are you saying that you do not know who took the decision, or, at the very least, that a decision has not been taken about whether that person is entitled to funding from the Victims and Survivors Service. I am saying that, at this stage, that is completely unacceptable.

Mr R Irwin: I am not across the detail of individual cases in VSS, nor should I be. What I am saying is that this is an issue that, initially, the commissioner has written to Ministers on. It is a very concerning issue, and, as a result, the commissioner has been asked to come back with formal advice on how this should be handled. To add to that, I expect that it is something that would come under the radar of the independent assessment as well.

Mr Lyttle: Do you have a timescale for when you might be able to give more clarity on that issue?

Mr R Irwin: The timescale for reporting on the independent assessment is early February, I think. The request from the commissioner is really down to when that legal advice is provided and how it is interpreted, and then it is a question of when that is provided to Ministers.

Mr Maskey: Thank you, Ricky and Cathy, for your presentation. I do not want to comment on the last issue raised. I think that it is much more complex than some people might suggest, so I think that it is important that it be considered. We are dealing with the issue of the legacy of the conflict and the victims and survivors of that. I do not want to make any comment at this stage, as I prefer to wait for further consideration on it.

I am very encouraged by the report that we got this afternoon from the services working group and your information, Ricky and Cathy, to the Committee, addressing a list of the issues on the extent of your engagement with the forum, with the individual members of that forum, and so on. I take that as very comforting. Ricky, you said in your opening remarks that you will take back the extent and strength of the opinion around the need for formal input from the victims forum in some shape or form, and I think that we suggested previously that it would come most usefully from the services working group. I want to reaffirm that. As far as I am concerned, I find that the evidence that we are getting today reaffirms the need for that. If I can make a proposal here, it is that the victims forum — perhaps through the services working group or whatever else, for it is its choice, not mine — be formally represented on the programme board. Notwithstanding all the extensive engagements that you have outlined, which I think are very good and impressive, there are still obviously information gaps. We heard from the forum representatives that they are not aware yet of all the issues that you are addressing, some of which you have outlined today. What is the point? I fail to see how that makes sense. It is the victims and survivors programme board, so I think that the obvious thing to do would be to address that gap.

That having been said, it is important to say that I am less concerned at this time about why things have happened in the way in which they have up until very recently. That will be a discussion for another day, because, as I see it, no matter what way you cut this, people have had to step in here in recent times, having been extensively lobbied and pursued to do just that. I do not want to make judgements at this time, but people in the VSS are employed to do precisely the work that you are now having to step in to address. Although all the issues that have been addressed are very important in their own right, they all seem like relatively simple matters to address. You have been very clear and forthright in your remarks this afternoon. For me, those matters seem organisational and should be quite simple to address. They were not being addressed but are now being addressed, and that is all that I am interested in at this moment, as I said in the previous session. We will take the time in due course, perhaps post-February or so, to reflect on how we ended up in this position. We are very keen to have the checklist on the table to show the issues that have been raised and how you are dealing with them. The type of report that you gave earlier is the only report that I am interested in hearing about until we get all the work concluded. We can then have all the discussions on how we got here and how we move forward. Thank you for the work so far.

Mr Spratt: I am sorry that I was out of the room for part of your presentation, but I am very heartened to hear about the progress that has been made.

It concerns me that there are so many meetings going on. We are looking for action as opposed to numerous meetings, Ricky. The Chair raised the issue of it taking 24 hours to return a telephone call. With 37 staff, it is incredible that that is happening. It should be a much shorter period. In fact, if somebody makes a telephone call or sends an e-mail before the close of business on any day, that should be answered, full stop. More work needs to be done on that.

We heard previously about means-tested benefits and the forms and such stuff. People are already getting other benefits that are means-tested, and that information will already have been available to the memorial fund or wherever the funding was coming from. Why put people through the trauma of having to produce new bank statements and all the rest of it when they are already getting other benefits that are means-tested?

I will comment on the threat issue. It concerns me that it is not as simple as the commissioner dealing with the threat issue. It may well not be a victims' issue but a police issue, and it concerns me that the Department is not having conversations with the PSNI and, indeed, other Departments, because there are other schemes in place, such as the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme, for people moving out. Sadly, in a meeting the other day, the commissioner appeared not to know very much about that, and you have to question why that is the case. Is there joined-up thinking and action on these things? There are a number of people, Ricky, whom you need to have a conversation with, and legal advice needs to be sought on some of the matters, particularly for something so serious. If somebody has to move house, we are talking about all sorts of problems, and I know of those problems from dealing with folk in the past.

There has been talk of forms and retraumatising people. Are you satisfied that enough work has been done so that the folks who come along are not retraumatised and are not asked for things such as death certificates that go away back to the late 1970s or early 1980s, when it is quite apparent that they have been there before? I know of one recent case in which somebody was asked to provide serial numbers for an incident that happened in the early 1980s. It is almost impossible for someone to go to the Police Service of Northern Ireland now and get that information. There has to be some

sort of acceptance over some of those issues, because you will not get written police reports that go back to the late 1970s. Those things are in archives somewhere. If you ring a police station, the police do not want to know. Why traumatise people by asking that they ask for stuff like that when it is totally and absolutely unnecessary and they have already been dealt with, perhaps through the memorial fund or another source? You need to look at things such as that urgently.

