

The Executive Office

Public Consultation on the Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategic Framework

**Response from the Commissioner Designate for
Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland**

October 2023

About the Office of the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime

The Commissioner for Victims of Crime's Office (CVOCO) is an independent body which represents the interests of victims of crime in Northern Ireland. The Commissioner Designate was appointed by the Minister of Justice in March 2022 to be an independent voice for victims of crime. The overarching purpose of the Commissioner Designate is to represent the needs and interests of all victims of crime and help drive systemic improvements across the criminal justice system.

This will include helping to identify any areas where victims are not consistently being provided with their entitlements set out within the Victim Charter and ensuring that their issues and experiences are raised in the public arena, with Government, with criminal justice organisations and organisations that support and represent victims, in order to bring forward effective change.

About this response

The issue of violence against women and girls has been noted as a significant global challenge. During 2018, it was estimated that 736 million women, almost one in three, had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2021). Whilst this finding is stark, it is also highly likely that it is a significant underestimation. Many women and girls will not report their experiences.

The Commissioner Designate welcomes the new Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategic Framework and commends the aspirational outcomes within the document.

The remarks within this response are based on our understanding of what female victims of violence have told us about their experience of crime and of engaging with the criminal justice system and feedback from a range of voluntary and community sector organisations working in this area. This response has been further informed by existing available literature.

The Commissioner Designate also welcomes the stakeholder engagement and Call for Views that took place to assist in the development of this strategic framework.

This response outlines a range of issues which the Commissioner Designate would encourage the department to address before the publication of this vitally important seven-year Strategic Framework.

General Comments

This is a welcomed and much needed strategic framework. It is ambitious in that it focuses on tackling the root causes of violence against women and girls and aims to work towards a cultural shift that will prevent violence, harm and abuse to develop and be sustained.

However, the Commissioner Designate notes that this is a strategic framework, not a strategy and therefore does not outline the detailed actions or costings involved in delivering the associated action plan for each government department. She believes it would be beneficial to understand how it will work in practice and would welcome sight of a more granular action plan. The Commissioner Designate also believes it will be an important step to see the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework and action plan embedded in all relevant government strategies and policies within the next Programme for Government.

It is also widely recognised that there is a need for the Northern Ireland Executive to be in place if we are to appropriately fund and prioritise this work which is indicative in that the last point in the foundational action plan is to seek the endorsement and active participation of political and civic leaders. The Commissioner Designate regrets that despite the commitment made by the First and Deputy First Minister when this work began, that we have now been without a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland for over a year. This work will only succeed if we have a clear commitment and buy in across the whole of government and that requires a functioning and supportive Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly willing to support and resource appropriately.

In addition, there will also be a need for newly identified funding to support much of this work. The Commissioner Designate has concerns that recent developments, including the introduction of new legislation to protect women and girls in the justice sector, has been done so without securing the additional resources needed to ensure successful implementation and without putting pressure on an already stretched system.

It is essential that we ensure that we build on solid foundations therefore we need to ensure the effective implementation of existing initiatives and evaluate how these are impacted by the development of any new pieces of work. In the words of one victim the Commissioner Designate has met with recently '*you need to look at the things that are there that aren't working and fix them first*'.

1. Vision - A changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them.

The Commissioner Designate welcomes the new Executive Office Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework and supports the view that the need to tackle violence against women and girls should be front and centre when government is developing new legislation and policies that may impact directly on their lives. This is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and put in place actions that will provide protection for women and girls who may find themselves in vulnerable situations at certain stages in their lives.

The detailed explanation of what exactly constitutes violence against women and girls is absolutely vital, as is the acknowledgement of the scale of abuse and violence against women and girls, ranging from everyday misogynistic attitudes and damaging social norms to harmful, unwanted behaviours through to serious criminal offences including rape and murder and the impact it has not only on victims but on society as a whole.

The Commissioner Designate also welcomes the commitment to partnership working on this issue and that partnership and collaboration is a thread which runs across and throughout all strategic areas of the Strategic Framework. She supports the overarching vision and acknowledgement that ending violence against women and girls requires everyone to play their part. She believes that the co-design process adopted in the development of this strategic framework serves as an exemplar of the type of engagement and partnership working that is required across government if we are to make this vision a reality.

