

Frequently Asked Questions



What does the Commission actually do?

The Commission has six things to do, all under the umbrella of promoting the interests of victims and survivors. 1: We have a duty to make people aware of victims' interests and needs. 2: We review how the law affects them and make recommendations for change where there is a problem. 3: We do the same with the services on offer to meet victims' needs. 4: We offer our advice to key players like the First Minister and deputy Minister and the Secretary of State about developments that impact upon victims and survivors. 5: We make sure we know what victims think. 6: We are setting up a Forum where victims can debate key issues.

Do Commissioners meet individual victims?

Yes, all the time. All four Commissioners agree you cannot take a view on a strategic way forward for helping victims and survivors unless you spend time with individuals. If you do not listen, you cannot understand; if you do not understand, you cannot be sure you are reacting in the best possible manner. So, we meet individuals for two reasons – to see if we can help them, and to inform ourselves about the obstacles and frustrations in their day-to-day lives.

Do the Commissioners always agree?

No! One of the strengths of the Commission is that any commissioner can come to the meeting table with a minority view, knowing the others will listen, with a view to reaching out for a position we can all agree on. That doesn't mean anyone surrenders; it's not appeasement, it's a question of finding the ground where a compromise leaves your integrity intact. We feel it makes us stronger as a group. It also means we are not asking anyone to do anything we haven't already done, if we need to ask others to rethink their position.

Do your decisions have to be unanimous?

No. We prefer to agree by consensus, but if we need to, we take formal votes, and when we do, a proposal will be passed by a vote in favour of 4-0, 3-1, or, if one commissioner is away, 3-0. Those are the only three combinations which will allow a proposal to pass.

Why do you have such a low profile?

That is our fault. We will fix it

Let Us Know Your Story

One of the most important things this Commission can do is listen. So, please feel free to contact us. The following stories are just three of the hundreds of stories we've listened to already this year. For obvious reasons, we have taken steps to protect the identity of individuals, but the spirit of the stories remains true:

My daughter was on a school trip which stopped at a memorial in Belfast. Her friends saw her surname and wondered if she was related. She wondered too, so she asked me that evening. I didn't want to tell her. After all, we had moved home to get away from all that. But I knew there was every chance that one of her school friends would find out. So I didn't have a choice, did I? I had to tell her. - Anon

I was shot in the lower back. I wasn't the target, I just happened to be in the way. I don't blame the man who pulled the trigger, even though I've been in daily pain for 30 years now. And I'm very grateful to the doctors and nurses who saved me and cared for me. But why was I ordered to drop my trousers in the compensation court? They had my medical files. Did they really have to strip my dignity on top of everything else? - Anon

I was 21 years old when my husband was shot. He was working outdoors when a car drew up. For over 30 years, I have had this thought that the car door opened, the gunman emerged and my husband died as he fell to the ground.

The Historical Enquiries Team has just finished their review of what happened. And yes, he was working where I thought he was, and a car did draw up, with a gunman in it. But my husband did not die as he fell. He died much more slowly, in pain. I did not need to know that. - Anon

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Or why not visit our new blog at:

<http://www.victimscmission.blogspot.com/>

Summer Newsletter 2009



This is a period of change, and preparation for change. The Commission is here, the Forum will not be far behind, there's a ten year strategy proposed by government, and OFMDFM want a new Service to deliver for victims. On their own, each development should make a positive difference, but taken together, we believe we have an unprecedented opportunity to add value and coherence—or put simply, to make a telling impact on the day-to-day lives of victims and survivors. Much of our work in the last year has been quiet, below-the-radar activity designed to maximise the opportunity in the new regime.

Hundreds of individuals have come to us for help with an alphabet of issues: Acknowledgement, Befriending, Counselling, Dwellings, Education, Freedom of Information, Housing, Health, Historical Enquiries, the list runs on. Many have tried and failed elsewhere, some have never asked for help before. Either way, success for them is a positive intervention from the Commission. For the Commission, success is more than that; it is a positive intervention which also informs our strategic view of the issues. In the next few months, we hope to convince you of the merits of our strategic view, starting with the publication of our three year, corporate plan, which maps out our broad direction of travel.

All four of us would like to thank each and every one of you who have helped us fashion that document — and that is each and every person we have met in the last year.

Dealing with the Past

The publication of the report of the Consultative Group on the Past has brought a welcome focus on a most complex and challenging issue.

The report contains 31 recommendations. Among them are:

- An independent Legacy Commission is established, promoting peace and stability, with a bursary of £100 million to tackle issues;
- The Legacy Commission's mandate runs for a fixed period of five years;
- The Chair of the Legacy Commission should be an International Commissioner, who would work with two other commissioners;
- A Reconciliation Forum is established to tackle issues arising from the conflict including sectarianism, promoting remembering activities, working with young people, providing improved services for healthcare needs, ensuring an even spread of economic benefits, and helping those exiled during the conflict to return;



The Eames Bradley Report,
released on 28th January 2009

- A two stranded approach to historical cases, dealing with investigations and information recovery backed by police powers.



As delegates gathered for a conference to mark the 20th Anniversary of the shooting of Pat Finucane, there is still no agreement between the family and the British government on the terms of reference for the public inquiry.

- The Legacy Commission should, through the Reconciliation Forum, support CVSNI in facilitating storytelling about the impact of the conflict on individuals and communities;
- Full support should be given to the continuation of the Annual Day of Reflection on June 21st each year.

We believe that we cannot keep asking questions of victims and survivors about their needs and aspirations without delivering on what we are being told. The CGP recommendations may or may not fit those needs at this time, but they provide an opportunity to have difficult conversations which tackle the legacy of the conflict and begin to put in place, where possible, methodologies to make progress. We hope to provide initial advice to government in early autumn.

