



## **Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027**

### **Consultation Response**

**November 2024**

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## Summary

- CVS is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a response to the draft Programme for Government 2024-27 from the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive. We recognise the continued commitment to tackle issues related to the legacies of the Troubles/conflict in Northern Ireland and an approach to government that is trauma-informed across our society.
- CVS in partnership with our Victims and Survivors Forum are frustrated and dismayed that this response is being drafted during a **prolonged period without a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors**. CVS and the Forum call for the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their departmental officials to commence the recruitment process immediately to reinstate the statutory challenge of a Commissioner at a critically important time for victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict.
- CVS is disappointed that the **draft Programme for Government contains limited reference to the current challenges experienced by victims and survivors linked to conflict legacy issues**. Inclusion of an outcome within the Programme for Government on addressing Troubles/conflict legacy issues from the Executive would demonstrate a clear commitment by our locally elected government to work collectively and proactively in dealing with legacy.
- An outcome to address the legacy of our troubled past would recognise the importance for the Executive to continue to support the needs of victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. Setting this outcome would also **realign a constructive relationship between the NI Executive and the UK Government and Irish Governments** that would **ensure the needs of victims and survivors across these islands are acknowledged and responded to**. Importantly, a cross-government approach would support efforts to build consensus around mechanisms and processes to deal with issues related to truth, justice and accountability.
- CVS strongly endorses NI government departments working collectively and cooperatively on a sustained basis over the next three years in building a more stable, peaceful and prosperous society here. **We support constructive engagement between the NI Executive and both the Irish and UK**

**Governments to ensure equitable and effective access to treatment, care and support for victims and their families living in other jurisdictions.** In the context of preventing future instability and violence and promoting reconciliation it is incumbent upon governments across these islands to commit to working together to support victims and their families.

- CVS welcomes the Executive's continued focus on building and maintaining safer communities throughout NI. **From a victims and survivors perspective the enduring and pernicious existence of paramilitary groupings in NI over 25 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is unacceptable, hurtful and offensive.** There are no circumstances that can justify continued loyalist or republican paramilitary groups violent existence and the persistent threat to life and wellbeing of many individuals and families across our society.
  
- **An outstanding issue that requires recognition and significant response from government relates to the needs of bereaved victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. CVS would urge the NI Executive and importantly the UK and Irish Governments to give serious consideration to the CVS advice recommendations and implement a fully funded payment scheme for bereaved victims and survivors.**
  
- A particular concern that CVS has around funding shared by our colleagues in VSS is tied to the **lack of reference within the Programme for Government document to victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict.** With limited reference to victims and survivors and no specific outcome on addressing Troubles/legacy issues from the Executive within the current document there is a **concern that supporting victims and survivors is becoming less of a priority at a crucial time in dealing with the past.**

## Introduction

1. The Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVS) was established in June 2008 under the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, as amended by the Commission for Victims and Survivors Act (2008).
2. CVS is a Non-Departmental Public Body of the Executive Office. The principal aim of CVS is to promote awareness of the interests of victims and survivors of the Northern Ireland conflict. It has several statutory duties that include:
  - Promoting an awareness of matters relating to the interests of victims and survivors and of the need to safeguard those interests;
  - Keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice affecting the interests of victims and survivors;
  - Keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for the victims and survivors by bodies or persons;
  - Advising the Secretary of State, the Executive Committee of the Assembly and any Body or person providing services for victims and survivors on matters concerning the interests of victims and survivors;
  - Ensuring that the views of victims and survivors are sought concerning the exercise of the Commission's functions; and
  - Making arrangements for a forum for consultation and discussion with victims and survivors.<sup>1</sup>
3. CVS is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a response to the draft Programme for Government 2024-27 from the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive. We welcome the return of the Executive and Assembly with local ministerial decision-making and accountability representing central elements of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that marked the end of three decades of the Troubles/conflict.
4. In the current economic climate, there are many challenges, and we recognise the candour of the NI Executive in recognising the tough decisions that will need to be made. However, it is important to ensure that despite budgetary challenges, improvements can be made, and CVS is committed to supporting plans for government that positively impact victims and

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<sup>1</sup> The functions of the Commission relate to those set out in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 as amended by the Commission for Victims and Survivors Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

survivors of the Troubles/conflict. In particular, we recognise the continued commitment to tackle issues related to the legacies of the Troubles/conflict in Northern Ireland and an approach to government that is trauma-informed across our society.

5. We encourage the NI Executive to build on this to specifically consider the needs of victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict in relation to some of the key issues raised in the draft Programme for Government and recognise and support them directly.

