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To: "Sean McAteer" <secretariat@civicforum-ni.org>  
cc:  
Subject: Consultation paper on a victims strategy

Hi Sean, about a month ago members of the CF were asked if they would like to respond to the Consultation Paper on Victims Strategy, (Ref: CF139). The file attached is a copy of my submission as part of Wave's response.

I feel it would be good if the CF were to make a response, I would be willing to be part of any ad hoc group that would be set up to co-ordinate a response. We still have plenty of time as the dead line is not until November 9th.

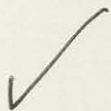
Sorry it took me so long to respond to this initial offer, let me know if any others are interested, maybe it could be discussed at the GPC meeting on Tuesday.

Regards,

Alan McBride



- Victims Con..doc



**Alan McBride : Response to Consultation Paper On A Victims Strategy.**

This Consultation Paper On A Victims Strategy is to be welcomed. It was particularly helpful to have the issues broken down into a series of questions. Answers to these questions now form the basis of this response.

**Question 1. How best can the Inter-Departmental Working Group On Victims interact with victims and their representatives.**

**Response:** Inter-Departmental Working Group (IDWG) interaction with 'victims' and their representatives is vital if the strategy contained in this report is to work.

To this end it is my view that the IDWG should consider various options to ensure the genuine voice of victims is heard. Some suggestions might include;

- Interaction through a news letter sent to as many individual victims as possible, where ideas can be discussed and opinions sought. The news letter produced by the VLU might be worth having a look at.
  - Victims and their organisations need an umbrella group that the IDWG can sit down with, perhaps Touchstone should be reconstituted, with more organisations added to it to make it more representative.
- In saying this I acknowledge the difficulties this might present with particular groups refusing to sit with other groups, but surely a way round this can be found which does not leave groups isolated.
- The setting up of good communication channels, for example, web site, e.mail and telephone lines, where victims can make comment and engage in general discussion about decisions the IDWG might be making on their behalf.

Finally, the work of the IDWG must be transparent with reports and documents readily available to any victim or victims



representative who might want to see them. Also they should be written in a way that is easily understood by the ordinary man/woman/young person 'in the street'.

**Question 2.** Does the draft Action Plan contain meaningful targets, the implementation of which will lead to a noticeable improvement in the services provided for victims?

**Response:** The draft Action Plan contains many meaningful targets which, if fully implemented should lead to a noticeable improvement in the services provided for victims.

I would draw particular attention to the following actions:

Action point 3, 'training for civil servants delivering front-line services', this is important as victims need to be dealt with in a sensitive way, also to be treated with respect and dignity.

Action point 4, 'further capacity building for victims groups, including on a single identity basis', this action recognises that not all groups are ready for cross community contact. There are various issues of trust ect. to be considered, especially for those groups which operate in border areas and where attitudes are amongst the most polarised.

Action point 7, 'identify education and training needs for staff in the Personal Social Services to enable them to deal with the personal and community consequences of the 'troubles'. The impact of inter/intra community conflict on personal and community life must be taken into consideration when developing adequate social services.

Action point 15, 'consider how the concept of the book Lost Lives might be given physical expression'. While I acknowledge that some consider the Lost Lives book to be a fitting memorial to the victims of the conflict, it is not the opinion of all. Some, within the victims constituency point out that the information contained within the book came from a secondary source, media



reports, ect, which has proved unreliable and inaccurate, also, little attempt was made at consultation.

Be careful here, if this is to go ahead it must only do so with the consent of the victims. In saying this I do acknowledge the intent which was to remember those that have suffered lest we ever forget.

One way of doing this might be to consider the idea of a 'Peace Maze', similar to the one @ Castlewellan. The imagery here is quite powerful, to find ones way out when compounded by a series of obstacles and blind alleys is surely an appropriate reflection on the Northern Ireland Peace Process.

Another idea would be a living memorial, for example, a garden or a forest. This was first muted by Sir Keneth Bloomfield, 'We Will Remember Them', 1998. Each tree planted could be in memory of a loved one who was murdered. Perhaps this idea could be merged with the previous, so that the maze could be a collection of trees planted by relatives of those who died during the conflict.

