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Ministers set out 10-year strategy on victims' issues

DAN KEENAN

STORMONT JUNIOR Ministers Gerry Kelly and Jeffrey Donaldson have published a draft 10-year strategy to deal with victims' and survivors' issues.

The plan, backed by £36 million (€45.5 million) from Stormont Executive funds, will now be open to 12 weeks of consultation.

Mr Donaldson, the DUP MP for Lagan Valley, said that, following devolution in May 2007, the issue had been a priority for the powersharing administration.

"There is no issue more sensitive or difficult to deal with for the Executive than that of how to address the needs of victims and survivors," he said.

"We hope that this document will help to move us on the road to making a real difference to the lives of those who have been most affected by the events here over the last 40 years."

Mr Kelly, a North Belfast Assembly member, added: "The Executive set aside £36 million to meet the needs of victims and survivors over the next three years. However, we want to ensure that future support and services are shaped by victims and survivors.

"It is important that everyone with an interest in victims' and survivors' issues reads this draft document carefully and gives us their views." He said the outline strategy published yesterday "will set a clear direction for policy in this area over the next 10 years".

"Through the Executive, we have the opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of those affected by conflict."

The ministers were speaking at the release of the strategy at the Wave Trauma Centre in Belfast. Established 18 years ago in five centres across Northern Ireland, it offers a range of services to victims and survivors, from befriending and individual counselling to advice and

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The Belfast office is now run by Alan McBride, whose wife died in the 1993 Shankill bombing.

The Executive's policy towards victims' issues has been dogged with problems since devolution was restored in May 2007.

Former first minister Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness announced earlier this year the appointment of four commissioners instead of the expected single appointment, to address the politically sensitive needs of survivors. However, the appointment is subject to a legal challenge.

The commissioners welcomed the publication of the strategy. "Within this document lies the opportunity to replace short-term anxiety with longer-term certainty," they said in a joint statement.

The commissioners have already expressed surprise at the decision to create a victims' service, questioning the need to establish such a body when the work could be done by the commission.

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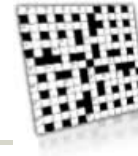
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