

A Forum for Victims & Survivors: Consultation Responses

A summary of feedback from
consultation seminars on the
role/purpose of a
Victims & Survivors
Forum

June 2006



This research has been carried out
by the Office of the
Interim Commissioner for
Victims and Survivors.

**The views expressed are those
of the participants at seminars
and
are not necessarily the views of
the Interim Commissioner.**

Introduction

One of the areas I was asked to look at as Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors (ICVS) was the practical issues around establishing a Victims and Survivors Forum. Recently a series of seminars were completed at various locations across Northern Ireland, in order to gather views on the need for and role of any possible Victims and Survivors Forum.

Attendees consulted at the seminars included individual victims and survivors, carers, representatives of victim support groups, community organisations, and Trauma Advisory Panels (TAPs).

This document summarises the feedback received and will be used as a basis for further discussion. If you were unable to attend any of the seminars and wish to input your views I am happy to include these if they are forwarded to my office by 22 September. All feedback will be considered and used to develop models which will be published in the autumn when further consultation will take place.

It became apparent that individual seminars highlighted the views of particular relevance to that locality however, broad themes emerged relating to issues where it is felt a forum could have the greatest possible impact on the everyday lives of victims and survivors in Northern Ireland. These areas are:

- **Information**
- **Research**
- **Lobbying**
- **Governance**

Having identified the themes, consideration was also given to the reasons why a forum may not be able to deliver them. These are recorded as risks, and are also addressed in the body of the report.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who took the time to attend and make their views known at the seminars. I hope this report is a fair reflection of your views, and that it will contribute to the debate on this important issue. I would also like to record my thanks to Eileen McGlone of QE⁵ Ltd who facilitated the seminars.

If you are unable to download this document from the website, please contact the office on 028 9025 6694 and a copy will be sent to you.

Bertha Mc Dougall
Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

Findings from the Seminars

Fourteen separate events were held at locations across Northern Ireland. Invitations were issued to all those with whom this office has had contact, via our website and to all those on the mailing list of the Community Relations Council. In total, 133 people attended the events, many of whom were representing the views of their wider organisations.

At the start of each event, delegates were advised that the purpose of this strand of consultation would focus solely on the role or purpose of a forum.

Issues relating to the structure of the forum and who will participate will be addressed later in the year. The purpose of this approach was to encourage an emphasis on practical and deliverable issues.

This report is in 3 parts.

Part 1 Issues which were raised around the issues which a forum needs to address - Pages 5-11

Part 2 Summary of the key roles for a forum - Pages 12-14

Part 3 Potential risks and obstacles – Pages 15-16

What were the issues?

The issues which emerged (in order of significance as measured by the number of seminars in which they were raised) were:

- **Funding**
- **Accountability**
- **Bureaucracy**
- **Health**
- **Truth Recovery**
- **Education, skills and training**
- **Compensation and entitlements**
- **Justice**
- **Transport in rural areas**
- **The role of the Churches**

Part 1 – The Issues

FUNDING – RAISED IN 13 OF THE 14 SEMINARS

Three key issues:

➤ Transparency

Current funding arrangements make accountability difficult, and there is a lack of **transparency** in how funding is allocated and the criteria applied.

➤ Criteria

Current funding **criteria** do not focus enough on meeting the practical needs of victims and survivors.

➤ Sustainability

Current short-term funding arrangements preclude planning for longer-term delivery of services such as befriending. It was felt that this can become a significant problem when the services are started with expectations raised accordingly, only to be withdrawn due to a lack of funding.

What a forum could do:

- Help to minimise the bureaucracy surrounding the funding process and making it more streamlined and victim-centred;
- Evaluate current criteria in order to ascertain if it is meeting identified needs;
- Develop guidelines on how funding should be allocated;
- Evaluate what the various funds have achieved and holding funders accountable in relation to outcomes.

Accountability – raised in 10 out of 14 seminars

- Proper **accountability** is needed in relation to funding as discussed above but also in relation to service providers such as:
 - **Health,**
 - **Education,**
 - **Welfare provision,**as current service provision is not perceived to be meeting the needs of the victims and survivors.

