



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Departmental Briefing on Proposals for
an Offender Levy and Victims of Crime
Fund**

3 June 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Victims of Crime Fund**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Lord Morrow (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jeffrey Donaldson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Conall McDevitt
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr John O'Dowd

Witnesses:

Mr Gareth Johnston) Department of Justice
Ms Janice Smiley)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow):

We welcome Gareth Johnston, head of justice strategy division in the Department of Justice, and Janice Smiley, head of the Department's criminal policy unit. Mr Johnston, this is not your first, or even second or third meeting, with us, and you will be with us a lot in future. You are both very welcome. I remind you that this session is being covered by Hansard.

Mr Gareth Johnston (Department of Justice):

Since I have attended the Committee a number of times, I have asked Janice if she would outline

to the Committee the proposals for the offender levy. We had hoped to be joined by Janice's colleague, Lorraine Ferguson, whose name appeared on the original agenda, but Lorraine's mother is gravely ill and Lorraine is unable to attend.

Ms Janice Smiley (Department of Justice):

As I said to the Committee at our last meeting, I am head of the criminal policy unit and have been in the post for five years. I have previously worked in prisons and in the Police Authority.

The consultation on the proposals for the offender levy and the associated victims of crime fund concluded last Thursday. Let me say a bit about the background to the proposal, outline some of its key elements and give a flavour of the consultation responses, which we are currently analysing. We will provide those to the Committee in written form in the coming weeks.

The concept of offenders making a financial contribution to the delivery of services to victims and witnesses first emerged in the five-year victims' strategy, 'Bridging the Gap', which was published in 2007. It sought to identify ways in which further improvements could be made to victims' services. A recurring theme in its development was the public perception that the balance of the criminal justice system was tipped in favour of the rights of defendants rather than the needs of the victims. There is a strongly held view that offenders bear no direct responsibility for the harm that their actions cause to victims and the community as a whole, and that the full burden of the cost of services to help victims to cope with their experience falls solely on the Government and the taxpayer.

We subsequently commissioned some desktop research from the Centre for Criminal Justice Economics and Psychology at the University of York. That research looked at ways in which other jurisdictions had sought to establish a financial contribution to victims' services from a levy on offenders. That report, which was published alongside the consultation paper in March, identified that offender levies operate in a large number of countries worldwide: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Sweden and, closer to home, Belgium and England and Wales.

The report examined the different practices and experiences in those jurisdictions and identified key learning points, which we might use in the development of a potential model for Northern Ireland. It identified that the most effective models were those that placed the levy on a

statutory footing, making it mandatory to impose it; recognised the need to take account of offender means but took a measured approach to waiving the levy; applied the levy proportionately and consistently across disposals, taking account of their seriousness; and which looked at a range of different collection mechanisms, including deductions from earnings for those in custody.

In scoping the proposal on which we consulted, we were able to draw on that research material. We spoke to officials in England and Wales, the only UK jurisdiction that currently operates a surcharge mechanism, about their experience. We conducted pre-policy consultation with our criminal justice partner agencies in Northern Ireland. That led to the development of the model on which we have now consulted.

We have proposed that a monetary sum — the offender levy — be imposed on adult offenders across a broad range of disposals, increasing in value according to the severity of the disposal. Those would range from a small levy of around £5 on a fixed penalty disposal to around £15 for court fines, with higher levy rates for community and suspended custodial sentences up to a possible maximum of £30 for immediate custodial sentences.

Although it would be mandatory to impose levies in cases that come before the courts, the judiciary would have some discretion to consider offenders' means and to take account of any other financial penalty that may be imposed at the same time. Payment would be acquired within 28 days. Where there is an existing ability to pay a monetary order by instalment, it would also apply to the levy amount. In non-court disposals, such as fixed penalties, the levy would be a constituent part of the penalty notice as an alternative to prosecution. At a modest value of £5, it is not expected to impact on offenders' ability to pay.

Of course, an offender retains his or right to ask to be tried for any offence. When an offender is convicted at court, the appropriate levy would be imposed alongside the sentence that is given. Payments that are made by offenders in receipt of a levy would be routed to the Courts and Tribunals Service, as they currently are for all other monetary orders. It would allocate the funding as it is received, giving priority to sums that are owed directly to victims via compensation in the first instance and, thereafter, to the levy.