The Commissioner Designate supports the ambitious and wide ranging vision outlined in the framework. This foundational step however will only make a difference to the lives of women and girls if followed by meaningful cross departmental action plans with the associated funding required. This requires the buy-in and commitment of our political leaders. The Commissioner Designate is concerned that the ongoing absence of a local Executive and Assembly is preventing progress on these issues and therefore failing to deliver on our government's commitment to prioritise work to tackle violence against women and girls.

2. Outcome 1 - Changed Attitudes, Behaviours and Social Norms. Everyone in society understands what violence against women and girls is, including its root causes, and play an active role in preventing it.

The Commissioner Designate believes that outcome 1 is admirable and supports the general theme it describes. She welcomes the recognition that gender-based violence, abuse and harm can range from everyday misogyny, sexual harassment in a public place or workspace, to more extreme physical violence and this in turn leads to significant health and socio-economic impacts on families, communities, wider society and prevents the achievement of wellbeing for all.

Recognising that the Strategic Framework highlights how everyone in society needs to play an active role to prevent violence against women and girls is an important element of this draft document. This is an aspirational goal and one which will involve a huge culture shift within society, however the Commissioner Designate believes it is a corner stones of any strategy or framework that hopes to succeed.

The Commissioner Designate understands that the priority areas within this outcome aims to integrate long term campaigns to change attitudes, behaviours and social norms including online with individual sectors promote positive attitudes and behaviours to prevent violence against women and girls at all ages.

She looks forward to additional information on how the Executive Office intends to work with other independent sectors, including with the Financial Conduct Authority and other relevant stakeholders not only to promote positive attitudes and behaviours but also to share best practice on how to protect women and girls who are in vulnerable positions.

The Commissioner Designate believes that many of the challenges faced by women and girls in the adversarial court arena such as use of rape myths, victim blaming, stereotypes etc. would be largely overcome if wider societal attitudes to these issues were different. She is hopeful that improvements in this societal piece will lead to a better experience for victims if they choose to report any such crimes in the years ahead.

3. Outcome 2 – Healthy, Respectful Relationships. Everyone in society is equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships.

Outcome 2 is also commendable and the Commissioner Designate agrees that healthy, respectful relationships are key to protecting women and girls while recognising that a culture shift of this magnitude is also aspirational and difficult to achieve.

In the recent Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey¹, which records the attitudes and opinions of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland, when asked “*if someone is sexually assaulted when they are drunk or on drugs, are they partially responsible for what happens?*”, 21% of males answered either agree or strongly agree. This is particularly concerning and highlights the need for a comprehensive roll out of relationship and sexuality education (RSE) throughout all education sectors in Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

The Commissioner Designate therefore welcomes outcome 2 – Healthy, Respectful Relationships which focuses in on Schools, Further, and Higher Education support children and young people to develop healthy, respectful relationships (outcome 2.2). She regrets that the absence of a local Minister has led to the intervention of the Secretary of State on this issue and is particularly concerned as to how public perception can be shaped by mis-information. It is essential that our political leaders are in place if we are to ensure that all children and young people have access to quality and consistent RSE to help them stay safe and develop healthy relationships, beliefs and attitudes.

She also welcomes outcome 2.4 of the Strategic Framework that identifies the need to support people and organisations who work with those at risk of using violence or those at higher risk of becoming victims of violence against women and girls. She believes that the need for effective perpetrator programmes is well evidenced and suggests that the Strategic Framework should strive to ‘*develop and implement effective adjudicated and non-adjudicated perpetrator programmes*’ rather than *scoping the need for non-adjudicated programmes* as currently cited.

The Commissioner Designate recently met with Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, a partnership organisation that is comprised of Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse and GB based housing associations. One of the initiatives they have brought forward with a range of London based housing associations is perpetrator housing.²

¹ [YLT Results | ARK - Access Research Knowledge](#)

² [Perpetrators & Housing Working Group - daha - Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance \(dahalliance.org.uk\)](#)

This initiative recognises the importance of providing perpetrators of domestic abuse housing to ensure their victims do not need to leave their homes, where they have an existing support network and feel safe.

Currently there are no similar schemes in Northern Ireland. If domestic abuse victims are forced to leave social housing due to fear of further abuse/violence, they will break their tenancy agreement (if in their name). Under the current Northern Ireland Housing Executive Housing Selection Scheme, someone who leaves their home as a result of domestic abuse can be allocated points for homelessness (70 points) and Primary Social Needs points (max. 40 points) for violence or the threat of violence, with a maximum of 110 points available.

