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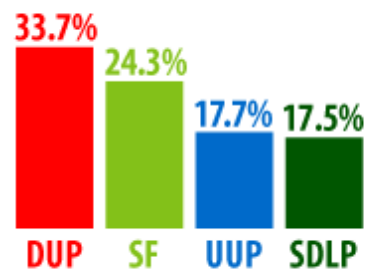
HAMILTON URGES ASSISTANCE FOR VICTIMS GROUPS

DUP MLA for Strangford and Finance & Personnel Committee member Simon Hamilton has expressed concerns that the essential work of some victims groups may be in jeopardy because of a "gap" in European Peace Programme funding. Speaking after a briefing to the Finance & Personnel Committee at Stormont by NICVA and DFP officials, Simon Hamilton said,

"In the past, because of a combination of issues including a lack of awareness and capacity problems, groups supporting the victims of violence did not receive their fair share of EU Peace Programme funding. This was a source of some annoyance given the supposed aim of the funding. I welcome the enhanced focus upon the needs of victims and survivors in the Peace III programme via the €50 million allocation to this important issue. It is unfortunate that it has taken until now for victims to be given anything approaching the prominence they deserve in European funding programmes. The new focus is matched by the new Executive's concentration on victims and survivors illustrated by the creation of a dedicated Commission and increased resources for the sector delivered by DFP Minister in the budget.

It is therefore, somewhat concerning that because of difficulties associated with the timing of the ending of the Peace II Programme and the commencement of Peace III, victims groups could face uncertainty about the continuity of their funding. NICVA's evidence suggested that some victims groups have already laid off staff because of

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this developing problem. Whilst a concentration of minds by implementation bodies responsible for victims funds such as the Community Relations Council to get their Programmes up and running as soon as possible and then subsequently process applications quickly will ensure there is no funding problem, failure to do this will result in a resources gap, at a time when, with the creation of a Victims Commission and the work of the Eames/Bradley group, victims issues are to the fore.

I would encourage the Executive to keep a keen eye on this matter and should a funding gap develop, I would suggest that some of the extra money allocated to victims and survivors in the budget could be usefully utilised to ensure the gap is bridged. A relatively small amount of resources could be employed so that the vital work of victims groups continues unhindered. I would also encourage victims groups to avail of the €50 million fund. It is imperative that victims get the support and resources they deserve."

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