What a forum could do:

- Have an **ombudsman type role** of holding service providers and others to account.
- To be effective a forum will need to be able to **monitor** and **review services** and have a **'watchdog'** type function.

Bureaucracy – raised in 7 out of 14 seminars

- **Bureaucracy** relates to:
 - **Funding,**
 - **Healthcare services,**
 - **Welfare provision and**
 - **Information provision.**

Generally, support services are difficult to access, are bureaucratic, insensitive and insufficiently focused on victims and survivors.

- The bureaucracy involved in accessing benefits was felt by many to be **stressful** and **demoralising** and runs the risk of **re-traumatising** those involved.

What a forum could do:

- Help to **minimise bureaucracy** in relation to **accessing services, benefits and information**.
- **Lobby** to have the issue raised at policy level and also have a 'watchdog' role in monitoring agencies' processes to **reduce unnecessary and cumbersome bureaucratic practices**.

Health – raised in 7 out of 14 seminars

- The majority of participants felt that currently there are gaps in health provision exacerbated by a:
 - **Lack of trust in statutory provision,**
 - **Lack of sensitivity in dealing with victims and**
 - **Gaps in knowledge of primary care providers.**
- The main gaps relate to:
 - A fear that medical symptoms are being treated but there is not enough being done to link the symptoms to trauma resulting from the conflict;
 - A reluctance amongst many victims to admit that they are experiencing problems;
 - A stigma around the issue of mental health;
 - A perceived lack of available services to address mental health problems and psychiatric interventions via the NHS;
 - A perceived lack of supports/services to address the emotional needs of victims who may not have been directly involved in an incident but who suffered from it;
 - A lack trust or confidence in the anonymity of available services;
 - Lack of resources and skills for those groups which attempt to fill the gaps in statutory services; and
 - The high burnout levels amongst carers of victims, and the need for practical supports to address this issue.

What a forum could do:

It was felt that **mental, emotional** and **physical health issues** need to be widely seen as a public health issue.

The risk that post-ceasefire trauma may not be seen as a continuing priority area was highlighted. Therefore it was proposed that a forum should:

- provide the strategic focus to ensure that health strategies include **appropriate links** for victims and survivors;
- lobby for **funding** for extension of identified good practice;
- promote awareness of mental health/well-being;
- promote awareness of needs of carers;
- be the focus for a **one-stop shop facility** for assistance in accessing services and provide an accountability role where required services are not being delivered

Truth Recovery – raised in 5 out of 14 seminars

Initiatives for dealing with the past were generally accepted as being **necessary**, but there was no consensus on how or when that should be done. Also, it was felt that there is a **tension** between remembering at an individual level and moving on at a societal level.

A mechanism to provide a safe opportunity for truth recovery, story-telling and reconciliation to promote real change aimed at preventing future conflict is needed. Other issues closely related to this topic were **conflict transformation** and **reconciliation**. The main focus here was in relation to the differing stages of readiness to address these issues across different areas.

It was noted that this would require **acceptance** and **understanding** and to be nurtured at small levels, in the initial stages. It was felt that in this way trust and confidence can be built **gradually** and that trust is a necessary pre-requisite for truth recovery. It was also reported that some such work is already going on, and in order for it to work it needs to be kept out of the limelight.

What a forum could do:

- **Make people aware** of which options are available such as **Truth Recovery, Story Telling** and **Reconciliation**. However, participation will be voluntary and there should be no pressure on individuals.
- It was also proposed that a forum could **research** Truth Recovery models to ascertain the best model for the Northern Ireland situation.

Education, Skills and Training – raised in 4 out of 14 seminars

There was a general acceptance that trauma across the generations (**trans-generational trauma**) needs to be addressed.

Problem areas to address:

- **Education disrupted;**
- **Additional training needed to compensate for gaps in education, particularly in young people; and**
- **Lack of confidence across all age groups to contribute to society.**

Attendees reported that **low self-esteem** was an issue among 5-11 year-olds. Skills gaps needed to be addressed and this was evident in some groups more than others, and again emphasised post-ceasefire on-going trauma.