Mr R Irwin: Members clearly raised the issue of means-tested benefit when we last appeared at the Committee. It has been discussed in depth with the commission. You are absolutely right to ask why someone on means-tested benefit should have to demonstrate that again. The process is actually quite complex. We have formally asked the commission to give us its advice on how we can change the process to make it less burdensome on households.

There is an issue around individuals who are under paramilitary threat. I am aware of the SPED scheme. Obviously, the PSNI has a role to play, but we, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department for Social Development (DSD) all have a role to play as well, and, yes, we need to have those discussions.

When it comes to supporting documentation, people should not be asked for death certificates. We should be removing obstacles for victims who have to provide supporting documentation. Steps have been taken to make sure that that happens. There is further work to be done — it is one of our ongoing issues — but I agree with what you are saying.

Mr Spratt: I congratulate you for the work that has been done, but keep it up.

Mr Attwood: My problem, fundamentally — this came across in some of the earlier evidence — is that I am not quite sure what all the work is that has been done. We have not received information about all the work that may or may not have been done. It seems, from the earlier evidence, that there are people in the victims and survivors' sector who equally are not aware of all that might have been done or is yet to come.

That is the first comment that I want to make, because, as with last week when we did not get papers on the social investment fund, this week we get a paper as the meeting commences that is two and a half pages long and does not say very much. It seems to me that it was written some time ago. Where it refers to the independent expert assessment of the functions of the Victims and Survivors Service, the last line of that paragraph is:

"The indicative timeframe for this process will see commencement in early December."

You would presume that, if the report is up to date, it would confirm that that had commenced in early December, if that is the case. It is very hard to be able to question and interrogate evidence if all that we get is two and a half pages.

I presume that you were present at the programme board meeting when it was decided that there would not be any further victim membership of the programme board. Is that the case?

Mr R Irwin: I was present when it was discussed and agreed that the forum would be invited to a future meeting.

Mr Attwood: My question is this: given that you were present, what was the reason that the board decided not to invite representatives beyond the Victims' Commissioner to join it in taking the work forward?

Mr Irwin: I believe that the discussion focused around the role of the commission, the need to have ongoing engagement with the forum services working group and how that could best be managed.

Mr Attwood: Was there any specific reason that no individuals from a victim or survivor background, be they in groups or otherwise, were full members of the project board, in order to ensure that the full work of the board was attended to?

Mr Irwin: It was discussed that that was something that the board would have to keep under review. Quite clearly, as I said previously, it needs to be reviewed.

Mr Attwood: I note that it is under review and I welcome that, but there is also an indication in your paper, short though it is, that the work of the programme board is well advanced. It states, for example:

"A large number of actions are complete."

How many actions are there, and how many are complete, in your view?

Mr Irwin: I have not counted them. Cathy has previously gone down through the list of actions that are complete. I am very happy to go over that list again. We have also covered the actions that are ongoing.

Mr Attwood: It was indicated earlier that being read a list is not a very satisfactory way of interrogating information. I think that you should know how many actions have been taken. If you are prepared to say that a large number are complete, you should know how many of the actions that were identified, have been completed.

Put that aside. Given the scale of concern around the issue and the fact that this has been a predominant issue in this session of the Northern Ireland Assembly, are you prepared to share with the Committee, subject to the appropriate privacy and confidentiality requirements, all the actions that have been identified and all the actions that have been completed?

Mr R Irwin: That is something that I will take back to the next board meeting. I will certainly recommend that.

Mr Attwood: Earlier, you will have heard the evidence that there are people in the victims and survivors' sector who do not know what all the actions are. I do not think that that is satisfactory. It is less unsatisfactory, but it is still unsatisfactory that we do not know. We have been read lists. By the way, I hope that that is not the extent of what is being done. If that is the extent of what is being done, I suggest that the project board is not getting to grips with what the issues are. For us to have any sensible understanding of what is or is not happening, we need to know what the action plan is and why you believe that a large number of actions are complete.

Mr R Irwin: OK. I do not disagree with that.

Mr Attwood: Will you give a recommendation to the project board that, subject to the appropriate conditions, all of the action plan be provided?

Mr R Irwin: Yes.

Mr Attwood: Earlier, it was identified by one of the contributors that staff who are qualified and capable are leaving the VSS. Is that issue being addressed in the action plan?

Mr R Irwin: There are a number of actions that have actions within them. I said that an independent assessment of VSS will be carried out, and the commissioner has confirmed that. The scope of that will look at a number of very important issues, including the service's interaction with victims, the service's interaction with groups, the governance of the service, management and finance. Issues including how people receive support and the work of assessors will be within the scope of that. We need that piece of work to complete before we, as a programme board, can comment on it.

Mr Attwood: Let us take the issue of the independent expert assessment. In the paper that you provided, you state:

"The scope of this work is currently being developed",

but then go on to state:

"The indicative timeframe for this process will see commencement in early December."

