HOUSE OF COMMONS

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland, HC 24

Wednesday 18 May 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 18 May 2022.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley.

Questions 1 - 43

Witnesses

I: Dr Colm Walsh, Research Fellow, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast; Dr Siobhán McAlister, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast; Professor Duncan Morrow, Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Professor Duncan Morrow, Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University (PNI0006)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Colm Walsh, Dr Siobhán McAlister and Professor Duncan Morrow.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues, and also to our witnesses this morning, for our first session on a new inquiry with regards to trying to establish and assess the effects of paramilitarism on society in Northern Ireland. We are joined this morning by Dr Walsh, research fellow at the school of social sciences, education and social work from Queen's University Belfast, and by Dr McAlister, a senior lecturer in criminology, also from Queen's. We are due to be joined by Professor Morrow, from the University of Ulster. There is a technical hitch that is prohibiting him joining at the moment, but he is hoping to join us as soon as he is able to. If he is not able, we can either have a separate session with him or table the same questions and have written submissions to us. Witnesses, we are very grateful that you could join us this morning.

"Paramilitarism" is a word that has fallen very easily into our vocabulary, mindset, language and commentary. Is there a better word or words that we could or should be using? Are you able to define what you mean and see paramilitarism as being? Take us through the evolutionary timeline, if you will, as to how it has manifested itself in different ways over the years. If you want to use 1998 as the BC/AD dividing line, feel free to do so, but I am not going to be prescriptive in that area.

Dr McAlister: It is a very complex question, because it is a very complex issue. Part of the reason why we stick to the use of this concept, particularly in my experience on research in communities, is that it is the language that communities use. There is a clear understanding and meaning of what paramilitarism feels like and how it is experienced within those communities.

I have been involved with the research in communities from about 2008 to the present day, looking at the issues of the conflict legacy and paramilitarism. There are certainly changes in perceptions of who and what these groups are from at least 2008, when there was not very much discussion about organised crime, gangsters or criminal activity, to 2016, when I did similar research, right through to a couple of years ago, in research for the Commission for Victims and Survivors, where actually many in the community were employing that language. They often draw a distinction between the groups of the past, which some see as having a political basis and perhaps some level of legitimacy within communities, and the groups that exist now, which many feel are defined by criminal activity.

I say it is complex because there are two paradoxes or exceptions to that. In many cases, again with my research with children, young people and communities, there is a rejection, primarily, of these groups. However, under particular circumstances—this has remained the same across 10 to 15 years of research—they are seen to be valuable or useful on two fronts: what is defined as keeping hard drugs out of communities

and dealing with so-called paedophiles. This is a dominant narrative across time and has helped legitimise these groups.

Q2 **Chair:** When you say "dealing with paedophiles", is that in a sort of Al Pacino sense of the term?

Dr McAlister: This is the sense that official mechanisms of justice do not work fast enough. It is in these respects, in dealing with hard offenders or sex offenders, that paramilitaries perhaps—

Chair: It is extrajudicial activity.

Dr McAlister: Yes. Part of this is that it is a narrative, so perhaps these groups themselves promote this narrative. We find very little evidence of this to support that, but there is that, which keeps some level of support for these groups there.

We also find that the support for the groups can shift as well, particularly at times of political unrest and times of contention and instability, whereby they are seen to play a role in promoting, preserving or fighting for community identity. This political underbelly of them has not been completely lost. That is why it is difficult. It is a messy concept. We know it brings in all different types of group with different ethos.

I do not think that there is a clear response to the question in terms of whether there is a better word. "Organised crime" or "organised criminal" to some extent brings in some of the activities of the group, but we cannot completely depoliticise them, because these groups emerged out of the political situation. If we look to what reignites violence or support for these groups, or membership into these groups, they tend to be legacy issues and political issues.

Also perhaps different from organised criminals, they are very much in the community and of the community. That very much is rooted in the historical evolution of the groups as well.

Q3 **Chair:** Is "gangster" a good word?

Dr McAlister: "Gangster" is a term that is increasingly used within communities and by young people, but not solely. They differentiate types of these groups. In most cases, they see that they are not useful for communities, that they prey on communities, that they commit crime and that they exploit children and young people. In some instances, they are seen as protecting communities as well. Part of that has to do with the issues still around policing and lack of trust in the police.

Q4 **Chair:** There is lack of trust in the police, so effectively taking on protective duties of their own communities. Does that then extend to disruption of the other side's criminal activity, physical intimidation, violence, destruction of property? Does defence manifest itself into offence?