The levy would generally be collected in the same way as fixed penalties or any court fine

would be with one exception: we propose introducing a variation in the way that levies are collected when imposed on immediate custodial sentences. In such cases, prisoners have the potential to earn between £6 and £20 a week through a combination of work and other constructive regime activity that prepares them for eventual release. We propose to take a power that would enable the Prison Service to deduct the value of the levy through small weekly deductions from their earnings. We anticipate that the maximum deduction would be around £1 a week. That is primarily to ensure that there is no disincentive to prisoners to work harder and to engage in constructive activity as they progress to receive the privileges of the next regime level and to avoid the imposition of the levy having a knock-on impact on families who have limited means or on prisoners' ability to save towards their resettlement.

We also seek to minimise any potential impact on fine default as a consequence of implementing the levy. Our projection is that around 93% of levies that are imposed in any given year will be on disposals that already have an existing monetary element, whether that is a court fine, a compensation award or a non-court-based penalty disposal as an alternative to prosecution. When individuals default on payment of the relatively modest levy sum, they would, inevitably, have defaulted on their other monetary order, which would already trigger enforcement action. Therefore, in those circumstances, the levy itself is unlikely to place any significant additional burden on enforcement procedures.

Of course, the imposition of the levy on the 7% of disposals with no other financial element could, potentially, lead to additional defaults. We hope that the relatively modest sums that are involved, together with our proposal to deduct from prisoners' earnings, should minimise that potential. We will also consider carefully the implementation timetable and seek to align it with planned fine default reforms that aim to further improve early payment rates and to provide alternative measures, such as supervised activity orders.

We propose that revenue from the levy will be ring-fenced and directed to a victims of crime fund. We project that, if the levy is in full operation across all planned disposals, it could provide up to £500,000 per year to the fund. That would be used to meet the needs of victims and witnesses during their engagement with the criminal justice system, as well as to support local initiatives by groups that work with victims in the community. We propose to make funding available for community initiatives through existing grant aid arrangements in local community safety partnerships. That could, for example, provide additional training for staff in community

groups that offer emotional support to victims and help them to provide better access to their services. Similarly, it could assist local groups to build a longer-term funding strategy.

We have opted to utilise existing financial management structures rather than develop bespoke arrangements for the fund, which would incur significant additional administrative costs in their development and maintenance. The proposed arrangements would be transparent, clearly setting out the level of funding each year and the initiatives to which the funding would be directed.

The necessary changes to the IT systems would incur one-off capital costs of around £100,000, which, we anticipate, will be met by reprioritising our existing baseline. We anticipate that, with careful planning, much of the administration costs can be absorbed within existing procedures. As already outlined, around 93% of applicable disposals have an existing financial penalty that requires to be administered and, effectively, the levy will be piggybacking on those arrangements. It is also proposed to phase in the implementation of the offender levy in line with operational capacities or partner agencies and to complement other planned reforms and fine default. Against those costs, we have modelled that the levy could generate up to £500,000, which will be directed exclusively to victims and witnesses' services.

That was the model that we consulted on. We received 11 consultation responses from external organisations that were supportive of the principle and broadly supportive of the proposals. The majority of respondents considered that the levy should apply to adult offenders only and thought that the proposed levy rates were appropriate, although three respondents advocated a higher rate for custodial sentences, particularly when violent offences had occurred.

There was general support for deducting the levy from prisoner earnings. However, there was concern that families might be put under pressure to increase their financial support for prisoners and that there was the potential for a negative impact on vulnerable prisoners who are on the lowest earning rate. For that reason, we proposed the modest deduction from prisoner earnings of £1 a week, which would be manageable at all the regime levels that currently operate. At the moment, there are only around 20 prisoners on the lowest regime level, and they earn £6 a week. We will be working with the Prison Service to help to ensure that there is not a disproportionate impact on that group of prisoners.

There were mixed views about the application of the levy to fixed penalties. A couple of

respondents expressed their opposition to fixed penalties on principle, irrespective of the levy. Some respondents believed that attaching the levy to traffic offences was inappropriate, as they believed them to be essentially victimless crimes. Others believed that the levy should be attached to both minor and more serious road traffic offences. We are proposing that the levy be limited to endorsable road traffic offences that represent more serious offending. Those would include excessive speeding and driving while using a mobile phone, which are dangerous practices that have a strong causal link to traffic accidents and fatalities on our roads.

