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30 March 2026

Dear deputy First Minister Little-Pengelly

I am writing to express my concern regarding the current level of indicative funding allocated to support victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge and appreciate that the indicative budget allocated to the sector has been protected in headline terms, and that the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) has managed this standstill budget in a positive and responsible manner. However, in real terms, this represents a reduction when inflation, rising operational costs, and pay settlements are taken into account. The impact of this will now be felt by victims and survivors.

In particular, I wish to draw your attention to the current indicative allocation of £7.9 million to the VSS (2026-27), which falls significantly short of the evidenced level of need, estimated at £11.2 million (2026-27). This shortfall of over £3.3 million has real and immediate implications for the support available to victims and survivors across NI, as evidenced by the funding call.

I want to be clear that this concern is not directed at the VSS. The VSS plays a vital role in administering funding and ensuring that resources reach those who need

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them most. This funding is not retained centrally but is distributed to a wide range of groups and organisations that deliver front-line services directly to victims and survivors. It should be noted that the VSS led a very comprehensive, lengthy consultation and co-design process with all the relevant groups which formed the basis of the case presented to The Executive Office, highlighting the current level of need.

From my perspective, the issue is clear: the level of need has not reduced and in fact, demand has increased. It was projected in earlier victims' strategies that the need for support for victims and the sector would shrink with the passage of time, and with the passing on of first-generation victims, but this was a flawed assumption. What we now understand is that against the realities of new policy initiatives, including the commitments from the 2014 Stormont House Agreement and the development of the mental health service (now the Regional Trauma Network) and the Pension for the Injured (now the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme), which has increased engagement with many hidden victims and survivors within our society. Coupled with the evolving picture of intergenerational trauma, many victims and survivors continue to live with complex and enduring physical and psychological impacts of the Troubles/conflict, while others are coming forward for support for the first time.

Our focus is on the consequences of the funding deficit on the services currently offered and needed by victims and survivors. As referenced in the Victims and Survivors Strategy 2024-34, at the heart of these services are the community-based organisations funded through the VSS. They remain the most trusted and accessible point of contact for these individuals. These groups are the backbone of provision in communities, offering counselling, complementary therapies, health and wellbeing services, peer support, advocacy, and practical assistance.

The funding gap therefore translates directly into reduced capacity. It means fewer programmes, increased waiting times, and reductions in key services such as counselling and complementary therapies. For victims and survivors, this can mean not being able to access the support they need, when they need it.

I am also concerned that this funding gap exists at a time when the pressures on these groups have increased significantly. While all the groups have willingly engaged to support victims and survivors to navigate new structures, the demands have grown in the wrap-around support including health and well-being, counselling and complementary services recognising that individuals will have complex needs that do not fit neatly into a single category. An unexpected consequence of new structures and programmes has been the increase in numbers of individuals presenting for support and help, without the necessary development of the infrastructure.

One such area is the implementation of the Victims' Payments Scheme. While this scheme represents an important step in acknowledging the harm suffered by those seriously injured during the Troubles/conflict, it has also generated additional demand for support at a community level. Many individuals require assistance from local groups to navigate the application process, to understand eligibility, and to manage the emotional impact of engaging with the scheme. This is irrespective of ultimate eligibility. Responding to the Scheme has created additional unexpected levels of demand which has been absorbed by the frontline groups, creating considerable additional pressures.

Similarly, the establishment of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) adds further demands. Engagement with legacy processes can be deeply challenging and, at times, retraumatising. The groups funded through the VSS are often those that provide the necessary emotional and

practical support to individuals and families engaging with these processes as well as those who choose not to, or who cannot for various reasons. This again represents an expansion of workload particularly in the wrap-around support which is essential without additional dedicated resources.

Taken together, these developments mean that the network of organisations supporting victims and survivors is being asked to do more, and to respond to increasingly complex needs, with funding that does not reflect this reality. Many of these groups have built up expertise and trust over decades, and any erosion of their capacity would represent a significant loss to the sector and to the individuals they support. Feedback from a number of groups following the news of indicative budgets has indicated that there is a danger that as groups are being squeezed further invariably, front-line services will be reduced and suffer.

At the same time, the implementation of a new Strategy for Victims and Survivors is taking place in the context of reduced funding and diminishing services. This creates a clear mismatch between strategic ambition and operational capacity. It is also important to highlight that this is a cross-Departmental issue. While the Strategy for Victims and Survivors sit at Executive level, the financial burden appears to fall largely on The Executive Office, which itself is under significant pressure. This raises questions about whether the current funding model appropriately reflects the shared responsibility across government and the efforts to ensure that all Departments contribute to an area of work which is essential to the delivery of the Programme for Government, predicated on peace and prosperity.

I fully recognise the financial constraints facing The Executive Office and the wider Northern Ireland Executive. However, funding allocated through the VSS is not simply an administrative cost, it is the primary mechanism through which essential support is delivered on the ground.

Supporting victims and survivors is a fundamental responsibility. Adequate investment contributes not only to individual wellbeing but also to wider societal outcomes, including community stability and reconciliation. Conversely, insufficient funding risks undermining these outcomes and placing additional pressure on other public services.

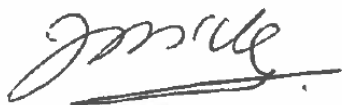
I would therefore strongly encourage consideration of current funding levels in the context of identified need. Bridging the gap between the indicative budget of £7.9 (2026-27) currently allocated and the £11.2 million evidenced as necessary would significantly strengthen the sector's ability to respond to both existing and emerging demand.

I would also encourage consideration of longer-term, multi-year funding arrangements. Greater financial certainty would enable organisations to plan effectively, retain skilled staff, and sustain the infrastructure that underpins service delivery.

I remain committed to working constructively with you, with the VSS, and with The Executive Office to find solutions. My overriding concern is to ensure that victims and survivors, and the organisations that support them, are adequately resourced to meet both current and future needs. At a time when victims and survivors face the outworkings of the Troubles Bill, the challenges of new structures, the imminent closure of the Victims Payment Board to new applicants, the lack of progress with a Payment for the Bereaved, confidence is in short supply. Reduction in frontline services and additional pressures on an already overstretched infrastructure simply reinforces the view that victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict are being forgotten.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you as a matter of urgency to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely



Joe McVey
Commissioner