However, an individual fleeing from domestic abuse/violence will not receive the 200 points granted for intimidation and therefore will be treated in the same manner as any other applicant. They will be assessed and placed on the waiting list pending allocation of a home with temporary accommodation will be made available in the interim.

The Commissioner Designate would like to see commitment to scoping all types of perpetrator schemes that could positively impact on the lives of women and girls who are victims of these types of crimes.

**4. Outcome 3 – Women and Girls are Safe and Feel Safe Everywhere.
Organisations and institutions across government and society embed the prevention of violence against women and girls in all that they do so that women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere.**

The Commissioner Designate acknowledges that this is a whole of society and whole of government approach and the Strategic Framework recognises the importance of measuring impact and accountability for delivering progress in all areas

When considering outcome 3.2, it is important to remember the past decade has witnessed a proliferation in cyber-crime such as technology assisted sexual abuse including the online sexual exploitation of children and young people. While the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to communicate online in order to stay connected with family and friends, allowing us to work remotely and ensuring our children were able to continue with education, this led to an unprecedented rise in screen time for children and young people increasing their exposure to online harm. The PSNI believe that the number of children subjected to technology based sexual abuse

could be much higher than reported.³ The change to legislation through the Justice Act (2016) Northern Ireland means that all people, including women and girls, have the ability to report the use of intimate image abuse as a crime and this is a positive step, however there is still much work to be done to ensure women and girls can be safe and feel safe online. 'Trolling' of high profile female public figures continues and with the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), there are potential harms that will be hard for government alone to address.

The Commissioner Designate would welcome information from the Executive Office on how they intend on integrating the Westminster Online Safety Bill into the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan to ensure women and girls are protected from online abuse and how they will work with Ofcom in relation to regulation and enforcement.

5. Outcome 4 – Quality Frontline Services, Protection, and Provision for Victims and Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls. Provision of high quality services for women and girls who are victims and survivors of violence against women and girls.

While the Strategic Framework states that '*We know that the full extent of the range of violence, abuse, and harm remains uncounted and under researched and what is reported is only the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, the data available only partly reflects the ongoing lived experience of women and girls throughout our communities.*' The Commissioner Designate welcomes the planned research to identify the prevalence of violence against women and girls who do not access services and/or face additional barriers to report. She would like to see more reference to the needs of these groups within the framework.

The Commissioner Designate is concerned that budget pressures within departments and the cessation of funding for key projects delivered within the community and voluntary sector is negatively impacting on the availability and quality of victim services. She recognises the significant challenges facing civil servants who must attempt to balance their budgets in the absence of ministerial direction and the ability to reallocate budgets through monitoring rounds. She does however believe that the removal or reduction in core funding to key support agencies is a retrograde step which could have lasting damage in a sector who government must rely upon if they are to succeed in their vision outlined in this framework.

³ [Reports of online child sexual abuse in NI rise by 80% - BBC News](#)

For many years now, the justice system in Northern Ireland has been the poor relation when it has come to the allocation of funding across government departments. Whilst the total Northern Ireland block grant has increased by 43% in the last 12 years to 2023-24, the Department of Justice has seen only a 3% growth in budget allocation compared to other departments - both Health and Education have seen their budget allocation grow by just under 70% and 45% respectively over this period. The Public Prosecution Service, who receive their funding through the Department of Finance has seen growth of 2.28% in the same period.

In previous years, the Department of Justice has benefitted from additional funding through the Monitoring Round process. However, as the budget settlement requires any future Barnett consequential for 2023-24 to repay the Treasury Reserve claim, it will be challenging to secure bids in future monitoring rounds.

The funding challenges facing Northern Ireland criminal justice system are deeply concerning and threaten to undermine public and victim confidence in the rule of law. At her appearance before the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in June 2023, the Commissioner Designate outlined how an increase in the complexity of caseloads (with increased digital evidence), court backlogs and a reduction in police numbers is impacting on the experience of victims of crime and eroding confidence in our justice system.

Doing more with less is not sustainable and will inevitably lead to cuts being made in some areas of victim care that will prevent the effective implementation of new initiatives and laws. Whilst additional funding is not the panacea, without it, the criminal justice system is seeing a deterioration in the treatment of some of our most vulnerable victims of crime and stalling much needed transformational reform.