What a forum could do:

- Identify **gaps in training** and skills, and lobby to have these met.
- Have a role in developing **shared understanding** of NI's historical context which could be delivered as part of the citizenship curriculum and thereby use educational medium.

Compensation and Entitlements – raised in 4 of the 14 seminars

- Compensation for victims of the conflict (particularly in the early years) is seen as **insufficient** with the criteria unfair and requiring review.
- It was felt that victims and survivors accessing benefits need to be treated more sensitively to minimise the **potential for re-traumatising** individuals as they produce the evidence considered necessary to access benefits and entitlements.
- The bureaucracy involved in accessing benefits is also an issue that the forum needs to examine.

What a forum could do:

- Raise Awareness
- **Lobby** at departmental level to ensure new and existing **policies are sensitive** to victims needs.
- Addressing the need to **reduce** the amount of bureaucracy involved
- Acting as an **advocate in individual cases** to ensure appropriate contacts and action are progressed

Justice – raised in 3 of the 14 seminars

- It was recognised that there is a **judicial system in operation**, and that it is neither practical nor effective to use the forum to duplicate the work of other statutory bodies such as the Ombudsman's Office, the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

What a forum could do:

- The view was expressed that the issue of justice and how a forum might deal with it can only be determined when the **definition of a 'victim'** is agreed.
- Some people felt that a forum could **influence the legal system** through lobbying and act in an advisory role to other bodies such as the Ombudsman's Office.

Transport in Rural Areas – raised in 2 of the 14 seminars

- It was generally felt that many victims in rural border areas are **prevented** from **availing of service** provision and **attending organised** events due to the lack of suitable transport.
- Particular geographical areas have **specific needs** and there is no **uniform solution** for individual victims and survivors

What a forum could do:

- While it was acknowledged that this is an **ongoing issue** with various departments, it was felt that the **forum could lobby** on behalf of rural-based victims and survivors as their voice is not often heard.
- A forum must take **account of varying regional needs** and lobby accordingly to have those needs met.

The Role of the Churches– raised in 2 of the 14 seminars

2 Main Issues in relation to the Churches:

- The point was made that while a substantial amount of funding is focused on addressing the physical and psychological needs of victims, their spiritual needs are often ignored.
- The other view expressed was that the churches need to be lobbied in order to get them to become more aware of all the services available in order to offer support to victims in their churches.
- On occasion there appears to have been a lack of leadership and direction from the churches as to their role in relation to victims and survivors of the Troubles.

What a forum could do:

- It was noted that the views of the main churches will be sought during wider consultation of the role and purpose of a victims and survivors forum.
- Link with the churches to ensure they are fully informed on issues relating to victims and survivors.

Part 2 - Roles for a forum

It was apparent that four key roles for a forum to focus on were identified. Those roles are:

- **Information**
- **Research**
- **Lobbying**
- **Governance**

In terms of **establishing priorities** for action, it was noted that a forum may wish to focus on all four aspects or just one or two initially.

However it was clear from the consultations that whatever roles, or areas, that a forum decides to focus on, the key is **delivery**. It was made clear that the most important factor on which a forum will be assessed is on its **ability to deliver on time**.

Information

The general consensus was that there is a vast range of **information available** to help victims and survivors access services but that information can be uncoordinated, difficult to access, particularly for individuals and often contains jargon. It was felt that a forum could **collate information** that is already available but hard to access, effectively acting as a **one-stop shop** for access to information.

The point was made that people in rural areas feel threatened by a **lack of information**, and a **lack of clarity** about what is happening. Again, the particular needs of individuals were highlighted as an issue here. It was also suggested that a **reference library** of information relating to the conflict would be a useful resource.

The overall opinion was that a forum should have a role in helping people access information easily, and in ensuring that available information is **up-to-date and relevant**.

Research

Research and **raising awareness** were identified, in 8 of the 14 seminars, as roles that a forum needed to focus on. The general consensus was that there is a **lack of a joined up approach** to ongoing needs assessment in relation to victims and survivors and research needs to inform this.