“No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent”

Abraham Lincoln

Living History



“Remembering is a noble and necessary act,” said Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of the Holocaust. Since the establishment of the Commission, we have met with many victims and survivors and groups working on their behalf who have affirmed for us the positive benefits of storytelling both to the individual and to broader society.

Our vision in the Commission developed as a result, and we are advocating the creation of a resource where all the stories of the conflict can be preserved; but more importantly heard and acknowledged.

This project will create a central, web-based repository of stories, memories and experiences, which will offer a unique insight into the human cost of the conflict. While there are many sources of information about the who, what, when, where and why of the Troubles, there is no comprehensive source of information recording the impact on the victims and survivors, their relatives, friends, neighbours and the wider community.

We are partners in a consortium of organisations bidding to deliver a world-class legacy project as part of the Peace III programme. Our vision for this storytelling work is that we aim to facilitate groups and individuals to tell their stories in a safe and supportive way and that, in addition to such local or sectoral work, we will provide the capacity to preserve the material in perpetuity and to use it as the basis for the development of educational materials and programmes which allow us to teach and learn about conflict.

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Maya Angelou

The Peace III Programme’s aim is “reinforcing progress towards a peaceful and stable society and promoting reconciliation.” We believe that to secure peace and stability, it is important to understand what creates conflicted and unstable societies, the human impacts of that tension, and how shared but contested history is reflected in multiple truths and narratives.

The Commission believes the Living History project will allow and encourage individuals and communities to study, in formal and informal contexts, the many truths of our shared history, in a manner which highlights commonalities and differences, and encourages readers/listeners/viewers to reflect upon their own tolerances, prejudices and sense of trust.

Coming up from The Commission for Victims and Survivors...



Eleanor Gill brings her experience as Chief Executive of The Consumer Council to a CVSNI session on Corporate Planning.

- The Commission’s Corporate Plan, with our vision, mission and how we intend to go about our business over the next three years.
- The 2009/2010 Work Plan
- Advice on the future of the Trauma Advisory Panels.
- Recommendations on the setting up of the Victims and Survivors Service.

Regional Information Days

CVSNI would to thank everyone who attended our Regional Information Days earlier this year. Victims and survivors joined us in Ballymena, Enniskillen, Armagh, Dungannon, Belfast, Derry / Londonderry and Newtownards for a series of presentations by the Commissioners, and by guests from the Social Security Agency and Citizens Advice; the Department of Social Development on the new Charities Commission; and local newspaper and radio editors. Thanks also to the local councillors and MLAs who took time out to listen to and acknowledge the stories of some of the victims and survivors.

Your feedback to the regional events was largely positive, but where you did have constructive criticism, we thank you for your comments, which will help us next time we’re “on the road” – hopefully with the Forum. Talking of which



John Nevin of the Social Security Agency, addressing the Commission’s Regional Information Day in Armagh, on the implications of Employment and Support Allowance. ESA was introduced in October 2008, and will replace Incapacity Benefit and Income Support based on incapacity grounds .

The Forum



Commissioner Bertha McDougall and Commissioner Brendan McAllister

You have heard it mentioned time and again - *The Forum* — but what is it? What will it do? What has it got to do with me?

Establishing a Forum for victims and survivors has been an important part of the Commission’s work from the outset. The law requires us to make arrangements for a forum for consultation and discussion with victims and survivors. Ministers and MLAs have stressed its importance and our own soundings with groups and individuals have indicated they have waited a long time for the Forum. So, it’s crucial we get it going, but it’s equally important we have a design that maximizes its chances of success, not least by taking account of the sensitivities involved.

In January we listened to what was said about the Forum at our Regional Information Days and in February we set up a Forum Development Group of 27 individuals from across the victim sector, as well as a number of expert witnesses from relevant organisations. Brendan McAllister and Bertha McDougall developed ideas, and tested them at a series of meetings with the Development Group. Informed by these group discussions, we produced a Design Plan which was adopted by the Commission on 2 June.

The Commission now plans to set up a pilot Forum which will run from September 2009 –June 2010. The final Design Plan will be on the Commission's web site by September.

Here’s our vision of the **pilot Forum**. It will:

- Facilitate consultation between the Forum and individuals and bodies relevant to the interests of victims/survivors;
- Provide space for discussion between victims/survivors
- Inform the work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors.

Why a pilot? Because there will be teething problems. It would seem sensible to identify and address these before asking the wider constituency to invest their time and trust.

In an ideal world, the Commission would like to use a public recruitment campaign, with an independent panel appointing the Forum’s members. However, that could delay the first meeting until December, and would affect the Forum's capacity to influence the Commission's approach to three important policy initiatives: planning for the new Service; the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and Dealing with the Past.

So, for the pilot, The Commission will follow a ‘Direct Selection’ process whereby it will issue an invitation to 25 victims/survivors to serve as members for the pilot phase of the Forum (September, 2009 – June, 2010). Each of these individuals shall meet the legal definition of victim/survivor. An additional 8 associate members will be persons with expertise or insight relevant to the interests of victims/survivors.



“He who sedulously attends, pointedly asks, calmly speaks, coolly answers and ceases when he has no more to say is in possession of some of the best requisites of man.”

Johann Casper Lavater

The Commission will select all 33 members who serve in the Forum’s pilot phase from September 2009–June 2010.

As well as reflecting Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998, members of the Forum shall serve as individuals in their own right, not as official representatives of an organization.

It has taken a long time to reach this stage. The Forum is for victims and survivors and this is their opportunity to use it and make it work for them.

“Our agenda is now exhausted. The secretary general is exhausted. All of you are exhausted. I find it very comforting that, beginning with our very first day, we find ourselves in such complete unanimity.”

Paul Henri Spaak concluding the first General Assembly meeting of the United Nations.