The Commissioner Designate is aware of real term funding cuts made to organisations that provide vital support to women and girls who are victims of domestic and sexual abuse. The outcomes detailed in this Strategic Framework does not reflect the funding reality these organisations are facing. She wishes to caution the Executive Office against progressing with the development of new popular initiatives which, whilst commendable in their own right, can often divert existing funding and resources from already stretched frontline services. It is essential that any policy initiative or action plans are fully costed and budgeted for from the outset and that existing services continue to be fully supported to meet the needs of people availing of their support.

6. Outcome 5 – A Justice System which has the Confidence of Victims, Survivors and the Public in its ability to Address Violence Against Women and Girls. In the context of violence against women and girls, a justice system that considers and addresses the needs of people who come into contact with it, holds perpetrators to account, while challenging and supporting them to change, gives victims and survivors a voice and a place in the process, and has the confidence of the public.

The Commissioner Designate believes there needs to be an ambitious approach to how the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland addresses violence against women and girls, but this needs to be underpinned by adequate financial support. Without financial support, an ambitious plan will never come to fruition.

There is currently no joined up approach to monitor or manage the journey of any victim of crime through the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. Victims of crime are not routinely tracked and if there are any additional needs required to support a victim (including those in line with Section 75 duties), this can be difficult to manage, especially when a case moves between criminal justice agencies. She therefore welcomes the recognition of the need for improved consistent data collection which is one of her key priorities and has led to her call for the development of one case management system to connect each of the agencies common data sets.

The Commissioner Designate supports the need to address the barriers faced by those who choose not to report crime. Therefore a commitment within the Strategic Framework that works towards providing protections to women and girls from the dangers of third party disclosure would be welcomed. The disclosure of personal information can be a key barrier for women and girls reporting crimes to the police and factor in victim engagement, so this should be an area of focus.

The Commissioner Designate would also like to see the introduction of accessible and safe channels for victims who may be subject to immigration control to report crime, through of fire establishing firewalls to prevent the automatic sharing of victims' personal data with migration authorities. She is pleased to see this issue being progressed by the European Commission in the proposed changes to their Victims Directive and would like to see such improvements developed to enable the appropriate support of victims in Northern Ireland.

Many victims describe the criminal justice process as harrowing and distressing, with victims of domestic and sexual violence in particular describing the trial as '*another assault*' or '*worse than the incident itself*'.

The Gillen Review of the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland highlighted how these cases ‘*defy the normal trial process.*’⁴ It identified a range of weaknesses including delays, rape myths, social media, disclosure issues, consent, training, education and resources which informed a staggering 253 recommendations for improvements. Despite several significant improvements such as the introduction of victim legal advocates and remote evidence centres, work is on-going to implement all recommendations amidst a pace of change that is both slow and incremental.

The Commissioner Designate would also welcome a commitment within the Strategic Framework to tackle the challenges posed to women in contact with our Family Court system which could include addressing relevant outstanding issues raised in the Review Group’s Report on Family Justice⁵, which was published in 2017 and chaired by Sir John Gillen.

Domestic abuse is not solely a criminal justice issue and often arises a central issue in civil law proceedings regardless of whether or not there has been an official report to the police. The Family Courts is often cited by victims as an arena where an abuser can seek to exert further harm and control post-separation. It is essential therefore that our civil justice system should also consider and address the needs of those coming into contact with it.

The Commissioner believes there is merit in undertaking research into the experience of domestic abuse victims and children using our family courts which draws upon similar research⁶ undertaken by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner in England and Wales. She also believes that developments both within the UK and worldwide should be explored to identify best practice to inform local thinking on this issue. She was particularly struck by the preliminary outcomes being reported from the pilot of Pathfinder courts in England and Wales with her visit to the Dorset pilot of these courts highlighting significant benefits not only for court time and delay, but more significantly espousing a culture where the needs and opinions of the child are considered from the outset as opposed to a more adversarial approach to these issues.

The Commissioner Designate welcomes the fact that outcome 5.2 highlights the need to reduce delays in the justice system for cases involving violence against women and girls. In fact, the recent NISRA statistical bulletin on ‘Case Processing Time for Criminal Cases Dealt with at Courts in Northern Ireland April 2022 to March

⁴ [gillen-report-may-2019.pdf \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Family Justice Report September 2017.pdf \(judiciaryni.uk\)](#)

⁶ [DAC Family-court-report Exec-Summary 2023 Digital.pdf \(domesticabusecommissioner.uk\)](#)

2023⁷, states that in 2022-23, the average time taken to complete cases where the main offence was motoring was 164 days and in stark contrast, comparative figures for sexual offences was 757 days.