A full needs assessment is seen as central to ensure that there is a strong evidence base available to embed victims' issues in policy development. The two main areas of focus were **health** and **education**, which are discussed in more detail under those headings.

The majority of participants felt that a forum should establish ongoing needs through proper **scientific research** and **identification of good practice**. It was strongly felt that those needs have to be identified from the bottom up, not pre-determined by policy makers and government.

Given the realism about what can be achieved, issues which emerge from the needs analysis must be prioritised for action.

When proper scientific analysis of the ongoing needs of victims and survivors have been identified, it was proposed that a forum should:

- **Raise awareness of those needs**
- **Focus on health and primary care needs**
- **Lobby policy makers**

Lobbying

It was generally felt that when the information on needs outlined above under Research, has been collated, a forum should have a role in **lobbying for change where necessary**. The view was expressed that a forum needs to be a **link to policy-makers** and, while having influence politically **must not be political**.

The forum should be a vehicle to facilitate 2-way representation. In this way, the forum could lobby pro-actively on **issues of interest** to victims and survivors, but also be a body which statutory bodies could approach to discuss issues pertinent to victims and survivors issues. It was felt that the lobbying must be practically focused, to ensure that services which are needed are delivered and meet needs – people do not need a talking shop.

In particular, the forum must ensure that government is made aware of victims and survivors **real needs**, rather than relying on its own preconceptions about what those needs and solutions are.

The areas that lobbying should be used to influence policy are:

- **Health**
- **Funding**
- **Education**
- **Compensation**
- **Churches**
- **Rural Transport**

It was felt here that the forum must be a **voice to all government departments**, to ensure recognition and respect for victims and survivors -

people who are victims of the past have particular needs that must be met, but they are not prisoners of that past.

It was noted that lobbying should be an ongoing process, aimed **at embedding victims' issues** in policies across Government and society.

Governance

A forum having a governance role was highlighted in eight of the 14 seminars. It was felt that a forum will need **proper authority** to enable it to influence and lobby at appropriate levels and to hold service providers and government to account.

Within existing structures, it was generally perceived that a forum could **contribute to strategic planning** with groups and Trauma Advisory Panels (TAPs) continuing to deliver on practical issues.

The overall view was that a forum would need to be closely linked to the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, who would need to have **sufficient legislative power to ensure an effective role**. Such power would ensure that victims' issues would have a prominence and voice at appropriate levels in government.

Part 3 – Risks and Controls

During the consultation process a number of risk factors (risks) were highlighted which it was felt could affect the work of a forum. These were discussed and ways to prevent them considered. They are summarised below:

Risks

- Lack of power
- Insufficient Funding
- Lack of political will to address Victims' and Survivors' Issues
- Competitive Sector
- Political Instability
- Becoming a 'Talking Shop'
- No agreement on who will participate
- Representation for individual victims and survivors may prove difficult.

Ways to overcome the risks

- Sufficient Autonomy
- Victim-Centred
- Pro-active
- Setting achievable objectives and delivering
- Linked to Commissioner's Office
- Influential at Policy Level
- Strategic Focus
- Leading by Example

Risks

The key **risks** identified during the consultation process were considered by asking 'what would stop a forum from working?' The following potential risks emerged:

- Insufficient autonomy to investigate and hold institutions to account would render a forum incapable of influencing sufficiently to initiate change;
- Insufficient funding to properly resource a forum would impede its operational capacity;
- Currently there is not the political will to address victims and survivors issues;
- Current funding arrangements lead to competition between organisations rather than co-ordination and co-operation.
- The current political climate may make the operation of a forum quite difficult
- A forum could become another 'talking shop' that fails to deliver and thus loses the confidence of the people it is designed to represent.

- There will be difficulties in agreeing who will participate.
- It would be difficult to have representation for the many individuals who do not wish to be part of a group.

