

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER

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Dear Colleague,

VICTIMS' PAYMENTS SCHEME

The development of a payments scheme for victims and survivors who have lived with severe and permanent disablement as a result of a Troubles-related incident is both positive and long overdue.

I have always been of the view that victims and survivors should not have to endure any further unnecessary delay, which is why I volunteered that my Department could be designated to deliver the new Victims' Payments Scheme (also known as the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme).

The formal designation of the Department of Justice on 24 August 2020 meant that meaningful work could begin within the Department to put in place the necessary administrative preparations for establishment of the Victims' Payments Board. £2.5m funding has been made available by the Northern Ireland Executive this financial year to allow for development work for the new scheme to be progressed.

It is the intention that the scheme will open for applications in early March next year. However, a number of important operational steps - not all of them within my Department's direct control - need to be advanced to actually implement the scheme. That includes developing an IT system, establishing a medical assessment process and appointing members to the Victims' Payments Board.

A dedicated project team has been established to advance delivery of the new scheme. Work is underway on the development of the IT system and good progress is also being made to secure accommodation for the Project Team and staff who will support the Victims' Payments Board to deliver the new scheme.

The Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) is responsible for the appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board. Job descriptions for Board members have been finalised and are now with NIJAC. We aim to have Board members appointed by early 2021. Those Board members will be responsible for approving application forms and establishing procedures for administering the scheme.

It is not possible to be specific about when payments to victims and survivors might commence; that will ultimately be a matter for the Victims' Payments Board when established. However, it will also depend on how quickly evidence can be gathered to allow applications to be assessed, which is why contact has been initiated with the Public Record Office of NI, the PSNI and others about how data can be accessed to support the Board in making decisions about applications.

I am very mindful of the understandable expectations of everyone who needs this important financial support and who have campaigned in a courageous and dignified way to get it. It is important that we get this right and balance expediency with ensuring due diligence. Given how often victims and survivors have been let down over the years, I will not over-promise and under-deliver on such an important scheme.

One critical issue that is outstanding, however, is the need to secure longer-term funding for the scheme. I am strongly of the view that the UK Government has an obligation to make the necessary funding available and I am committed to working with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HM Treasury and Executive colleagues to ensure that it is put in place. I recently met with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Minister of Finance to discuss this issue and we agreed to seek an early joint

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meeting with the Secretary of State. I have also personally raised the urgency of this directly with the Secretary of State in a recent meeting.

But alongside this, and in accordance with normal government budgeting arrangements, I understand that a request will be made by The Executive Office for the necessary funding with the Department of Finance, as the funding falls due, in line with the Regulations that underpin the new scheme.

That we have finally got to this point is extremely welcome - but I understand why many are concerned about any potential further delay. I share those frustrations and want to reassure those who are waiting on the delivery of this scheme that we are doing everything in our power to move things forward.

I intend to keep you updated on progress and if we encounter any issues that might delay implementation I will ensure that you are made aware at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime, updates on how implementation of the scheme is progressing will be published here: www.justice-ni.gov.uk/victims-payment-scheme

I trust this update is helpful. If you need support at this time, a number of organisations will be able to help you. The Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) provides health and wellbeing support and services through a network of community providers. You can contact one of the community organisations directly using the following link www.victimsservice.org/find-support-in-your-area/ or by telephone calling **028 90 279100** or email enquiries@vssni.org

Yours sincerely,



NAOMI LONG MLA
Minister of Justice