It is vitally important that all actions to tackle violence against women and girls within the justice system are informed by an understanding of how detrimental delays in accessing justice are for victims and the severe impacts these delays can have particularly on the mental health of victims.

The Commissioner welcomes the recognition within the Strategic Framework that *'some victims and survivors who have engaged with the justice system have found their interactions to be traumatic, causing additional harm to that inflicted by the perpetrator. The experience, including giving evidence in adversarial proceedings and traditional cross-examination, can be daunting and victims can find that there is a lack of access to support services before, during, and after proceedings.'*

This aligns strongly with the lived experience of female victims of all forms of violence who have spoken directly to the Commissioner during her term thus far who often report that they have been re-traumatised by going through the legal process and unfortunately when asked if they would advise others to go down the judicial route following such crimes say they would not.

While the Strategic Framework principles section does mention the need for a trauma informed approach, the Commissioner Designate would like to have seen this more strongly embedded, particularly in outcome 5 - The Justice System. She would like to see greater consideration given to the development of specialist courts which are tailored specifically to deal with domestic and sexual abuse. The levels of victim attrition and victim feedback on their criminal justice experience, in the Commissioner Designate's opinion, requires a radical approach if we are to turn the tide on these issues. The Gillen Review was completed in 2019 and despite some notable improvements, many of the issues identified continue to plague the system. The Commissioner Designate believes that the time has come for a radical rethink on how we approach this issue and would encourage The Executive Office to consider the options explored by the Law Commission in England and Wales in their recent consultation on Evidence in Sexual Offence Prosecutions.

⁷ [Prosecutions Convictions and Diversionary Disposals 2021 \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk)

7. Outcome 6 – All of Government and Society Working Better Together to End Violence Against Women and Girls. A whole system approach with collaboration and cooperation by default across government departments and with, within and between the community, voluntary and other sectors.

In order to ensure that the objectives of the Strategic Framework result in improved outcomes for female victims of violence, effective and robust collection of meaningful data is crucial. A key objective to be delivered within the Commissioner Designate's term is to improve the level and quality of data that is used to monitor the experience of victims of crime and the outcomes they receive.

The Commissioner Designate welcomes the recognition for the need for '*robustly evidence based and data informed policy development with measurable benefits/outcomes*' along with the acknowledgement that data is essential for understanding the problem of violence against women and girls, measuring our progress toward ending it, and informing funding, service design, and delivery decisions. She agrees that data capture and data-sharing mechanisms need to be comprehensive, joined up, gathering consistent and high-quality data to use across the system.

The Approach to Delivery section of the document states that '*In order to end violence against women and girls, it is essential that we work in a more strategic, collaborative, and joined up way, embedding good practice. This ethos helped to shape the process of co-design, which was foundational to the development of the Strategic Framework and will inform our approach to delivery and supporting arrangements.*'

Unfortunately, despite the existence of over ten separate case management systems across the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, there is no way to easily track the experience of female victims of violence reporting a crime or identify the points at which they withdraw support for a prosecution and the reasons why support is withdrawn. This raises the question as to how the Strategic Framework can successfully reduce barriers to female victims of violence participating in the justice system when it is not possible to identify what those specific barriers are in the first place.

The Commissioner therefore particularly welcomes the creation of a Knowledge & Network Hub within the Executive Office to provide a central resource for everyone. The Strategic Framework states that the Hub will include data and evaluation expertise, engagement with reference groups, international research and dissemination of good practice, communications and campaigns, and ensure

institutional memory and will also make appropriate links with other local violence prevention and reduction programmes and initiatives.

In order to ensure that the objectives of the Strategic Framework result in improved outcomes for female victims of violence, effective and robust collection of meaningful data is crucial. A key objective of the Commissioner Designate's term is to improve the level and quality of data that is used to monitor the experience of victims of crime and the outcomes they receive.