Still another idea could be to set aside a public holiday where the victims of Northern Irelands conflict could be remembered. A day marked by various ceremonies similar to Remembrance Day. This need not be at a cost to the economy as a public holiday such as May Day could be immobilised for this purpose.

Some thought might also be given to the concept of a museum, where the story of Northern Irelands conflict could be told, not one that would in any way serve to glorify the combatants, but rather remind its public of the horror of sectarian warfare. The Anna Frank Museum might serve as a case in point.

Some of these ideas are bound up with various constraints, for example, has enough time elapsed to reflect the casualties of conflict in this way, what happens if ideas do not have



unanimous support, specifically in relation to a museum - who decides what events in our past get remembered, ect, ect. Be that as it may, whichever memorial is decided upon, (if any), it would be important that names are not used, as this could undoubtedly become an other source of contention which would only serve to infuriate victims.

Action point 20: 'examine how victims issues can be addressed in the new statutory curriculum for schools'. If this is to have maximum impact it must form part of a core curriculum subject and not dealt with on the fringe of education. Perhaps it could play a role in 'Citizenship' or 'Personal Development' classes. Issues which must be tackled include, 'death and loss', 'identity', 'understanding difference', 'conflict resolution/transformation' and 'citizenship'.

Action point 21: 'examine how teacher development can address barriers to learning experienced by victims'. The impact of the 'troubles' on young people should be part of teacher training, both for student teachers and those in current practise. The teaching profession could make use of expertise gathered on the ground by various community and voluntary victims organisations.

In addition to this, support services should be available to teaching staff who might have to deal with young people who are severely traumatised as a result of community conflict.

Action point 22: 'examine how parent support and the development of parenting skills can be developed by schools and other agencies'. Adequate parenting would go some way to helping young people learn to cope with the effects of trauma, however, often the parents are severely traumatised themselves affecting their ability to cope. While the development of parenting skills is to be welcomed, one would have to be careful that this would not be detrimental to parents, making them feel that they have in some way failed, sensitivity is therefore called for.



Action point 23: 'examine how counselling support for pupils can best be made available in schools'. Counselling already exists in many secondary and grammar schools. This provision should also be extended to primary schools. Where counselling is provided counsellors should have specific skills in, A. relating to children, B. dealing with violent death and C. an understanding of inter/intra community conflict.

One useful idea here might be for schools to work in partnership with local victims groups who have considerable experience in this area. This partnership approach has already proved successful when dealing with other issues, for example, drugs and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, ect.

Action point 25: 'by December 2002 examine the development of alternative programmes for getting intimidated youth back into education'. This is too long a time gap, many young people that have suffered intimidation need this help now. Not just for those that have stayed away from school, but also for those that have remained or have found a new school.

While this remains a problem needing an immediate imaginative solution we should not forget the root cause. Schools should be safe havens for children and young people to learn, this should be universally respected by all in society, including paramilitary organisations and their supporters. This right should be emphasised in any negotiated settlement being sought between conflicting communities.



Action point 27: 'consider the specific needs of victims when implementing the review of counselling'. Counselling support offered to victims must take into consideration a number of issues.

- A. It may be long term
- B. It must be available in the community if the individual requires it to be
- C. It must be free
- D. The counsellor must be professionally trained
- E. The counsellor must have some experience in dealing with trauma as result of community violence.
- f. Counselling should always be focussed on helping individuals move on, it should not create dependency.
- G. Individuals receiving counselling must be kept informed of the process upon which they have embarked.

**Question 3.** Are there targets or target areas which should be included in the draft Action Plan which currently are not?

**Response:** The Action Plan contains many meaningful targets, however there are others which should also be included. The problem of pain should be addressed, specifically the provision of adequate pain relief for those maimed or injured. There is an argument that Northern Ireland does not have enough 'Pain Relief Centres', given that over 40,000 people have been injured as a result of the 'troubles', surely this must be addressed.