We do not propose to attach the levy to minor and non-endorsable offences such as unlawful parking or driving just a few miles over the speed limit. The PSNI is already intending to offer first-time offenders a speed awareness course instead of a fixed penalty for such offences. There was widespread support from respondents for directing the use of the fund exclusively to delivering victims and witnesses' services.

In summary, the proposal is based on best practice and national and international experience of operating levy mechanisms. It seeks to target disposals across the board at a level that is proportionate to the seriousness of the offence committed, and it seeks to ensure that offenders make a tangible contribution to meeting the cost of services that address the harm caused to victims of crime.

The Chairperson:

Mr Lavery from the Courts and Tribunals Service attended the Committee a couple of weeks ago, and I think he said that there were 37,000 unpaid fines. What impact would surcharging those 37,000 people between £5 and £30 have on the likelihood of their paying?

Ms Smiley:

As David Lavery indicated, some people will pay within the 28-day limit, some will pay whenever an initial reminder action is taken and others will pay when further enforcement action is taken. A small number of people will not respond whatever action is taken, which is why they go into custody for fine default. Those numbers are improving, and there are planned fine default reforms. In some of the reminder systems, there has been an improvement in the rate of fine default because people are making payments earlier. I do not deny that some people will seek not to pay any monetary award that is made by a court or other agency. The levy does not have any significant effect by adding to that burden; it exists in the knowledge that some people will not meet their obligations.

The Chairperson:

The small number that you talk about is 37,000.

Mr Johnston:

That probably refers to the number of outstanding warrants for fine defaults that have built up over a number of years. We have introduced a new fine reminder scheme for fine default, which has resulted in a 30% reduction in the number of warrants that are being issued. We are also exploring, for the future, deduction of fines from benefits and from earnings, so that an order can be made to deduct money weekly. That would help defaulters pay and avoid default. We are exploring community options so that we would not have to send people to prison for fine default. All those options go alongside the broader work on fine default. As Janice said, we are not creating new fines. That means that, in the vast majority of cases, people are being fined and we are simply adding a relatively small sum to that fine. We do not think that our proposals will have any major effect on levels of fine default.

The Chairperson:

I can well understand your attempts to minimise the fact that there are 37,000 outstanding unpaid fines. We can dress that up whatever way we like, but the fact remains. A fixed tariff of between £5 and £30 will only add more cost to an already expensive system that is obviously dysfunctional and not fit for purpose. I mean no disrespect to you or your colleagues, but you are telling us that you are going to charge defaulters another £5 or £30 if they do not pay up. I believe that the impact of that will be negligible. You tell us that it will reap about £500,000 against a setting-up cost of £100,000. What about the running costs after that? Are those included in the £100,000?

Mr Johnston:

The running costs should not be terribly significant, because the systems for charging and collecting fines are already there; only the amounts that are collected will vary. Once the computer systems are set up, the amounts paid for the offender levy will be directed into the appropriate accounts. The running costs are containable within existing resources. The then Court Service and the police have engaged in a concerted campaign to address the 37,000 unpaid fine warrants. That has shown significant results and is continuing, and I know that the problem has been recognised. We now have the Causeway computer system, which joins the agencies

together. There is potential in the Causeway system for us to avoid building up large numbers of outstanding warrants in future. You are perfectly correct: it is quite unacceptable that so many warrants have been allowed to build up over time. However, new arrangements are in place for the future.

Mr Donaldson:

England and Wales have tried what they call a victim surcharge. What has been the experience there? Are there lessons to be drawn from that?

Ms Smiley:

We spoke to colleagues in England and Wales who have some useful experience to pass on. They had particular difficulties because they chose to apply the surcharge as a single penalty in the form of a court fine. That attracted criticism because the individuals who caused the most harm to victims were not being surcharged while others were being fined for more minor offences. They did not have an integrated IT system that would have allowed them to apply the surcharge across the board at a much earlier stage. They are quite envious of the Causeway system, which allows us, in a reasonably small jurisdiction, to make a more concerted effort to collect fines, rather than approach the problem in a piecemeal fashion.

Mr Donaldson:

In that case, will the system that you are considering for Northern Ireland avoid such difficulties?