Ways to overcome the risks

Having identified ways to overcome the risks, time was spent looking at how to address or avoid them. The general view was that:

- The forum needs to be victim centred and pro-active on behalf of victims and survivors
- Groups and TAPs could provide some of the services locally but the Forum should have an over-arching and more strategic focus;
- The Forum would need to start slowly by setting obtainable objectives within a set timeframe and ensure that it delivers - this will assist in instilling confidence in its operation;
- To be successful the forum needs to have clear lines of communication and links with the office of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors;
- The question of level of power and autonomy needs to be established at the outset together with the supports that will be in place to support a forum or the office of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors;
- The question of accountability needs to be addressed ie to whom is the forum or Commissioner accountable to;
- Given the prevailing political climate within Northern Ireland, it was generally felt that a forum could lead by example by showing that people from different backgrounds and communities can work together to achieve beneficial outcomes for all. Within existing structures, it was felt that a forum would need to be directly linked to the office of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and that Office would need sufficient powers to carry out its function.

In addition, it was emphasised that a forum would need to be able to interface with other key stakeholders if it was to deliver on its objectives.

Alternative Viewpoint

There was a concern in one of the seminars that a large gathering of individuals and groups has the potential to create diversity and consequently there would be no added advantage in having a forum. It was generally agreed, in that seminar, that all the functions that need to be delivered can be done so by a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. The Commissioner's role was seen to have several advantages over a forum:

- It is easier to hold one person to account than a large group
- A forum will not have personal contact, and will de-personalise issues
- Trust is important and is hard to achieve for a large group
- A large group can lack focus and cloud the real issues
- Individuals may achieve greater access to a commissioner than a forum.

What Next?

Your views are important and if you have not done so, please feel free to contribute now.

We are accepting contributions up until **5pm** on the **22nd September 2006**. This stage of the consultation closes on that date. We will then collate your comments and add them to what we have already received.

The second stage of the consultation process will begin in October 2006, and we will then deal with the issues of:

- How a forum might operate?
- Who would participate in a forum?

Models will be developed for the second stage of the consultation in October, and we will welcome feedback on them also.

At this point, it has not been decided how we will conduct the second stage of the consultation, but we will endeavour to inform you in advance of this time.

Contact Us with Your Comments

Write to us at:

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Or alternatively:

Telephone: 028 9025 6694

Fax: 028 9025 6030

E. Mail: cvs.info@cvsni.org

Web: www.cvsni.org

Programme of Seminars to Gather Views on a Victims and Survivors Forum

LOCATION	VENUE	DATE	TIME
Londonderry	City Hotel , Queens Quay, Londonderry, BT48 7AS	Monday 5th June	14:00 – 17:00 and 18:30 – 21:30
Belfast	Holiday Inn , 22 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast, BT2 8HS	Tuesday 6th June	14:00 – 17:00 and 18:30 – 21:30
Dungannon	The Bleach House, 8 Linen Green , Moygashel, Dungannon, Co Tyrone, BT71 7HB	Wednesday 7th June	18:30 – 21:30
Omagh	Silverbirch Hotel , 5 Gortin Road, Omagh, BT79 7DH	Thursday 8th June	18:30 – 21:30
Belfast	Holiday Inn , 22 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast, BT2 8HS	Monday 12th June	14:00 – 17:00 and 18:30 – 21:30
Armagh	Armagh City Hotel , 2 Friary Road, Armagh, BT60 4FR	Tuesday 13th June	14:00 – 17:00 and 18:30 – 21:30
Enniskillen / Lisnaskea	Killyhevlin Hotel , Dublin Road, Enniskillen, BT74 6RW	Wednesday 14th June	14:00 – 17:00 and 18:30 – 21:30
Coleraine	Bushtown House Country Hotel , 283 Drumcroon Road, Coleraine, BT51 3QT	Monday 19th June	18:30 – 21:30

North Down	Clandeboyne Lodge Hotel , 10 Estate Road, Bangor, Co Down, BT19 1UR	Wednesday 21st June	18:30 21:30	–
Newry & Mourne / South Down	Burrendale Hotel , 51 Castlewellan Road, Newcastle, Co Down, BT33 0JY	Tuesday 27th June	18:30 21:30	–
Antrim	Comfort Hotel , 20 Dunsilly Road, Antrim, BT41 2JH	Wednesday 28th June	18:30 21:30	–