## Background

6. Victims and survivors and their families have had to share the heaviest burden within our communities and across society in NI because of decades of civil conflict further compounded by an inability to address our troubled past. According to a survey conducted by the Commission in 2021 24% of the NI population said that they could meet the definition of a victim and/or survivor of the Troubles/conflict. Further, 21% of adults reported that their mental health has been affected by the experience of the Troubles/conflict with almost half of these respondents stating that their mental health continues to be affected.<sup>2</sup> When asked similar questions in Commission surveys in the Republic of Ireland (RoI)<sup>3</sup> in 2023 and in Great Britain (GB)<sup>4</sup> in 2024, 10% of adults in the RoI said they could meet the definition while 8% of the adult population in GB said they could meet the definition of a victim and/or survivor of the Troubles/conflict. CVS have highlighted these survey findings with government departments and other stakeholders in the RoI and GB making the case for strategic and operational plans which acknowledge and respond to the needs of victims and survivors living in the different jurisdictions.
7. CVS recognise the high-level nature of the draft Programme for Government document covering a reduced mandate period of three years with a focus on a series of immediate priorities to address key issues across our society. These involve funding our public services including our severely pressurised health service with investment to cut waiting times and support for long standing programmes and initiatives to keep our communities safe including reducing the harm from ongoing paramilitary intimidation and violence. This

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<sup>2</sup> CVS (2021) Population Survey 2021: Northern Ireland (NI), Lucid Talk/Commission for Victims and Survivors.

<sup>3</sup> CVS (2023) Population Survey – Republic of Ireland, SMR. Survey Report can be accessed here: <https://www.cvsni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SMR-CVS-Report-FINAL-1-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> CVS (2024) Population Survey – Great Britain, YouGov. Survey Report can be accessed here: [Commission for Victims and Survivors: Population Survey Great Britain](#)

response will highlight some specific points in relation to these priorities as well as several other relevant issues for consideration.

8. CVS in partnership with our Victims and Survivors Forum would like to convey frustration and dismay that this response is being drafted during a prolonged period without a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. It is currently ten months since the previous Commissioner, Ian Jeffers resigned from his position in January 2024 with the recruitment process to appoint a new Commissioner having still not commenced. In the context of the implementation of the controversial Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act (Legacy Act) victims and their families across Northern Ireland and beyond have not had a critically important independent voice to promote and safeguard their interests. CVS and the Forum call for the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their departmental officials to commence the recruitment process immediately to reinstate the statutory challenge of a Commissioner at a critically important time for victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict.
9. Despite the absence of a Commissioner, CVS continues to strongly advocate on behalf of all victims and survivors living with health and wellbeing and other impacts of the Troubles/conflict and its legacy in NI and elsewhere. We are currently working in a challenging context influenced by the implementation of the contested Legacy Act, enduring conflict-legacy societal issues as well as operating in an increasingly constrained financial environment. Equally, there are opportunities supported by the recently published Strategy for Victims and Survivors<sup>5</sup> that provides a framework and recommitment from government to continue to support victims and survivors in the decade ahead. CVS works closely with all our strategy partners including the Victims and Survivors Forum, the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) and community-based partners presenting strong arguments and advice to the NI Executive departments as well as the UK and Irish governments to ensure victims and survivors needs are properly acknowledged, addressed and resourced.

## Addressing legacy Issues

10. CVS recognises the NI Executive's cross-cutting commitment to peace in NI, which it links to prosperity and a fairer society. However, CVS is disappointed that the draft Programme for Government contains limited reference to the current challenges experienced by victims and survivors linked to conflict legacy issues. Additionally, we are surprised and dismayed that there is no mention of the controversial implementation of the Legacy Act representing

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<sup>5</sup> The new Strategy for Victims and Survivors published in October 2024 can be access here: <https://bit.ly/3Ysblxf>

a largely unsupported and cruel attempt by the previous Conservative administration to address our troubled past. While the new Labour Government has given assurances that they will address the contentious and hurtful parts of the Act including reinstating inquests and civil actions, there currently remains a high level of anxiety, uncertainty and frustration among many victims and their families that the legislative framework will remain relatively unchanged.

11. Inclusion of an outcome within the Programme for Government on addressing Troubles/conflict legacy issues from the Executive would demonstrate a clear commitment by our locally elected government to work collectively and proactively in dealing with legacy. In recent years Government departments and statutory agencies have worked closely together on conflict-legacy issues including paramilitarism and services to address victims trauma-related needs including the creation of the Regional Trauma Network (RTN) and the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme (TPDPS). The RTN was established following a Ministerial decision in 2015 to progress a key measure agreed within the Stormont House Agreement to create a specialist mental trauma service for victims and survivors. Following the enactment of Westminster legislation and the tireless campaign led by the WAVE Injured Group the TPDPS has been administered by the Victims Payment Board. CVS recognise that legacy continues to be a complex and sensitive area for local political parties to achieve consensus on, however it is important to acknowledge these achievements that have been attained in recent years. The imposition of the Legacy Act by the former UK Government with no support from local political parties, victims groups and human rights organisations highlights the need for collective engagement of Executive Ministers to proactively work with both UK and Irish Governments on legacy matters.

