

Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill

Open Secret/ In Care Survivors Service Scotland

Introduction

The In Care Survivor Service Scotland (ICSSS) supported a number of clients through the previous Time to be Heard forum. Clients were all told about ICSSS in the publicity materials sent to them and they were able to choose whether to access support from the service. Our learning from the impact on the survivors we worked with has informed our response to this call for evidence.

The functions and powers of the NCF (as set out in the Bill)

- 1. to receive and listen, in private and in confidence, to the experiences of adults who were placed in institutional care as children, including experiences of abuse, and to offer acknowledgement of those experiences;**

This will be a very therapeutic process for many survivors as many have expressed that they would like to have some sense of closure and acknowledgement of what they experienced in childhood. However it should be recognised that to talk about abuse in particular is very difficult even as part of a counselling process and to talk to the forum may be intimidating. For many survivors they are left with a feeling of shame, particularly where the abuse was sexual and they could be left with feelings that are difficult to cope with. This can be addressed with the appropriate support as explored later in this document.

- 2. to contribute to the prevention of the abuse of children placed in institutional care in the future by making proposals to inform policy and practice, based on experiences recounted in hearings of the NCF;**

This is an aspect that survivors say is very important to them. The ICSSS service user group had this as one of their main action points. We feel that this is a very important role of the forum and testimonies can be very powerful informing practice or providing training.

- 3. to make a contribution to the permanent record of life in care, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of an important part of Scotland's history;**

Again this aspect is very important to survivors. They express to us as workers that it is very important to increase public knowledge about the issues they have faced particularly in breaking down the stigma that many face. There should be clarity about what records are kept, by whom and how they are stored as this is very important to survivors.

4. to signpost services to participants and their families which can offer support, advocacy, advice and information.

This will be covered in more detail under Support for Participants but this is perhaps the most important aspect of the process due to the potential of risk to survivors with regard to their ongoing wellbeing. This should be more than signposting and should be an integral part of the process.

Eligibility to participate

ICSSS work with survivors who have been placed in a number of care settings including foster and kinship care and we feel that it is important that those survivors also have the opportunity to participate.

Confidentiality

Safeguarding of confidentiality will be an important aspect of the forum. Many survivors of abuse have issues with trust and the confidentiality aspect, including exclusions should be made explicit when materials giving information on the forum are distributed.

It is important that any children are protected from harm and therefore confidentiality should be breached where there is the risk of current abuse. This should be made clear to participants from the outset as we would inform our clients in therapy. Another area where confidentiality should be breached is if it becomes apparent that a participant of the forum is at risk of harming themselves or others.

Status of the NCF – housed as a sub-committee of the Mental Welfare Commission – and its independence

The independence of this body should be made explicit to participants due to issues of trust highlighted above. It should be made clear that there is no presumption of mental health issues as not all participants will have experienced mental health problems and they may feel that there is a presumption that they have. However we feel that this is a sensible option.

Support for participants before, during and after their input

We feel that this is a crucial part of the forum operation. We found through Time to be Heard that clients who had been through the process found that while it was something they really felt compelled to be part of that it brought up feelings that were hard to cope with. Many survivors of abuse suffer from severe anxiety and find formal processes very difficult to engage with.

We feel that the Confidential Forum should go further than Time to be Heard. At that time the packs highlighted the services of ICSSS and the onus was on the participant to make contact. A more formalised process of support on offer

would be less intimidating for participants than having to also contact an organisation they were unaware of. Participants could be asked at first point of contact if they require additional support. At that point an ICSSS worker could contact them to explore what support may be necessary. They would also talk through what will happen at the forum. When a therapeutic relationship is established the worker would then attend the forum with them to offer support to go through the process. For those participants who have not accessed the support previously a worker could be available on the day to provide support if necessary. At the forum participants could be asked by the team if they feel they require ongoing support and an ICSSS worker could then make contact. The lesson from TTBH was that people thought they didn't need support and it wasn't until afterwards, sometimes weeks afterwards, that the effects of it came to light and they felt traumatised. At all stages the work would be evaluated.

We feel that ICSSS are the best placed organisation to offer this support. Staff are professionally trained and qualified as therapists or advocates and all have substantial experience of working with survivors of abuse in care. They receive regular supervision and continuous professional development training. They are also skilled at offering counselling and advocacy from the same worker. In our focus groups this was an area identified as very important as survivors did not want to engage with different workers. There are no other services experienced in this specialist work. We receive a large number of referrals from psychologists and psychiatrists who recognise the specialisation that ICSSS can provide.

Advocacy

There was some discussion at the Health and Sport Committee on 26th March about employing an independent advocacy service to support participants. This is something that many of our clients have said that they do not want. They have given us many examples of accessing advocacy services that do not understand their specific needs have increased levels of anxiety and not met their needs.

“The advocacy service is crucial for many reasons – firstly the fact that I can have access to a counsellor to help me do the advocacy work means there is **already a full understanding of my mental health issues and needs**. Secondly, the counselling and advocacy works together so I only have one worker, instead of being passed around. You must remember that being passed around is a feeling I was used to in care.”

“Not having to open up to another person is a good thing – you transfer your knowledge of me from counselling into advocacy so you minimise my trauma by not having to repeat my experiences.”

ICSSS Focus Groups

For advocacy out with Scotland, ICSSS have been experienced in delivering this. One volunteer is arranging access to records for a home in Selkirk where the person now lives in Spain and there are many other examples.

Support for Forum Staff

Many ICSSS staff are also professionally qualified supervisors and they would be well placed to provide professional debriefing and support.

Any other aspects of the NCF

Budget

There was discussion at the Health and Sport Committee on 26th March that participants should be given the opportunity to have funding to pay for their own choice of support e.g. to pay a psychologist or psychiatrist. This would be a very high cost option and very difficult to monitor. On a unit cost basis ICSSS offer a very low cost service with very specialist skills. Work is likely to be long term so the associated costs for support would be likely to exceed the amounts identified in the budget allocation. On a basis of £45 per hour for an average of 24 sessions for 100 participants this cost would be £108,000. This is half of the cost of the full ICSSS service.

ICSSS have had our budgets cut for this three year funding period due to less funding being available therefore there would be a cost implication of ICSSS providing support. However costs would be within the budget levels.

Why ICSSS for Support

“Too many of us have been stigmatised for our behaviour brought about by trauma symptoms, making it difficult to receive help in Health and Statutory services. ICSSS build relationships based on their knowledge of trauma.”

“Coming into the organisation I feel scared and nervous but I at least have the reassurance that the workers will know where I am coming from. This is not the case in the NHS or generic services.”

“It is not appropriate to signpost us to other agencies. Here’s an example. You shut down ICSSS and the Helpline and signpost me to Samaritans or Breathing Space. I used them before I came to ICSSS. I don’t want to slag off other organisations who do great work, but to demonstrate the point, these help lines were not helpful to me for years because they are generic. ICSSS is specialised and it works.”

ICSSS Focus Groups

In conclusion ICSSS feel that the plans for the confidential forum processes have been well thought out and will be of benefit to survivors. However we feel that it is crucial that the appropriate support is provided.

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