

## Victims Forum Meeting 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022

### Event Overview and Meeting Minutes

#### **Event Overview**

The inaugural meeting of the Victims Forum, as envisaged under Supporting A Victims Journey and set out in Justice Plan 2021, was hosted by Minister McEntee on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022. The meeting, which was held on zoom, was attended by 68 individuals representing a variety of Non-Governmental Organisational and State bodies.

The Victims Forum was established by the Department of Justice to bring together State bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations and Social and Community Groups to work together to facilitate information exchange and examine avenues of improvement in relation to issues relating to victims of crime.

The Forum is co-chaired by Maeve Lewis, CEO of One in Four and Ben Ryan, Head of Criminal Justice Policy, Department of Justice. It is envisaged that the agenda for future forums will be driven by the participants but topics discussed should include subjects relevant to victims' rights advocates and the criminal justice system. It is intended the hold meetings of the Forum twice a year.

The terms of reference for the Forum provide for the establishment of sub-groups to further examine particular issues, which will then report back to the Forum in plenary session.

#### **Meeting Minutes**

##### **Opening Address**

###### **Minister McEntee**

The Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending. The Minister encouraged those present to take ownership of the forum and to drive the agenda and discussions at future meetings.

##### **Co-Chairs**

Ben Ryan, Head of Criminal Justice Policy, Department of Justice and Maeve Lewis CEO of One in Four, in their capacity as co-Chairs, presented on the Forum.

##### **Presentation by Deaglán Ó Briain. Department of Justice – Criminal Policy**

Deaglán Ó Briain from the Department of Justice's Criminal Policy Unit gave a presentation on 'The Review of Protections for Vulnerable Witnesses in the Investigation and Prosecution of Sexual Offences' (The O'Malley Review) and 'Supporting a Victims Journey: A Plan to Help Victims and Vulnerable Witnesses in Sexual Violence Cases'.

The following topics were discussed:

- Legislative changes regarding victims of crime in recent years;
- The background to The O'Malley Review;

- The recommendations of The O'Malley Review;
- The development of Supporting a Victims Journey as the Department's plan to implement the recommendations of The O'Malley Review;
- The monitoring of Supporting a Victims Journey;
- The progress so far of Supporting a Victims Journey.

### **Presentation by Antoinette Doran. Department of Justice – Transparency**

Antoinette Doran from the Department of Justice's Transparency Function gave a presentation of work that is being carried out to raise awareness of the rights that victims of crime have.

The following topics were discussed:

- The Victims of Crime Act 2017 and EU Directive (2012/29/EU);
- The background to The Victims Charter;
- The contents of the current Victims Charter;
- Actions within Supporting a Victims Journey on awareness raising measures;
- The Victims Charter website having been launched in 2021;
- The development of printed and digital assets to raise awareness of the rights set out in the Victims of Crime Act 2017;
- Plans for two new initiatives being rolled out by the Department, with the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, to:
  - reach marginalised and traditionally hard to reach groups with specific messaging relating to support that is available to them if they become a victim of a crime;
  - create messaging to promote the work of victim of crime support services at a local level in communities around Ireland;
- The Victims Charter Network of Champions;
- The establishment of a sub-group of The Victims Forum to focus on awareness raising issues and initiatives.

Deaglán Ó Briain from the Department of Justice's Criminal Policy Unit then gave an update in relation to the current state of play for the draft third national strategy on combating Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

### **Questions and Answers Session**

Among the issues raised during the Q and A session were a number of offers to participate on the sub-group looking at reaching marginalised communities and to share relevant work already undertaken in this regard. The Department of Justice committed to following up on these offers.

Ensuring that messaging reaches victims of human trafficking and migrant women who are suffering domestic violence was also referenced, as was the need to consider migrant women in prostitution in Ireland, including in relation to exit strategies developed in line with international best practice. In relation to this point, information on the development of

the new action plan on human trafficking was provided to the Forum and a commitment made to share a draft of this new action plan when it is further developed. A commitment was also made to share further information on the new NRM for which a general scheme is under preparation.

An issue of accessing legal aid solicitors was also raised where an applicant might not be able to demonstrate proof of earnings/social welfare receipts etc. if they have fled the family home and so do not have access to this information.

The importance of interaction and information sharing between the Victims Forum and the separate stakeholder forum on trafficking was also referenced as was the importance of gathering information on who the victims that are reaching out to services are so that their needs can be better served.

A further question related to plans to extend the right to legal advice from the Legal Aid Board in criminal proceedings to victims of crime, including victims of domestic violence, similar to the proposed extension to legal advice rights for victims of sexual offences.

A request was also made to provide some text to the sector which could be used to reassure victims of crime who are undocumented that it is safe for them to engage with authorities without risk their information will be shared with immigration authorities. A follow up email issued from Deaglan Ó Briain to the Forum providing this text.