



## Advocacy Services Research Project

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**COMMISSION** *for*  
**VICTIMS** *and*  
**SURVIVORS**

# ADVOCACY SERVICES RESEARCH PROJECT

## A SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH PROJECT UNDERTAKEN ON BEHALF OF THE COMMISSION FOR VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

### BACKGROUND

Civil society initiatives to address the past date back to shortly after the 1998 Agreement, but at a government level, proposals to deal with conflict legacy issues were largely set in motion with the 2008 establishment of the Consultative Group to Deal with the Past by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. The Stormont House Agreement (SHA) of December 2014, which provided for four linked mechanisms to deal with the past, included a commitment that victims would be given access to advocate-counsellor assistance. This PEACE IV funded research study examines the effectiveness of advocacy services for victims, survivors and their families in the areas of historical investigation and information recovery in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.

More broadly, the research aims to understand the role of advocacy around victim issues in societies emerging from conflict, and specifically to assess the significance of the Northern Ireland approach within the wider field of transitional justice and peacebuilding. Thus, the research focuses both locally on improving current approaches, and globally, through academic and practitioner networks and publication, to contribute to comparative lesson-learning and wider dissemination of findings.

### RESEARCH AIMS

1. To study and examine the effectiveness of advocacy services for victims and survivors and their families in the areas of historical investigation and information recovery in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.
2. To provide an understanding of current advocacy service provision and service user experience of victims and survivors and their families accessing support in the historical investigations and information recovery sector.
3. To explore international best practice and consider how this can inform the development of services in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.
4. To understand the role of advocacy around victims issues in societies emerging from conflict.

### THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The Ulster University research team wishes to acknowledge the contribution and participation of organisations and stakeholders currently engaged in providing advocacy to victims and survivors. The researchers appreciate the sensitivities associated with conducting research on what is an emotive topic, and are cognisant and

respectful of these differing views, including the differing interpretations of victimhood and diverging opinions on the implementation of legacy mechanisms moving forwards. The research:

- Provides a clear understanding of current advocacy service provision and the service user experience of victims and survivors and their families accessing support in the historical investigations and information recovery sector
- Identifies international best practice and considers how it can inform the development of services

The report draws from more than 50 interviews, encompassing exploratory discussions, semi-structured interviews and case studies. Interviewees include service providers (e.g. advocacy case workers and managers), service users, health and wellbeing caseworkers and managers. The report also presents three case studies designed to highlight in more detail the advocacy process. An online workshop with ten international experts in the field of transitional justice and truth recovery was also held to consider some of the emerging research findings for an international audience.



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Special EU Programmes Body  
Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE  
Special EU Skemes Boadie

## Literature Review

Initial sections of the literature review focus on different aspects of **advocacy**: how advocacy is defined and used outside a victim context in the non-academic literature; how advocacy is conceptualised within the transitional justice academic literature and in relation to the victims of war and civil conflict globally; and how advocacy focuses upon the issues impacting victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Subsequently the review moves on to address services developed locally to address the needs of victims' and survivors, and victims' and survivors experiences engaging with legacy processes in Northern Ireland.

## Summary of the advocacy literature

While advocacy has become an increasingly used term in recent years, it lacks a single accepted definition. It is used in a variety of contexts (predominantly in relation to mental health and disability). Within the transitional justice literature, advocacy tends to be used as short-hand for issue-based lobbying but specifically for victims, mainly the focus of the work of large international NGOs.



The focus of advocacy networks within a transitional justice context tends to be upon engaging with (or representing) the victims of violence to secure prosecutions, to uncover the truth and promote institutional reform in the aftermath of armed conflict. However, while transitional justice approaches to such themes are often promoted as victim-led, the top-down nature of macro-political institutions make the reality somewhat more complex. Genuine victim participation has been limited globally in transitional justice. To date in Northern Ireland there is only limited written information on the role of advocacy support for victims in already completed historical investigations, and this work is restricted to the support provided by statutory bodies.

### THE LIMITED INFORMATION ON GOOD PRACTICE SUGGESTS THE FOLLOWING APPROACH:



Northern Ireland's network of NGOs, community groups and victim support organisations provide the bulk of this support. This reservoir of expertise is not well documented but is at the time considered to be extensive.