Has the scoping of that work been concluded?

Mr R Irwin: That is probably a question that the commissioner would be better qualified to answer.

Mr Attwood: The opening line of your document states that Ministers have written to the commissioner and that you jointly request an independent expert assessment in collaboration with the Department. Why are you throwing responsibility strictly on to the Victims' Commissioner?

Mr R Irwin: I am not.

Mr Attwood: Your answer suggests that you are.

Mr R Irwin: With respect, I thought that I was quite clear on this. What the paper has said is accurate. The independent assessment will commence in early December. I believe that the commissioner has written back to Ministers and confirmed that that is the case, and she has provided the indicated timescale for when it will report and the detail of what is contained in the report, or the scope of that report.

Mr Attwood: Will the Committee be provided with terms of reference of the independent expert assessment? Are you in a position today to confirm whether the issues of experienced people leaving owing to job insecurity, consolidating experience and how recruitment has been conducted by the VSS are going to be addressed? Are they going to be addressed?

Mr R Irwin: That is something that we will have to take away and write back to the Committee on.

Mr Lyttle: Is that a normal write-back-to-the-Committee time frame, or you will "write back to the Committee on"?

Mr R Irwin: Obviously, we will need to discuss with the commissioner the extent of the work that will be completed — the detail and all of that — so I cannot give you the detailed answer that you need now.

Mr Attwood: Such is the nature of all the evidence before the Committee.

The Chairperson: Welcome to the Committee, Mr Attwood.

Mr Cree: I will be very quick, because I know that we are running behind. I think that the only item that has not been highlighted is mental health services. You have one line there. Bearing in mind the uniquely high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), will you flesh out the line a bit more to let us know exactly what is envisaged?

Mr R Irwin: With respect, no, because we are not medically qualified to —

Mr Cree: You are not qualified? So what is the purpose of the exercise?

Mr R Irwin: We are not qualified to make a qualification around the mental health needs, which is why we are engaging with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) around how the statutory sector and the primary healthcare sector can provide for and meet the needs of victims and survivors.

I cannot go into detail on the medical aspect, but —

Mr Cree: I understand that. Are you suggesting that it is not satisfactory at present?

Mr R Irwin: I am suggesting that there is a role for the primary healthcare sector in dealing with acute needs, and we need to get that sorted.

The Chairperson: I will make two final points, Ricky, if I may. You will have heard the previous evidence from members of the forum that sometimes they input into the great machinery of government but that that input disappears and they do not hear back. Sometimes they become aware — they have not been told directly by the Department — that things have changed, and they think, "I wish that I had known that". They also think, "I wonder whether I was partly responsible for that". Why does that happen?

Mr R Irwin: I am not sure that I fully understand the question.

The Chairperson: If I were running a Department and were making a change, and I knew that there was a group that wanted to see that change, I would be first on the phone saying, "Hey, that was really good advice. We are making the change. Thank you very much".

Mr R Irwin: Like I said previously, we are feeding back all the changes that are happening to individual members of the forum. We meet the commission staff every week and go over our progress to date. There are communication channels that the commission has to groups and individuals, so information is going out that way. There is clearly a need to do better on how the information is going out. That is the message that we are taking back today.

The Chairperson: Finally, to go back to the suspension of the commissioning of services, when were the victims and survivors' groups that were impacted on by that informed?

Mr R Irwin: That is feedback that the commission has gathered from the groups and provided to Ministers. The decision by the programme board is a very recent one.

The Chairperson: Have the groups been told yet?

Mr R Irwin: It goes back to my previous point that we are in the process of going around individual members of the victims forum. There is a round-table event next week, which I will speak at, at which point I will outline the position on the commissioning of services. There are a number of communication channels that we are going through.

The Chairperson: Including, perhaps, somebody running a victims and survivors' group watching this live on the internet, for whom this would be news.

Mr R Irwin: It may be. It is not something that has been put out on a press release. There is further work to be done around it. The service has to look at how funding for groups will go out next year, and the board needs to look at the proposals. It is an ongoing piece of work that has not finished.

The Chairperson: In fact, if I was running a victims' group and listening to or watching the feed of this Committee meeting, planning for a commission-based model from April next year, this could throw me into utter chaos.

Mr R Irwin: Again, I cannot comment on that, but the board has reacted to the advice of the commissioner on that issue. That was one of the key issues in her letter to —

The Chairperson: Was her advice that every group affected would prefer not to go to commissioning in April 2014?

Mr R Irwin: Sorry, I missed the start of the question.

The Chairperson: Did the commissioner tell the board that every group that would be affected by it was in favour of not going to commissioning in April 2014?

Mr R Irwin: The commissioner was very clear that, as a sector, it was too much too soon.

The Chairperson: I am not sure what that means in terms of my question.

Mr R Irwin: The impact is part of the work that needs to be identified now. We need to talk to VSS, which is funding the groups, to find out exactly what the impact will be. That will inform the preferred option for going forward for funding for groups next year.

The Chairperson: OK. Ricky and Cathy, thank you very much, and merry Christmas.