

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
Monday 28 April 2008

Private Members Business
Victims' Commissioners: Workplan

Sources: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2007/080428.htm>

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on the expected work to be conducted by the four Victims' Commissioners.
(AQO 3199/08)

The deputy First Minister: Subject to the Assembly's approving the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill, we expect that the commissioners will soon get down to carrying out the duties that were outlined in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Those duties include promoting an awareness of matters relating to the interests of victims and survivors; reviewing the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice in this area; and reviewing the effectiveness of services for victims and survivors. All those activities will be carried out within an agreed work programme, which is being prepared by the commissioners designate in anticipation of their formal employment.

Mr Ford: That was a fine answer. However, the First Minister and deputy First Minister failed to come to the House last week to make a statement on not proceeding with the Bill. Indeed, in practice, they continue to kick victims in the teeth.

Will the deputy First Minister share the proposed amendments to the Bill with the House? Will he give a categorical guarantee that the Bill will be proceeded with next week, in line with the draft Order Paper? Will he also guarantee that he and the First Minister will end their blockade of the process, start to put victims first, and stop carrying on as they have been in recent times?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The deputy First Minister: The abiding principle of establishing the Victims' Commission is to generate real support for those who need and deserve it most — the victims and survivors — in as timely a fashion as possible. The tabled amendments, to which the Member refers, are being considered carefully. None of those amendments has been dismissed or adopted at this stage. It is incumbent on Members not to use the issue of victims and survivors as a political football in the Assembly. We must recognise that this is important work.

Mr Ford: We know that it is important work, but do you?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: I am not going to finish until I have silence.

This issue is hugely sensitive for victims and survivors throughout our community. There has been an attempt to play political football with the issue.

Mr Ford: Yes, and it started with you.

The deputy First Minister: No, it did not start with us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Remarks must be made through the Chair.

The deputy First Minister: While many Members were on their Christmas holidays, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister were working to try to resolve this issue, and were implementing a process that addresses the real needs and concerns of victims. We hope that the relevant legislation will be put before the Assembly — and passed — within a very short period, and that the four commissioners will be installed as soon as possible.

Mr Kennedy: The deputy First Minister, and others, have produced a Christmas turkey that has not yet been dealt with.

Does the deputy First Minister and his party support, in principle, the appointment of a lead commissioner to carry forward the newly proposed commission's important work? Will he indicate whether agreement has been reached in his Department — between his party and the DUP — on any, or all, of the tabled amendments to the legislation?

The deputy First Minister: This is a work in progress, and the Member will receive answers to those questions in due course. Hopefully, that will be sooner than the Member expects.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the delay in establishing the commission affect the funding of victims' and survivors' groups for this year?

The deputy First Minister: As I said earlier, we will provide £36 million over the next three years for work with victims and survivors.

Following consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we will shortly introduce a strategy for victims and survivors that will set out our plans for their future support. We anticipate that current funding arrangements in relation to the memorial fund and the core-funding and development grant schemes for victims' and survivors' groups that are operated on behalf of our office will continue during the financial year 2008-09.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work closely with the memorial fund, the Community Relations Council, the new commission and the Victims' and Survivors' Forum to manage the transition to the new funding arrangements that will be set out in the strategy for victims and survivors. Moreover, in liaison with the commission, for certain areas of need already identified, the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will introduce enhanced support for victims' and survivors' groups to provide befriending services for victims and survivors, enhanced provision for respite care, and support for general practitioners in dealing with trauma. Other areas of emerging need may be examined by the new commission.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn; the Member who asked question 6 is not in the Chamber; and question 7 has also been withdrawn.