Dr McAlister: My sense, which is grounded in the research, is that most of the activity in the way communities experience this form of violence, intimidation and control is within their own communities. It is not about protection from another community. It is that there is some level of control of particular behaviours within their own communities.

Q5 **Chair:** In part, is there any evidence to suggest that is in some way to try to stop people "breaking out", opening their eyes and opening their minds? It is better to keep one's own people penned in in an echo chamber, without seeing that there is sunlight and flowers on the other side of the fence.

Dr McAlister: The groups themselves, or the individuals, whoever these are, have a powerful narrative at particular times. They draw on that narrative. They prey on the vulnerabilities of communities. They prey on feelings of instability, when identity is perceived to be threatened. They keep going back to these narratives. Whether there is any truth in this—that they actually deal with paedophiles or keep the hard drug dealers out—is fairly unknown, but these are these repeated narratives. As I say, over 15 years of research, those narratives have not changed. What has changed is that there is absolutely less support for these groups on a general, everyday basis.

Q6 **Chair:** There may be less support, and that is obviously encouraging, but, in terms of the numbers of people engaged, whether they are supported or not is of interest, but it is not the sole determinant. Have the numbers of participants moved one way or the other, or has it remained fairly static?

Dr McAlister: I am not really sure that my research can speak to actually how many people are involved in this activity. It can speak very clearly to the impact of this on whole communities.

Q7 **Chair:** We will come on to that, Dr McAlister, in colleagues' questions. Dr Walsh, do you want to pick up that generic scene-setting probe and give us your two penn'orth?

Dr Walsh: Siobhán gave a comprehensive response, in terms of the definition there. To make one final point in relation to the definitions, the starting point for the question around definitions is complex as it is. There have been a number of critical conversations that have been going on within academia, but also within civil society and across a number of organisations, over the past few years around which is the most appropriate. It depends on what we are trying to achieve through this.

For me, as primarily a violence researcher, the term "paramilitarism", with the connotations that Siobhán described, actually has very little utility. I would veer more towards the language of organised crime and seeing the contemporary activity of paramilitary organised crime groups on the continuum of violence. That is much more functional, because it provides some insight into the pathways into it and also provides some hope for potential interruption points for people being engaged actively

within those groups, but also the harms that it can cause. That is really it on the definitions.

In terms of the general landscape, I could make a few points. Trying to assess to landscape over the past few decades as a researcher, I would be looking to a number of different areas. I would be looking to the general perceptions of the community. I would be looking for data that is available. Whenever I talk about the data, that is both administrative data and empirical data that I, Siobhán and Duncan, who is due to join, would be actively engaged in.

In terms of the perceptions broadly, generally people feel safe. We look at the Safe Community Survey. We look at the attitudinal reports from the likes of ARK, Northern Ireland Life and Times. We can see that people generally feel safe. Only about 10% of respondents within those ARK reports believe that paramilitaries are active.

The data tells a slightly different picture. Some of the research that I would be involved in would suggest that exposure to paramilitary groups is very much clustered. It is clustered in particular communities, and even within communities it is clustered within particular groups.

I will give you a bit of an example of the transition post 1998. I was involved in a very early report in 2001, so a few years after 1998 and post the Good Friday agreement. The report, whenever it was finished and disseminated, was called *Everyday Life*. Basically, that captured the sense among young people, their exposure to violence in communities and the enduring presence of paramilitaries. Looking back, we might accept that that was in the infancy of the transition towards peace.

In 2019, so just a few years ago, along with a colleague from Queen's, we followed up on that *Everyday Life* report. We found that not much had changed. The ways that young people in particular experienced violence had shifted slightly, but the rate of exposure and prevalence of exposure to violence in various forms, from low-level community to higher-harm, organised crime, paramilitary violence, was still very much present. It was still very much in their consciousness and affected the way they thought about their own personal safety, the activities they engaged in, the places they went to and the places they did not go to.

This comes out in multiple reports. A follow-up, basically an aggregate of the Northern Ireland Life and Times and Northern Ireland Young Life and Times that I was involved in tried to make some sense of a multi-year analysis, from data collected in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Young people in particular are feeling markedly less safe, and women actually.

We see this in other samples, so particularly in youth work samples. I am actively engaged with Youth Service, which is taking the lead in really innovative, novel work in some of these areas most affected by paramilitarism. We found, within that cluster, 50% within that Youth Service sample report being exposed to paramilitaries. We see that 25%

of that sample have been actively intimidated or threatened. We see that 10% have been physically attacked. That is even higher in another population, in a probation study—sample—of young men. 100% of that sample had had exposure to paramilitarism.