## Key Findings

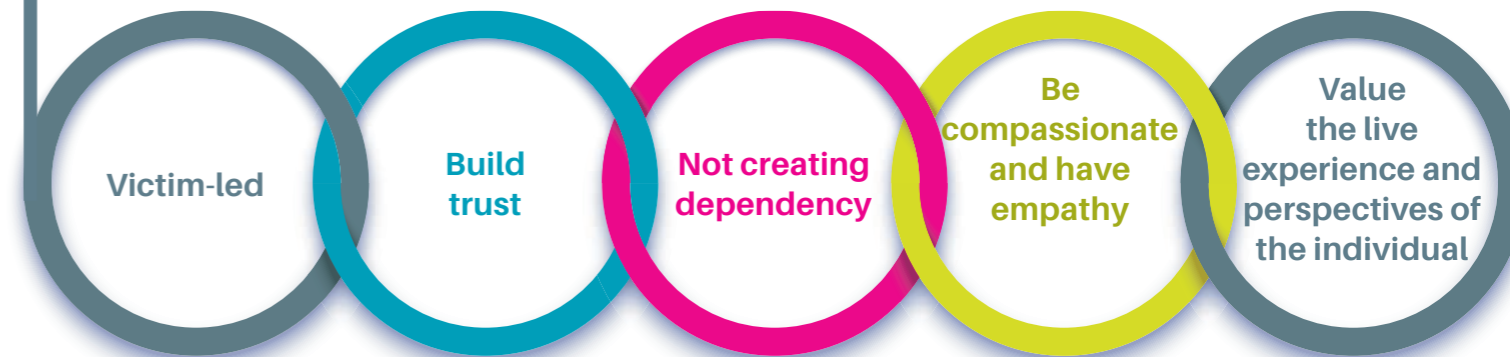
The key findings relate to the following core areas:

## Definitions of advocacy

Participants provided definitions of advocacy which included 'giving a voice', 'providing support' and 'helping people find out the truth' when trying to qualify the nature of advocacy work. The ultimate goal is described as achieving 'self-advocacy' and 'equip people to speak for themselves'.

## Principles of advocacy

Five core principles underpin advocacy service provision - it should be:



## Methods of advocacy and what the process typically entails

Advocacy services tend to be sought out by victims and survivors and the key method of securing advocacy services is through self-referral. The first step is face-to-face engagement with victims and survivors, with the sole aim of establishing contact to build up a relationship of trust and confidence - a key element in effectively assessing the best approach to respond to individual needs. Advocacy service provision involves substantive research as well as providing emotional and practical support.

## Identifying good practice

The report illustrates areas of good practice in advocacy service provision, including:



## Support offered to victims, survivors and their families

Advocacy service provision offers substantive support to victims, survivors and their families. Support is wide-ranging, from information retrieval, supporting individual cases through the judicial process, to addressing issues of social isolation experienced by some victims and survivors.

## Challenges with policy and practice

Service users and service providers agree that the main challenge is delay and the slow nature of legacy investigation and information recovery. The report highlights the need for the systemic nature of delays to be acknowledged and for agencies to be held to account. The report also concludes that there is little confidence in those agencies responsible for providing access to information. The case studies offer important insight into the traumatic and practical impacts on victims and survivors of systemic delays.

# Improving advocacy services and structure

Areas for improvement identified by advocacy service providers and health and wellbeing caseworkers include:

- Better access to, and exchange of, information between organisations
- Proactive engagement by statutory agencies engaged in historical investigation and information recovery

# Views on the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) and legacy mechanisms

The potential implementation of the SHA drew diverging views from the advocacy support managers and advocacy support workers, with most groups broadly supportive; others having serious concerns with the content and intent of the proposed legislation.

## Recommendations

The report concludes with four key recommendations:

1

Advocacy services work should be valued, supported and expertise shared

- Advocacy work should be expanded and appropriately resourced
- Embed and enhance advocacy work through lesson-sharing, bespoke training and peer-support
- Develop an advocacy toolkit built on, and with, the funded groups

2

Flexibility and responsiveness should be incorporated into future benchmarking and monitoring of funded advocacy services

3

Further provision for dealing with the past should draw on and learn from the scale, diversity and experience of advocacy practice to date

4

To improve confidence of both advocacy groups and victims in existing and future processes, formal recognition and response to systemic delays and cross-jurisdictional issues is essential.