Also, for those victims that have been diagnosed with psychiatric conditions, for example, PTSD, there should be appropriate training for mental health and general practitioners. The issue of the lack of residential psychiatric beds for young people who are severely traumatised should also be looked at.



Another area which should be explored concerns the issue of truth and justice. There is a genuine perspective among victims that the Belfast Agreement was built upon a number of basic injustices, ie. the release of prisoners, de-facto amnesty for terrorist related offences pre-cease-fire.

Truth and justice needs to be addressed in order to bring some sense of closure to those victims that choose to go down that road. Models of truth telling and restorative justice should be examined in order to produce something that would be right for the province. The IDWG should consider feeding into consultation on this issue, as truth and justice are not simply related to victims and perpetrators but cut across many aspects of society. Consultation on truth telling is currently being undertaken by the Healing Through Remembering Project.

**Question 4: How can funders make the funding process easier to understand and access?**

**Response:** Funding application forms should be straightforward, using plain English. The criteria on which funding will be granted should be clearly shown and where possible, a rationale explaining the reason for this. In addition to this, the maximum grant should be shown along with a guide to the average size of grant awarded. Also evaluation and monitoring processes should be made easier.

Funding sources should recognise validity of single identity groups and organisations and not stipulate a demonstration of cross community activity. While cross community contact enhances the search for peace, some groups are not ready for this, to penalise groups who find themselves in this situation could be perceived as being unfair.

Help in terms of writing application forms and setting up processes for monitoring and evaluation, should be given to groups and organisations that are seeking funding. This should form part of any capacity building activity being offered.



Where groups or organisations have been unsuccessful in obtaining funding, reasons for this must be clearly stated.

As funding will inevitably draw to a close, organisations should be considering how to sustain the work long term. While some of this money must undoubtedly come from the British exchequer, other sources of income must be found. One way to do this might be to sell expertise to institutions who will have need of it, for example, schools and colleges.

**Question 5: What other methods can be used to raise awareness of victims issues?**

**Response:** Groups and organisations that have been active in the 'victims' field contain a lot of grass roots expertise. This work should be documented and disseminated so that others might learn from it. Help should be given to groups to do this, again this ought to be a component part of any capacity building programme.

Also, the Civic Forum could draw attention to victims issues, this organisation is ideally placed, given that it cuts across all aspects of civic life.

It's one thing to draw attention to victims issues, however victims and their representatives should be guided as to who to make their views known. It might be an idea to include a representative from the victims constituency on the IDWG, (obviously this would be a contentious issue, a way around this might be to allow the Commissioner for Victims, should one be appointed, to sit on this).

**Question 6: What statutory sector partnerships need to be developed?**

**Response:** No response



**Question 7: How best can the statutory sector work in partnership with the voluntary/community sector?**

**Response:** With regard to this issue, it would be good to know what the Government's strategy for support for the Community and Voluntary sector was, this strategy was mentioned in the report but no details were given, perhaps this could have been condensed and included as an annex.

That aside, the collaborative approach to statutory/community partnerships is to be welcomed. Both sectors must have a genuine respect for each others contribution to this sphere of work. Unfortunately this has not been the case in the past, any future partnership must be devoid of tokenism, both have much to learn from each other. Once again, would it be an idea to include members from the community and voluntary sector on the IDWG or alternatively could the IDWG meet periodically with a reconstituted Touchstone Group.

**Question 8. How best can those who carry out or commission research engage with victims to ensure that relevant research is carried out and followed up on.**

**Response:** Research without action may increase the knowledge base surrounding certain issues but is absolutely of know practical benefit to victims. All research must be published with the recommendations clearly identified. Recommendations should be time bound. Attention should be paid to the language that is used and style of the report. Reports that overly academicall may not be read by many victims.

Also, in relation to follow-up, further reports should be compiled focusing on the progress or other that has been made in putting into operation the recommendations that have been made. Were recommendations have been shelved reasons for this should be made clear.



**Question 8** Perhaps the formation of a watchdog committee should be formed to monitor progress. This committee should be independent of government and include victims representatives along with those who would have good standing in both communities, for example, Dr Maurice Hayes.

