



CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
Social Justice & Theology Sub-Committee (NI)

Services for Victims and Survivors
Response to the OFMDFM

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1. A clearer vision for the healing of victims is needed in this document.

Healing is enabling victims to move from victim, to survivor, to victor over their trauma. This will be assisted by the context of a peaceful society which can openly recognise all suffering of the past, has dealt with the past justly, and is free from the acts of violence or threat of cross community strife.

Reconciliation and good community relations are intrinsic to the healing of victims. It is hoped that the statement of the changing needs of victims will encompass the need for reconciliation, although that may seem too much to make explicit now.

However there should be more detail given to the kind of society we wish to work for. This will give grounds for hope, which is fundamental for all working in this area.

2 *‘victims should be afforded dignity and respect It was also stressed that service delivery needs to be clearly focussed on achieving specific results in a targeted manner within available resources and that services should be co-ordinated in a consistent and effective manner between the relevant statutory, community and voluntary sectors.’ (page 4)*

This quote from the document exemplifies the inherent tension in providing services for victims; the needs of providers to put in place accountable services, and the needs of victims and the services they would demand. Part of healing for victims will include the sense of being heard, and compassionate responses being made to their needs.

However the needs of victims may extend beyond their current felt needs. This is an extremely delicate point, for victims need to be accepted where they are. But also if

healing is to take place, they will not stay where they are. There is a need to deal with the past, to gain freedom from the life inhibiting effects of trauma etc. However there is also a need to gain a vision of a future, which is possible to achieve, where the past is dealt with adequately, and where the poison of their experience will cease to influence their quality of life.

So we welcome the statement:

'Over time needs change and it is considered important that the strategy looks forward and ensures that work with victims and survivors does not become locked in time, but plays a part in promoting a more sharing and less divided society in future.' (page 7)

Envisioning a shared future needs to be intrinsic to the services provided for victims.

3. Victimhood

Healing will mean leaving behind a culture of victimhood whereby a person's identity is strengthened by being a 'victim' and where those who are 'to blame' for their victimhood are categorised as those who must change.

Those locked in victimhood find the recognition of 'all victims' intolerable. To such the 'other so - called victims' aren't worthy of the name victim. This is recognised briefly in the aspiration on page four '*where the suffering of all victims is recognised*', where victimhood as such can disempower people as they are likely to insist that 'others' have the moral obligation (and therefore the power) to put things right. This attitude means that those who feel themselves victim are yet again victimised as powerless. The move from blaming others, to taking action to address your needs and fulfil your aspirations, is intrinsic to the rehabilitation of victims as active citizens and agents for positive change within civil society. To fail to accept this vision for victims is to diminish their rights for healing.

It should also be recognised that victimhood also affects communities where they feel they are suffering because of another community.

4. Victims' Groups

It is recognised that great work has been done by victims' groups. It is essential that services to victims should involve the work of victims' groups. However one of the difficulties in relating to victims' groups as service providers for the healing of victims, is that to belong, to avail of the services, you are a victim. This can reinforce the victim culture.

Also, there are individuals who do not wish to be part of a victims' group. Support for these individuals would be best mediated through **trained and accredited volunteer victim support workers** (see below).

5a. Healing, Peace and Reconciliation

The recognition of all victims is difficult while inter-community tension prevails and reconciliation is not being addressed. Healing of inter-community mistrust is central for the healing of victims. It is accepted that reconciliation may not be able to be addressed at an early stage in the healing of victims, however it must be recognised that a sense of wholeness will not be possible unless issues of reconciliation are addressed.

Recovery from victimhood demands great change for that person, and will also require a change in their context. Good community relations, skills in dealing

positively with difference, respecting the identity of others and, in turn, having one's own identity respected, is all part of what it means to move beyond victimhood.

This means that a wide group of resources are appropriate to the welfare of victims which may not normally be associated with the 'victims' groups'. As well as the service providers mentioned you should also include those working for cross community reconciliation, community relations, inter-church work etc.

5b. Healing and Political Progress

There is a deep mistrust on the part of some victims of statutory services. There is a fear that the needs of victims are being addressed in order to remove them as an obstacle to 'political progress' rather than a genuine concern for the injustice they have suffered.