The picture is mixed and the landscape is mixed. Situating paramilitarism within that continuum of violence, we also see that there are very strong connections between low-level community violence and that higher-harm, organised crime violence. For instance, in 2019, I wrote a report for the Department of Justice. In that, I was able to demonstrate that there was a correlation between police recorded crime, violence against the person and, over a 10-year period, incidences of paramilitary activity.

It is hard to understand what the reason for that is. There are some theories that can help you explain. It shows that, if we really want to understand the enduring presence of paramilitaries, violence, exploitation and coercion within communities, we cannot do that without reference to the broader picture of violence.

Q8 **Chair:** Let us just pause there. We have just been joined by Professor Morrow. Duncan, good morning; it is nice to see you. Dr Walsh, let me ask you for a few words, please. Somebody has just arrived in Northern Ireland and they say to you, "Describe to me or take me to a representative community, socioeconomic, demographic, et cetera, where I want to see dissident republican paramilitarism fostering and growing and dissident loyalist paramilitarism fostering and growing". Where do you take them? What are we looking for here? Do we look to groups of the unemployed, low skillset, low educational attainment? Is it broken families? What is the seabed in each?

Dr Walsh: That evidence is still emerging. Very clearly, through some of the research I have been involved in, we can see that there are those factors that make people vulnerable and create the conditions for paramilitarism not just to be sustained but to grow and diversify in those ways that you are describing. We can see that, at an individual level, particularly the young people, which a lot of my research would involve, have experienced significant trauma. They have been victims of violence themselves. They live in communities where there are high levels of deprivation and that have a significant mistrust of outsiders. They have a lack of confidence in the state.

Increasingly, we are seeing that those communities—both Catholic, nationalist, republican and Protestant, unionist, loyalist—equally have an increasing mistrust of the police, which is a significant concern. At a community level, we see that there are attitudes and beliefs that endorse violence. That speaks to some of what Siobhán was talking about previously around these kinds of attitudes where, in normal life, communities would say, "We should not accept violence in any form or exploitation". Under certain conditions, things can be legitimised and the harm that it causes can be neutralised. There are multiple factors that

give rise to this, create vulnerabilities and sustain paramilitaries in communities.

Q9 **Chair:** Is it too simplistic to say, "We will protect us against them, because the police and everybody else will not or cannot do it"? Is that, in essence, one of the USPs? Professor Morrow is nodding.

Professor Morrow: To your two questions, we did a piece of work some time ago on young people about continuing involvement in armed groups. One thing we found was that it is too complex to simply push it to one factor. There were three that we found. One was that there is a long tradition of "We are defenders of the community" in some families and some particular groups within the community. That is one of the reasons that paramilitaries have claimed legitimacy as not simply being criminal, in a sense that there is a need to defend this community. That armed tradition is very deep in Northern Ireland, but it is quite narrow.

The recruitment then went for two particular groups, we found. One was people who would be leaders, in the sense that they were people who other people would follow. There were some people of that nature who were often very bright and able people but who had somehow got off the edge or were involved in that kind of thing.

Then there were other people for whom some of these issues around challenges in their own lives, social challenges and all these things you identified were real. This was an opportunity for some kind of role in the community, or at least some kind of economic role. There were a whole lot of motivations in there, but it was a multiple group of things. To address that, you had to do something on each of those different levels, because the same responses would not lead to the same results.

On your question of the legitimacy factor, it is double. One is arising out of the embedded conflict in Northern Ireland around them and us. Ultimately, we need somebody who will defend us and that was not available to us. The state or the police are not around.

The second, which is even alive at times when that is not such a big factor, is that they have, because they are so embedded, undertaken roles in communities, which, if they leave, will leave a hole that somebody else will fill, which will be filled by perhaps even more criminal elements and so on. There is a reluctance to simply move there. There is a political factor and a policing factor in there, which we found.

Q10 **Chair:** Very quickly, Professor Morrow, there is an assessment or statement, "The police will not look after us; therefore we will protect ourselves". Is there legitimacy in that belief, or is it merely used as a rather useful smokescreen to justify existence and then dubious criminal activity in order to fund the existence and all the paraphernalia that is required to manifest itself?

Professor Morrow: It may, paradoxically, be both.

Chair: That is also true, yes.

Professor Morrow: At one level, it is an excuse provided, which is then made reality on the ground by activity. That is something that you see. The other side is that there are some elements, and we certainly found this, where groups on the ground say, "If we go, this will become an entirely drug-infested area". Therefore, the answer to that, as far as we were concerned, was that there is a question mark. It is not a rationalisation. It is not a justification, but it is at least a question mark about the requirement to develop, as part of this process, much better community policing engagements.