12. CVS continues to believe that the strategic direction for our Government with its genesis in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that ended the Troubles/conflict is the need to acknowledge and respectively respond to the ongoing impact of the past upon our society today. As mentioned, an outcome to address the legacy of our troubled past would recognise the importance for the Executive to continue to support the needs of victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. Importantly it would also provide a timely statement of intent and collective direction to approach issues that continue to divide us including our segregated education system, sectarianism and paramilitarism. Setting this outcome would also realign a constructive relationship between the NI Executive and the UK Government and Irish Governments that would ensure the needs of victims and survivors across these islands are acknowledged and responded to. Importantly, a cross-government approach

would support efforts to build consensus around mechanisms and processes to deal with issues related to truth, justice and accountability.

## Cross-government and cross-jurisdictional cooperation

13. As referenced above in recent years the Executive Office has worked collaboratively with the Departments of Health and Justice and other partners to set up and operate the Regional Trauma Network (RTN) and the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme (TPDPS). Working in partnership with Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) funded community organisations, the Executive Office and the Department of Health and the five Health and Social Care Trusts have designed and operated the Regional Trauma Network (RTN), a specialist psychological trauma service for victims and their families. Meanwhile, since August 2021 the Executive Office and the Department of Justice including the Victims Payment Board has delivered the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme (TPDPS) that has made awards to individuals with permanent psychological and physical Troubles-related injuries. The RTN and TPDPS are two examples of effective partnership working between government departments and victims organisations in acknowledging and addressing the health and wellbeing needs of victims and their families. The new Strategy for Victims and Survivors published in October 2024 recognises the importance of continued cooperation between departments reflecting the cross-cutting and wide-ranging needs of victims and survivors.

14. CVS strongly endorses NI government departments working collectively and cooperatively on a sustained basis over the next three years in building a more stable, peaceful and prosperous society here. We support constructive engagement between the NI Executive and both the Irish and UK Governments to ensure equitable and effective access to treatment, care and support for victims and their families living in other jurisdictions. In the context of preventing future instability and violence and promoting reconciliation it is incumbent upon governments across these islands to commit to working together to support victims and their families.

## Paramilitarism

15. CVS welcomes the Executive's continued focus on building and maintaining safer communities throughout NI. Closely aligned to the cross-cutting commitment to a peaceful and stable society, CVS support the considerable efforts across government to tackle the scourge of paramilitarism. From a victims and survivors perspective the enduring and pernicious existence of paramilitary groupings in NI over 25 years after the Belfast/Good

Friday Agreement is unacceptable, hurtful and offensive. There are no circumstances that can justify continued loyalist or republican paramilitary groups violent existence and the persistent threat to life and wellbeing of many individuals and families across our society.

16. In a paper issued in December 2023, CVS highlighted several victim-centred recommended actions as part of the continued efforts by government and other sectoral partners to end paramilitarism. These included the recommitment of political and community leaders across our society to demonstrate unconditional support towards peace and reconciliation. This involves an unequivocal condemnation of all forms of paramilitary intimidation and violence. Secondly, the Victims and Survivors Form has consistently stated that the '*past must never happen again*'. Regrettably, rather than respect the views and lived experiences of victims and survivors, paramilitary groupings have been responsible for the deaths of over 160 individuals and have perpetrated severe, often life changing injuries on thousands of victims since 1998. Rather than accepting the continuation of this activity across many of the communities worst affected during the Troubles/conflict, all sections of our society should develop greater understanding of the devastating impact on victims of paramilitary violence. Thirdly, CVS have argued that should a process of paramilitary group transition be agreed by the two governments, the views of victims and survivors must be actively sought and their interests promoted throughout its development and delivery.<sup>6</sup>

## Troubles-related mental health issues

17. Exposure to Troubles-related trauma and the trauma associated with conflict-related issues including ongoing paramilitarism and historical investigation and information recovery processes can heighten the risk of developing different mental and physical health conditions and or injuries. As referenced earlier in 2021 over a fifth of the population in NI reported that their mental health had been affected by a Troubles/conflict-related incident with almost a half of these individuals stating that their mental health continues to be affected. These figures highlight potential levels of unmet mental health needs among our population that are linked to Troubles-related experiences. We also know from multiple research studies including the 2021 CVS Report entitled *It Didn't End in 1998*<sup>7</sup> that the trans-generational impacts of conflict legacy represent significant mental health stressors for many of our young people.