Ms Smiley:

We want to apply it across the board, and England and Wales took provision to apply it to all their current disposals. In the period of three or four years, those jurisdictions have not managed to expand beyond the current financial penalties, and they are considering expanding into deductions when people are in custody. They are looking to our experience as much as we looked to theirs in that regard. They have a much bigger system and much greater IT considerations to take into account across the various police board areas, court systems and prison systems. Therefore, they are studying how we implement the system with custodial sentences in particular.

Mr Donaldson:

Does Scotland have a similar system?

Ms Smiley:

Scotland does not have a system. It is considering one. Scottish officials have seen our research report and have looked at experience in England in Wales. They have not yet decided what position to take.

Mr Donaldson:

Did you look at any other international models that place a surcharge on offenders?

Ms Smiley:

Yes. The research report examined Australia, Sweden, the United States and Canada, and we saw parallels with Canada and New South Wales in Australia. Very similar processes operate, and they chose to take a much broader approach to applying it across all the areas, including to prisoners in custody. That is one successful feature of the models that we looked at.

Mr Donaldson:

Can you recover the £100,000 set-up costs from the initial levy income or is that difficult?

Ms Smiley:

We have chosen to keep the offender levy exclusively for victims and witnesses' services. Rather than charge an offender for the process of setting up a system, we will use that for administrative costs. All the money that is taken for a victims' levy will go directly to victims' services.

Mr Donaldson:

The taxpayer will end up paying for the set-up costs.

Mr Johnston:

There is an added problem in that the changes to the computer systems involve capital money, whereas this is revenue money. Therefore, there is a financial difficulty, but we are confident that we can find that £100,000, as Janice said, by reprioritising existing commitments.

Mr Donaldson:

Has the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) agreed to allow you to ring-fence the levy?

Mr Johnston:

We have to finally tie up that issue with DFP now that powers have been devolved. It is unlikely to be a problem because it is not a fine that will go to the Consolidated Fund as of right. It will be a separate payment, but we still need to have that final conversation.

Ms Smiley:

We are providing some additional information to DFP because the situation is new since we have moved into a devolved setting. Our previous discussions have been with the Treasury.

Mr Elliott:

You will appreciate that I am pretty sceptical of the idea. Are you convinced that it will work?

Mr Johnston:

I have every confidence that it will work. It has worked in other jurisdictions. It has generated additional money for victims' services, created more of a direct link between offenders and victims and made offenders more accountable for the wider impact of offending behaviour. That is not to say that we will not take a cautious approach to it, and we envisage bringing it in on a phased basis. The aspects that are easier to introduce and administer, such as attaching it to fines and prison earnings, will be implemented first. A little further down the line, we will introduce it for community sentences, which involve greater set up. We could usefully learn from the initial experience.

Mr Elliott:

As a matter of interest, how much are prisoners paid?

Mr Johnston:

It varies from £6 a week to £20 a week depending on how far they have managed to move along the progressive regime scheme.

Mr Elliott:

You said that 37,000 fines are unpaid. What percentage of the annual total does that represent?

Ms Smiley:

The 37,000 of unpaid fines have accumulated over a number of years. It is, therefore, quite

difficult to provide specific figures for a particular year.

Mr Elliott:

The figures are year-on-year.

Mr Johnston:

Generally, more than 90% of fines are paid. However, I will get the Committee some figures on the default rates over recent years.

Mr Elliott:

Finally, the presentation states:

“It is expected that much of the administration cost can, with careful planning, be absorbed within existing systems and procedures.”

Ms Smiley:

What we are saying is that a timetable of reforms have been planned for IT refreshes and other areas with which we wish to align ourselves in order to piggyback the already funded initiative. We can benefit from that without actually having to expend any additional capital or resource.

Mr Elliott:

Will that resolve any additional running or maintenance costs that are attributed to that fund?

Ms Smiley:

Yes. Only about 7% of the disposals to which the levy applies do not carry a financial penalty. We will, therefore, ensure that we bring the disposals on board at a point at which the system is capable of dealing with them. We will look at the reforms that allow us to deal with the default measures at a stage when that will minimise any potential default from the application of the levy itself.

Mr Elliott:

In the end, it seems like a small fund to address such serious issues. The fund has only £500,000 a year for victims, and that is a minimal amount to be shared among people who have been badly hurt or affected.

