

RFJ statement on VSS assessment process

Currently all those people seeking mental health and well-being support from groups funded to support victims and survivors of the conflict from OFMDFM victims funding are required to be independently assessed by the newly established Victims & Survivors Service (VSS). The initial assessment around this area of support, including assessment for education & training support and respite breaks, is part of wider plans to include one-hundred percent assessment of all forms of support by groups within the next couple of years.

The assessment of a victim beyond an organisation to which they present for therapeutic support is itself controversial and many organisations like Wave and Relatives for Justice (RFJ) already employ professionally qualified clinical lead assessors who refer to counsellors within their respective organisations in line with best practice. These organisations are also registered with the appropriate regulatory authorities and annually inspected.

We argue that people coming forward and actually presenting is itself a huge decision and is based upon trust, confidence and on established relationships with members who choose to seek support and share the very worst events of their lives, oftentimes quite sensitive and confidential information too. That somehow prior to that person receiving support that they have to be assessed by VSS can add to their trauma and thus many people are refusing to be assessed beyond the particular organisation that they presented to and therefore not receiving any support. This creates greater problems down the line.

In some senses we say why duplicate the system? This isn't happening in any other sector of mental health. If a victim of domestic violence presented to Women's Aid and were told that prior to receiving any support that they would first have to be assessed by a semi-government agency to establish their validity we would be appalled yet that is what is happening here. And that is not to mention that some of the organisations appointed by OFMDFM and the VSS to conduct these assessments have their origins in the old RUC.

When first established VSS and OFMDFM awarded the Police Rehabilitation & Retraining Trust (PRRT) the contract to conduct assessments of victims and survivors without implementing an open and competitive tendering process. PRRT itself receives public funding from the DOJ and was set up by former members of the RUC as part of the Patten reforms to assist former officers and to provide support. And there were studious attempts to prevent that detail from emerging.

RFJ say that the awarding of this contract at the very least is inappropriate and potentially open to abuse concerning onward therapeutic referrals to other profit making organisations in which community based not for profit organisations lose out. This makes absolutely no sense when existing groups are already funded to provide services. And that is not to mention that community based organisations can be more

cost effective and oftentimes more person centered than commercial enterprises. However, the trajectory move away from community is alarming.

RFJ further add that it is totally unacceptable that organisations linked to participants to the conflict would be awarded contracts in this way without clear checks and balances and where the potential exists for a victim of the state to be assessed by a former state combatant. Just think of the traumatic impact of that this would have. It also discriminates against community-based initiatives and organisations.

Some of our members are saying that this is yet another gravy train for former security force personnel on the back of the retiring and rehiring. Others see this as medicalizing the conflict whilst avoiding dealing with the past in a real and meaningful way.

There are also anomalies in the system in that former members of the security forces do not necessarily have to be assessed by VSS in order to receive support as they simply go directly to PRRT, Futures and other similar groups funded from different sources of public money and not subject to the VSS in the same way groups like Wave and RFJ are.

In addition we have real fears that such lucrative contracts driven by profit also contain the potential to draw heavily on increasingly limited resources and already many of the direct schemes to support victims have been arbitrarily cut or run out of resources. So the level of expectation of support is now also becoming another major problem with promises to victims and survivors being reneged on by VSS. This too comes on the decision by OFMDFM to exclude the siblings and grandchildren of people killed that has already had a huge negative impact for hundreds of people.

There can be no doubt that the VSS has the potential to provide additional outreach to victims and that we want to work collaboratively with them and OFMDFM in the best interests of those we all want to support and who are seeking that support but the reality is they are not listening at all. Attempts to constructively dialogue on this issue at all levels are not genuine and obfuscation, spin and contradiction cloud every issue. This should not be a situation whereby it's our way or no way. If people decide to go to VSS that's good and creates greater choice and possibly reaches to those who prefer not to go to groups.

However, this should not remove the fundamental right of choice of those people affected by the conflict who want to go directly to the organisation that they want to support them without having firstly to go through a third party. In that context the VSS and OFMDFM are being seen as vetting victims, not trusting credible groups, controlling and managing the sector in a way that is largely detrimental to their stated intentions and this begs even further questions of the real intentions.