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<sup>6</sup> CVS (2023) *Paramilitarism – Recommendations for Action*. Paper accessible here: [2023-Dec-20-Paramilitarism-recommendations-1.pdf \(cvsni.org\)](https://www.cvsni.org/2023-Dec-20-Paramilitarism-recommendations-1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> CVS (2021) '*It Didn't End in 1998*' – *Examining the Impacts of Conflict Legacy Across Generations*, Queens University Belfast. Report can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3Yy7ajp>

18. Over the next three years CVS welcomes the focus across the Executive, in acknowledging the unique stressor of Troubles-related trauma on population mental health ‘to embed trauma-informed, responsive systems to help people to easily navigate and access the support they need, when they need it, and for however long they need it for.’<sup>8</sup> There are different complementary responses to address levels of trauma within our society including timely and effective access to evidence-based treatment and supports to making the public sector workforce trauma-aware to better identify and support mental health need. Equally, it is critical that the Executive collectively works to ensure that those conflict-legacy issues that are significant stressors including paramilitary intimidation and violence are ended while legacy processes to address issues related to truth, justice and accountability do not risk re-traumatising victims and their families. A whole society approach to acknowledging the mental health impacts of conflict-related trauma on victims and survivors can ensure they continue to receive treatment and support for however long they need it while we address the legacy of the past as a key element in maintaining peace and stability and promoting wider reconciliation.

19. It is important to recognise the invaluable contribution of all colleagues working across the victims and survivors’ community inside and outside NI providing a range of critical services and support to many thousands of victims and their families. Executive Office funding and additional PEACE Programme finance provided under the new Strategy for Victims and Survivors has been crucial in meeting the health and wellbeing needs of victims and their families across our communities over many years. According to VSS, in 2023-24 government funding ensured that over 3,100 victims and survivors were able to access talking therapies and over 3,000 availed of complementary therapies while c10,000 individuals received support in the areas of welfare, personal development and social support.<sup>9</sup> Each of these interventions has provided an important contribution to improving the mental health and wellbeing of individual and/or family members who has been impacted by their traumatic experiences of the Troubles/conflict. As these numbers indicate many victims and survivors are still living with the mental health legacy of the conflict as they deal with trauma in their past, navigate through emotional challenging legacy processes and in some cases confront the continued threat from active paramilitary groupings. In this current environment and in the years ahead it important that effective government funding levels are maintained in continuing to support the health and wellbeing of victims and their families.

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<sup>8</sup> NI Executive (2024) *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most – Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027*: 44.

<sup>9</sup> Information obtained from the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) in October 2024.

20. CVS recognises the issues relating to the significant waiting times across our health service currently. There are also waiting times being experienced by victims and survivors requiring access to the RTN. CVS would ask that the waiting times experienced by the RTN are kept under review by the Department of Health and the Executive Office and provide any further support possible to alleviate existing waiting times issues in the months ahead.

## The bereaved

21. An outstanding issue that requires recognition and significant response from government relates to the needs of bereaved victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. The new Victims and Survivors Strategy acknowledges that the specific needs of the bereaved are 'not always fully addressed by the forms of support currently available.'<sup>10</sup> Further, the hurt, pain and enduring loss felt by generations of the bereaved has been compounded in recent years with the legal regulations underpinning the operation of the TPDPS. They deliberately exclude many bereaved individuals not at the immediate aftermath of their loved one's deaths from being able to receive an award under the Scheme. This is despite many experiencing often severe and permanent psychological disablement, managing lifelong conditions including trauma-related clinical depression, complex grief and substance dependency.

22. The previous Commissioner for Victims and Survivors submitted advice to government in December 2023<sup>11</sup> recommending the establishment of a dedicated Scheme for the bereaved that would include a substantive payment to individuals recognising the suffering and lost life opportunities caused by our recent conflict. CVS would urge the NI Executive and importantly the UK and Irish Governments to give serious consideration to the CVS advice recommendations and implement a fully funded payment scheme for bereaved victims and survivors.

## Funding

23. A particular concern that CVS has around funding shared by our colleagues in VSS is tied to the lack of reference within the Programme for Government document to victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. With limited reference to victims and survivors and no

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<sup>10</sup> TEO (2024) *Strategy for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles/Conflict 2024-34*: 16.

<sup>11</sup> CVS (2023) *Advice to Government on provision of a bereavement payment scheme and services for people bereaved as a result of the Troubles/conflict*, Commission for Victims and Survivors. Report can be access here: [Bereaved Advice Cover](#)

specific outcome on addressing Troubles/legacy issues from the Executive within the current document there is a concern that supporting victims and survivors is becoming less of a priority at a crucial time in dealing with the past. The current structuring of the draft Programme for Government with only reference to acknowledging 'levels of trauma within our post-conflict society' under the area of 'safer communities' creates a narrow and restricted window of opportunity making it potentially more difficult to access sectoral funding in the years ahead.