Ms Smiley:

The fund is not just about directly compensating victims, because the court does that. It is also about looking at people's experience of the service that the justice system provides. We look at whether there is a need for better information and communication. Through the Northern Ireland victim and witness survey (NIVAWS), we talk to victims and witnesses about their experiences before they exit the system. We ask them what would have helped to improve their experience, what would have been more useful and at what stage of the process. We seek to target those issues so that we can make real improvements to people's experience of the justice system. A very small amount of money can make a significant difference to how local community groups offer services to victims in the community. There are no other groups that victims can go to for additional support, such as aftercare, once they have been through the justice system.

Mr Johnston:

There is, of course, a wider context. The Department provides £2.5 million of funding a year to voluntary organisations that work with victims. It also provides compensation through the Compensation Agency, which has a budget of 35 million a year, and which victims of violent crime in particular benefit from. Therefore, there is a bigger picture. In future, the victims of crime fund could be used to provide better support to victims of sexual violence and sexual attacks by creating posts to support those people as they would journey through the criminal justice system.

Mr McDevitt:

Is it possible to get some information on the 37,000 unpaid fines so that we can put that into context? How far back do the unpaid fines go? What percentage of fines were issued during the period covered? It would be in our interest to understand that better. That point follows on from Mr Elliott and the Chairperson's questions.

What is the current budget allocation for victims' services in Northern Ireland?

Mr Johnston:

The budget that the Department provides to the voluntary sector is between £2.5 million and £2.6 million. However, criminal justice organisations are also carrying out work to provide better services to victims. For example, the police are piloting a scheme that provides victims with

better updates on the progression of their cases. The NIVAWS showed that a victim's first concern is what is happening with their cases. The Public Prosecution Service (PPS), through the community liaison offices, has also been offering new services to victims. I do not have a figure for the total investment in victims. All that I can say is that the criminal justice system continues to place significant focus on victims.

Mr McDevitt:

Would that extra amount of up to £500,000 belong to the part of the fund that goes to the voluntary and community sector?

Mr Johnston:

We envisage that some of it would go to the voluntary and community sector through community safety partnerships or their successors. Some of it would be used for more central initiatives, and paying for the independent advisers for victims of sexual violence is one possibility for that. Therefore, that money could go in two directions.

Mr McDevitt:

What modelling is your £500,000 maximum built on? How do you arrive at that figure?

Mr Johnston:

The calculation is fairly detailed and involves looking at the numbers of people receiving different sentences and multiplying those figures by the fines. There are about 46,000 offenders to whom the levy would apply, once it builds up over a period of years. On that basis, we calculate that a figure of £512,978 would be generated over a number of years because the levy can apply only to offences that are committed after the legislation is enacted. Therefore, in the first year, there will be a smaller amount but after four years it will increase to £500,000 and, in fact, be very close to that after three years.

Mr McDevitt:

We would broadly support the principle of a levy. Based on our brief exchange, my one question is whether the levy should be used to fund core services. Should that happen, or should it go to services that would not otherwise be part of the core delivery programme? Do you have an opinion of that? Is it an issue at all?

Mr Johnston:

We want the levy money to provide additional services, whether via core or voluntary and community organisations. As with every other budget, the budget allocated to victims of crime services over the next few years is going to come under scrutiny, and we cannot avoid that. However, we are considering what we can do that would, by and large, be additional to what we already do. Some of that may come through core services. It is about providing additional core services.

Ms Smiley:

It is about cutting across each of the agencies. Each agency will continue to fund its own services; this will be an added-value provision across them all.

Mr McDevitt:

What provision will be made to ensure that the funding is not absorbed into the budget? Often, something that starts off as pioneering and a great idea is appropriated within four or five years and its intended innovative value is gone. What measures will be taken to protect against that happening?

Ms Smiley:

That will be through the agreement of DFP. At that point, we will be committed to using the levy exclusively for victims and witnesses' services, because that is the purpose for which it will be introduced in legislation. Therefore, that will be a requirement and we could not then use the funding for non-victim services, because we would have to go back to our base legislative provision again, which will always be about victims' services.

Mr McCartney:

I have a couple of questions about the mechanics. The vast majority of the eventual 46,000 offenders will not get custodial sentences. The most easily collected levy will come from prisoners. However, for others, will non-payment of the levy be treated similarly to non-payment of a fine?

