



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 January 2001

Junior Minister (Office of First and Deputy First Ministers) Mr Haughey:

My Colleague Mr Nesbitt and I welcome today's debate. The administration fully endorses the sentiments of the Good Friday Agreement on the need to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence.

I was reminded very forcefully that we have suffered many forms of violence in our community: violence prejudices, violent words and violent actions. They have all contributed in one degree or another to the obscenity that was visited upon this community in the last thirty years.

It is in order to bring all of that to an end that; to bring about a peaceful society, a normal society, and a process of reconciliation in which the administration attaches the very highest priority to dealing with victims' issues and needs in a positive manner.

We welcome the opportunity to hear Members' views on that. However, to suggest, as Mr Paisley did in introducing this debate, that there is a dynamic policy at the heart of government — those are his words — to neglect victims is simply absurd. It is the kind of hyperbole that is not conducive to rational debate, and it does not actually assist the cause of victims or their case.

The actions contained in the Programme for Government demonstrate the administration's commitment to dealing with victims' issues, as does the setting up of the Victims' Unit. We recognise the need for concerted, co-ordinated effort across Departments, over a number of years, as well as the need for close co-operation with the Northern Ireland Office.

We are determined to ensure that practical help and support is made available to all victims in an equitable, inclusive basis, according to their needs. I assure Mr Kelly that parity in this regard is central to the approach of the administration to the whole questions of victims.

The Victims Unit, which I have referred to, aims to co-ordinate activities and raise awareness of victims' issues across the devolved administration. In line with the Bloomfield report, the first priority in providing greater recognition for victims is to assure them of better social, economic, medical, and other practical support. The vast majority of those areas are now the responsibility of the devolved administration, and we take very seriously our responsibilities to ensure that victims get the best possible service in those areas that the administration can provide.

The interdepartmental working group on victims has been reconstituted. The terms of reference have been agreed and work is progressing on developing a cross-departmental strategy, on which there will be wide consultation with victims and with victims' groups. We would welcome Members encouraging victims' groups in their constituencies to contact the administration so that their views can be taken on board.

A rolling programme of visits to victims' units across Northern Ireland is well under way. This forms part of a publicity strategy, which includes plans to develop a web site, printed materials and relevant workshops. The unit has established a help-desk function to respond to specific cases directed to it by elected representatives such as Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Gibson, Mr J Kelly and other Members who have spoken here and victims' groups. The Victims Liaison Unit has also been involved in a social security agency project that is examining how to improve services to victims as well as in the development of capacity building programmes, which, as Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr Gibson quite rightly pointed out, are so essential. Certain groups have not had the experience or time, unlike others, to develop the skills necessary to access funding and deal with the administration. Capacity building is therefore very important.

Two programmes have been started — one in Cookstown and one in Armagh — and the initial feedback on those capacity building programmes has been positive. It is also important to build capacity awareness among policy makers themselves, and a separate programme has been designed for that purpose. The programme will begin with a major conference at the end of January, which I hope all the MLAs who have been invited will attend. The conference will be followed by four one-day seminars. It is planned that participants from programmes for victims and policy makers will come together later in the year.

A positive relationship has developed at ministerial level, with regular meetings taking place between the Northern Ireland Office and the devolved Administration here. It is supplemented by almost daily contact, regular meetings at official level and joint work on initiatives such as capacity building. The visits carried out by the Victims Liaison Unit are helping to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each unit, and that will be supplemented in the near future by a mailshot to all victims' groups setting out which unit is responsible for which area. It is important to continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that gaps in services do not appear. We are committed to doing that.

The Victims Liaison Unit is currently finalising plans to allocate the funding granted to it by the Executive — £200,000 from the October monitoring round, with a further bid for £120,000 from the December monitoring round. Spending options are being carefully evaluated, and since the funding is, relatively speaking, quite modest, it is important that it is used as efficiently as possible.

Decisions have yet to be finalised. Therefore I cannot give details on what direction spending will take. However, in broad terms, it is anticipated that the funding will be directed towards projects in the health field by assisting the four trauma advisory panels, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and research into the needs of victims. In

the course of Mr Paisley Jnr's speech, he made reference to the need to talk to victims, to set up a mechanism to assess victims' needs and to hear from them what their needs are. We are well aware of that and researching victims' needs is likely to be assisted by funding from the moneys available.

It is likely that funding available from the Peace II programme will be much more substantial. That will provide the Department with considerable resources to engage in a much broader range of activities. However, negotiations are still ongoing, so I cannot provide details on the final arrangements that will be made.

I will refer to one or two things said during the course of the debate that I want to deal with specifically.

Mr Paisley Jnr, for instance, raised questions about individual allocations from the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) from the core funding available to it. Those questions really need to be directed towards the Northern Ireland Office, because the NIVT operates on moneys allocated to it by the NIO and not by the devolved Administration.

5.00 pm

Obviously, I deplore the incident mentioned by Mr Paisley of arms being found in an office which was partly financed by the funds referred to. However, the devolved Administration has had neither an involvement nor an input into decisions made under the core funding scheme. In the period leading up to October 2000, grants totalling almost £74,000 were made to a group in north Antrim and, in addition, grants of almost £1 million have been made to regional organisations, one of which operates in north Antrim.

Mr Paisley referred to educational provision for prisoners, one of whom he said had been able to complete a degree. In fact, many prisoners have been able to do this. He compared that provision with the situation of a family, a victim of violence, in which one of the children had to discontinue education because of the family's lack of resources. That is a matter of great regret. However, families whose income falls below a certain level can avoid paying fees for third level education, and they have access to basic levels of maintenance grant support. Indeed, the Memorial Fund has provided educational bursaries for cases just like that in which families have found themselves in such a position.

Criminal injuries were referred to in the course of the debate. They are a matter for the NIO and not for the devolved Administration. In providing practical assistance to victims of violence and their families, the Memorial Fund has allocated grants for respite care in suitable cases where families have found themselves in a needy situation.

In the past the NIO has made a direct allocation of £6.25 million for victims, in addition to the mainstream funding being sought. Victims' organisations that have received this funding are not excluded from seeking money from other sources and particularly from the Peace Fund, which will come on-stream in due course.

Those are the major issues that were referred to in the course of the debate. If I have omitted to deal with any point raised, I will be glad, on notification by the Member concerned, to respond in writing.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.