It is not appropriate to demand that victims should bear the responsibility for the difficult process of negotiating peace. While not excluding their views, they cannot be expected to bear the pain of such costly work. However careful attention and public recognition must be given to the pain caused to victims by necessary actions to promote political progress.

5c. Healing and Hope

There needs to be an exploration by victims and service providers of the kind of society the victims' services are working towards, the values they aspire to, and the quality of relationships between constituent groups they are working to create.

The wider context of a peaceful society is directly related to healing for victims. Otherwise continuing violence means that hope is eroded and wounds are opened by the recurrence of similar events. Envisioning such a society is a step to achieving it.

Proposals

- 1. Good relations** should be part of the vision of the context necessary for the healing of victims. This should be one of the programme streams which will attract funding by those groups providing services or programmes for victims and victims' groups.

The importance of community relations to the healing of victims is illustrated by the experience of victims meeting within a cross community context. The sharing of stories within one's own community has been shown to be helpful but also across community boundaries it is extremely important and illustrates a element of reconciliation, of having one's story heard and received by the 'other' community from which the perpetrator is perceived to have come. This is a means of addressing both the personal and community orientated aspects of the healing of victimhood.

- 2. Diversity of victims' groups:** Victims' groups should be encouraged and should aspire to be inclusive of diversity in the victims they identify with and support.
- 3. Collaboration of victims' groups.** Victims' groups are key deliverers of appropriate services and programmes for their members. However to enable their members to move beyond victimhood, they may need the collaboration of

other groups. So the building of networks within and beyond the victim community is extremely important.

Where possible the promotion of cross community victims' groups should be explored, since the healing of victims must include the healing of their relationship with that community which is perceived to have caused their suffering.

4. Importance of cross community membership of Trauma Advisory Panels (TAPs)

The cross-sector and cross community aspects of TAPS are very valuable. Much of what is stated above should provide the modus operandi for TAPs

5. Should roles, functions and criteria for membership of TAPs be set out in legislation?

Legislation won't drive the work for victims. Commitment to this work and accountability to others working in the sector are of more importance. As is acknowledged, victims work will progress over time and therefore unforeseen changes in the role and functioning of TAPs may be necessary. However it is essential to maintain the cross community aspect of TAPs membership.

6. Users and carers groups involvement

The formation of a Users and Carers Reference Panel should be established under the Commissioner. Representatives of this panel should sit on all the committees responsible for victims services, not only the TAPs but **including the Interdepartmental Working Group (IDWG)**. Otherwise the agenda will be driven by the department's needs or the committee's agenda rather than the needs of the victims. What is said and decisions that are made is influenced hugely by 'who is in the room.' To maximise the effectiveness of the victims' services provided, victims must be 'in the room'. Not least the involvement of victims at every level is essential to building trust through openness and transparency of the procedures.

7. Communication including the voluntary sector, churches etc.

Concern for victims pervades a very large proportion of the voluntary and community sector, and indeed of statutory services as well. Individuals within such organisations should be designated as responsible for the communication of victims' issues. They could be update by e-mail from the office of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. This is in addition to the Victims and Survivors Advisor in each HSS Board area and TAP co-ordinator.

8. Victims and Survivors Advisors should not be half time as liaising with the community and victims' issues would be most useful. However these advisors should be supplemented with **accredited volunteers**.

9. Accredited training for volunteers

As stated above there is mistrust by some victims of statutory services. Also some victims are not comfortable associating with victims' groups.

An accredited training scheme for volunteers to work with victims should be established. These volunteers could provide information, support, and guidance for victims. Within the voluntary sector there are many skilled volunteers within other organisations and community groups who, with additional training, could

be a valuable asset in the healing of victims; Victim Support, mental health charities, local counselling services, clergy, etc. Key to this is the central accreditation and the quality of the training and supervision of such volunteers.

Accredited volunteers should work ultimately under the Commissioner (through appropriate structures) to give legitimacy for their role and credibility with victims.

10. Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

This role should include the oversight of the IDWG, TAPs, the Victims and Survivors Advisors and the accreditation of volunteers.

This role is an excellent suggestion. However the effectiveness of such a Commissioner, and ultimately the value of all services being discussed, will depend upon the credibility and respect in which the Commissioner is held.

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