Ms Smiley:

Yes. If not paid, it will be collected in the same way and enforced in the same way.

Mr McCartney:

If someone who had not paid their levy reappeared before a magistrate, can the magistrate take that non-payment into account when sentencing? Can the magistrate impose another levy?

Ms Smiley:

The discretion is there to enable the judiciary to look at the offender's means to pay. We do not want to create a situation in which a person who genuinely cannot and never will be able to pay incurs additional levies time after time. The legislation will provide the discretion for the judiciary to take account of that, but it would be limited to circumstances and a means test.

Mr Johnston:

Equally, if someone has repeatedly appeared in court, been fined numerous times, but has not paid any of them, that may be the point at which the court decides that its previous approach is not working, and it might opt for a different disposal this time, for example, a community sentence. In partnership with the Courts and Tribunals Service, we are introducing a fine default register for courts, which will mean that the courts will now have information on whether an individual has defaulted before and will be able to take that into account.

Mr McCartney:

If a person were sentenced to 20 hours of community service, would the magistrate have the power to increase that to 30 hours if they had not paid their levy, much in the same way that he can suspend a sentence for a month and say that if the person does not pay £30, the suspension will become live and they will go to prison? Is there any provision for that in the legislation?

Mr Johnston:

What could happen is that, if the financial part is not paid, further down the line there could be a supervised activity order, which would add further hours to the community sentence.

Ms Smiley:

That will be an alternative to paying any financial penalty. The court could impose a supervised activity order, which, I think, is a maximum of 20 hours.

Mr Johnston:

Actually, it can be up to 100 hours for the biggest fines. We are looking at how we could pilot

that and potentially introduce it in the future. The legislative provision is there for it in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008.

Mr O'Dowd:

So, it is from £5 to £30 for a range of court-imposed sentences. Will someone be charged £30 for rape?

Mr Johnston:

One of the comments made during the consultation was whether we might have two rates of charge for custodial sentences, differentiating between the more serious and the less serious sentences. We will certainly look at that. As the proposals on which we consulted stood, any offence that led to a custodial sentence would have incurred a £30 fine.

Ms Smiley:

That is the reason we have gone for disposal custody as opposed to an offence. We do not wish to get into value judgements about what particular offences should be charged. It is to do with the disposal itself as opposed to the actual offence that may be committed, because that is taken into account by the judiciary when setting the sentence.

Mr O'Dowd:

The title of it is the offender levy and victims of crime fund. No one could argue that that is not good in principle, and when I first read it, I thought it was a very good idea that there will be compensation for victims of crime. What it should be called is an offender levy to allow the Department of Justice to carry out its core duties, because it is a wee revenue-raising exercise.

Mr Johnston:

The compensation for victims of crime is already available through the statutory compensation schemes and the Compensation Agency, and the court can make compensation orders. We are trying to broaden that out and say that if a person offends, they are not simply offending against the individual — the individual can get compensation in various ways already — but they are doing something that has implications for the wider community and for the sorts of services that need to be provided.

Mr O’Dowd:

It could then be argued that the sentence is imposed because it is a crime against society. Regardless of what a person has done, from a minor offence to a serious offence, the public prosecutes them rather than the individual citizen prosecuting them. A rapist is sentenced not only for the crime they have committed against an individual but for the crime they have committed against society. I accept the principle of the idea, but I am not sure about the proportion of the fine. You say that the court can impose a compensation levy against the perpetrator, but I am not sure that someone who is doing 40 mph in a 30 mph zone being charged a fiver but someone who commits rape being charged 30 quid to be put into the fund is proportionate. The principle of it is OK, but I am not so sure about its outworkings.

Mr Johnston:

I am perfectly happy to take account of that and to think about it again in light of the consultation responses that were received. There has been a thread going through that consultation that perhaps we should look at different levels, so we will revisit the proposals in light of all that has been said.

The Chairperson:

We are stopping there. Thank you very much for your presentation, and we wish you well with it. Mr Johnston, perhaps you will provide a summary report of the responses received for the Committee to have a look at.

Mr Johnston:

We are happy to do so.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

Are members happy that we ask Assembly Research and Library Services to produce a paper identifying the key issues? I think that such a paper would be useful to the Committee.

Members indicated assent.