The Commissioner Designate would like to see the associated action plan emphasise much more strongly the interdepartmental nature of this framework and that the action plan should outline the level and extent of commitment from each government department and include timescales attributed to the relevant departments in order for monitoring to take place. For example, all departmental work plans could be impact assessed for how they will affect female victims of violence – this will enable departments to examine what role they play and what actions they are committed to in working towards the vision of the framework document.

8. The emphasis of this draft Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls is on prevention. "Prevention is about addressing the underlying causes of violence against women and girls, to stop it before it occurs." UN Women, 2012 17.

The Commissioner Designate believes that focusing on prevention within the strategic framework is to be welcomed. She agrees with the premise within the document that '*Effective prevention can both stop violence from occurring in the first place, such as education and campaigns; as well as interrupt the cycle of violence, like making public transport safer.*' However the lack of an indicative budget makes it difficult to assess how effective the prevention element of the framework will be. Additionally, while prevention is vital in ending violence against women and girls it is equally important to focus on the women and girls who have already been victims and who are facing huge delays in the justice system.

9. Draft Foundational Action Plan

The Commissioner Designate welcomes the inclusion of the foundational action plan and agrees with the overall direction of the document. She is particularly pleased with references to supporting research on victim attrition rates in serious sexual offences and domestic abuse cases, as part of implementation of Gillen Review and the draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, as well as the focus on engaging with those with lived experience.

However, she looks forward to seeing a more granular action plan with more detailed information on how exactly the key points of the plan are going to be achieved with clear timeframes and an indicative budget.

For example, the Commissioner was pleased to see the action plan highlighting the need to '*support research on victim attrition rates in serious sexual offences and domestic abuse cases.*' However without a detailed budgetary plan it is hard to access how vital research can be commissioned.

The Commissioner Designate would highlight the acknowledgement in the Strategic Framework that conservative estimates of the costs of domestic and sexual violence and abuse range between £730 million to £1 billion per year in this jurisdiction. She acknowledges the difficulties that uncertainty of budget allocation and the lack of a multi-year budget can have when trying to plan a strategy.

However, she notes that a Funding Plan was developed and published alongside the Department of Health's Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031. The plan outlines the estimated cost of developing, establishing and maintaining the services and interventions set out in the Strategy, with the estimated costs drawn from a wide range of evidence. The lack of a functioning Executive has limited the ability for the Executive Office to commit to a budget but it would be useful to understand how the Strategic Framework has been costed and what can be delivered within each year.

The Commissioner Designate recommends that an indicative funding plan is published alongside this Strategic Framework with estimated costs to deliver on the commitments within the document over the next seven years to understand the extent and range of resources required. In the absence of understanding of cost, we risk government committing to a strategy that it is either unwilling or unable to fund which will ultimately lead to either lack of delivery or poor delivery against our stated outcomes.

10. The need for a functioning government and Ministers in place

The current absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive restricts the ability of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to make the necessary government commitments to address this whole society problem.

This seven-year Strategic Framework needs to make bold commitments for action which reflect the feedback from victims, their representatives and research on what works. The Commissioner Designate regularly meets with individual victims and community and sector representative about the myriad of struggles faced by females

victims such as, the inability to access justice in a timely fashion, the re-traumatising nature of the judicial process, the lack of support for female victims, to name but a few. She believes that having an Executive in place would help ensure that this Strategic Framework could more strongly reflect the bold and decisive action that needs to be taken if we are to tackle these issues in a meaningful way.

During the previous collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service warned of “stagnation and decay” of public services. Undoubtedly, the current lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly will continue to have consequences for necessary public service reforms in the criminal justice system and beyond that will directly impact the implementation of the Strategic Framework.

For example, existing problems with court backlogs will have an impact on how effectively the Executive Office is able to deliver on stated objectives within the Strategic Framework including ‘*Reducing delays in the justice system for cases involving violence against women and girls.*’ (outcome 5.2). Decisions around how the budget is allocated and what areas are prioritised will be made by individual departments with no Ministerial direction.

Furthermore, the lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly results in a lack of accountability and government oversight, which is required to deliver against this Strategic Framework. Assembly Committees are unable to meet to scrutinise the work of the departments or ask questions about the implementation of this Strategic Framework.

The Commissioner Designate remains hopeful that a way forward can be agreed to ensure a return of our Legislature and encourages all government departments and strategy partners to continue developing policies and work plans that can be progressed in a timely manner once it has been restored.

If you would like to discuss any of these points in further detail, please contact the office via:

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