**Question 9.** What steps, if any, do OFMDFM and the NIO need to take to ensure that victims know the relevant part of Government to access for help.

The explanatory statement explaining the different role and responsibilities of both the Victims Unit and the Victims Liaison Unit was helpful in this regard. Perhaps this should be spelt out again in a flyer which would be sent out to all victims groups and individuals with no group connection.

In addition to this the flyer could be displayed in DHSS offices, libraries, schools and Doctor surgeries. Rather than simply outline the roles and responsibilities of the respective units, what about including some practical examples of the sort of help and advice which can be obtained.

**Question 11** (With so much being available to victims there might be an argument for a directory of services to be produced, highlighting where folk can get help, both in the community and by statutory providers. The VU and the VLU could advertise in such a directory.



**Question 10.** If such seminars or conferences were to be held, what subjects should they address?

**Response:** Many issues exist that have resonance with victims regardless of what particular side of the political divide they come from. These include,

- Compensation/reparation
- Justice
- Accessing benefits
- Health care/pain relief
- The benefits of alternative therapies
- How to remember the lost, memorials ect.
- Addressing the educational needs of victims
- Intimidation - moving home, securing property, ect
- Capacity building for victims groups
- How to respond to consultations, Victims, Bill of Rights, ect

(While not an exhaustive list, much of these have a significant role to play in helping victims' address past wrongs that have been inflicted upon them.)

**Question 11.** If the Touchstone Group is to be replaced, what should replace it? Who would be on any new group and how would they be selected?

**Response:** Be careful here we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. The original concept of Touchstone, ie, a 'sounding board' for policy initiatives, was fine. The key to the success of such an initiative depends on, A. who sits on it  
B. how seriously will Govt. take it.

In relation to its membership, first of all it should be chaired by someone with a good track record in dealing with victims of community conflict, not a Govt minister or Civil Servant, perhaps it could be one of the functions of a Victims Commissioner.



Membership should be restricted to a small group, maybe around 12, (larger group would be unworkable). While it would not be possible for all victims groups to be represented, it is important that a broad range of viewpoints are, for example,

- A representative of victims of Republican violence
- A representative of victims of Loyalist violence
- A representative of victims of State violence
- A representative of security forces injured
- Representatives of those facing intimidation through inter-community violence

The membership should also include the heads of both the VU and the VLU, along with both victims representatives on the Civic Forum. Consideration should be given to ensure that those who are perceived as being against the Belfast Agreement are also included.

Criteria should be drawn up for the selection process, essential criteria would be,

- Must demonstrate an awareness of victims issues.
- Must be prepared to work as part of a cross-community group in addressing victims issues.

Selection could be handled in much the same way as that of the Civic Forum, using an independent recruitment agency so no accusations of bias would be forthcoming.

The benefits of Touchstone, (or whatever this new group would be called

) must be sold to victims and their representatives to encourage people to join.



Question 12. Should a Victims Commissioner be appointed? If yes, what should their role and remit be and how would a Commissioner fit with the other potential structures outlined in this chapter?

Response: First of all, a Commissioner should only be appointed if he or she would add value to the work that is already being done for victims.

It is my view that such value can indeed be added. The Victims Commissioner should be someone who champions the cause of victims whatever their background. They can ensure that victims issues are kept on the Government agenda for work, that the measures being taken are not short term.

The Commissioner could also act as a contact person for victims, especially those who do not belong to any particular victims organisation and whose voice could potentially be excluded when forming policy.

The Commissioner should be independent from Government but be able to feed into the IDWG, there could also be a role in either heading up Touchstone or any potential watchdog committee, (see question 8).

The Commissioner should be someone who would have the trust of both main traditions, they must be accessible to all victims so where they base an office, (if one is required) would be important.

One final point, why does the cost of a Commissioner have to be taken out of money which has been set aside for service provision and help, is the same to happen with other potential Commissioners, for example, will the cost of the Commissioner for Children, should one be appointed, be taken from the Education budget.