That is not just a question for the police, by the way. That is also a question for the structures around policing, particularly the PCSPs, and involving the communities in that transition. There is an element of this that is that, in some areas, and it is not true in all, this is certainly claimed, that the groups provide a function. If it goes, the situation will deteriorate. On the other side, the answer to that is that we then need to develop appropriate and good models of neighbourhood policing around this. There is an opportunity in there for thinking around that, as I say, between the police and the various structures around policing in Northern Ireland.

Q11 **Stephen Farry:** Good morning to all our witnesses. I will just very quickly pick up from the Chair's initial broad question and ask each of you in turn to touch upon a different way of framing some of the current influence of paramilitaries. Could you talk through what you understand by the concept of coercive control and what that looks like in communities?

Dr McAlister: This is one of the continuities that we talk about over time. That comes up time and time again in research, as Colm says, within particular communities. These are the communities that are dealing with all the fallouts of conflict legacy and the overlaying of lack of investment, legacy issues, poor mental health and lack of opportunities. Sorry, I have lost my train there. What was the question again?

Q12 **Stephen Farry:** It was about the concept of coercive control.

Dr McAlister: This has come up time and again. No matter whether the profile of these groups has changed and no matter whether there is support or attitudes towards them have changed, there is a sense that these groups are present within communities. There is this sense within the communities where I have carried out my research that violence could ignite at any time. That kind of unease that is created by the knowledge of these groups' presence, by intimidation, control and creating fear to report or even talk about some of these issues outside the community is very much there.

This goes back to what we talk about around how we define paramilitarism, violence and harm. We need to move away from this narrow focus on paramilitary-style attacks and think of this in terms of

coercive control and the levels of harm it causes more widely. If we just look at this in terms of particular attacks, we do not see the impact this is having on whole communities and groups, on women and children and particularly on young women.

Dr Walsh: I absolutely agree with Siobhán in terms of the broad definition of what coercive control is. Some of my research would explore how that looks. It looks slightly different for different populations and the mechanisms that contribute to it are quite wide. For instance, I have just finished a study with a probation sample and coercive control came through very strongly there. The mechanism that seemed to facilitate that control was that even the victims themselves believed that they were deserving of the violence, exploitation and threats and intimidation that was served on them. That is one way that perpetrators of coercive control use for their victims. The victims somehow assume the responsibility for that.

Layer on top of that a situation within communities beyond the individual. In some of these communities, 4% of women, for instance, in another study I was involved in, believe that the police protect them. 60% of young people believe that the police are prejudiced against their community. That creates, I suppose, what Duncan was describing there, in the context where there is a potential threat against them.

Even if they recognise the threat, there are limited opportunities to access support. Even if they saw support as feasible, that they could access it, there seems to be at least a perception within communities that that is not done. In some ways, you are going outside the community and outside the norms within that community. There are a number of different factors at play.

The term "coercive control" is very useful, but similar to the distinction between paramilitarism and organised crime, the term does not just lend itself to a greater recognition about what is going on here, but also puts the responsibility on a range of different organisations. A lot of this stuff, historically, has sat within the field of justice. The evidence that is emerging is that the factors that are contributing to some of our most intractable issues cut across a whole range of sectors and Departments. It is a whole-Government and joined-up response that is needed to understand and respond to these issues.

Q13 **Stephen Farry:** Professor Morrow, do you have anything to add to either of those answers on that one?

Professor Morrow: It is only adding. The description of the environment as coercive is extremely important, because it underlines that some of the issues here are to do with the return to health of the whole community. If we are going to say to communities, "We need to see change here", part of it is to identify where this can be relieved and improved.

I would also suggest that where your levers are is not just in getting rid of paramilitaries. They are actually about changing the ways communities respond when there is coercive control and giving new opportunities in that area.

One thing to say is that, again, it goes back to this question of ensuring that, if you like, it is a transition for paramilitaries, in my view. I prefer "armed groups", because the word "paramilitaries", by the way, is extremely problematic, because the number of people who call themselves paramilitaries in republican communities, for example, is very low, so there is a sense of "It does not really apply to us". There is also a sense in which the term "paramilitary" is used in different contexts in different ways. In communities, some people are paramilitaries but they are also taxi drivers, so it is a complex ball of wool. This issue of coercive control and the role of armed groups offers us a much more wholistic way in which to say, "These are the things we are trying to tackle and this is the range of things we want to bring to the table to do it".

Q14 **Stephen Farry:** No doubt some of my colleagues will be picking up on some of those definitional issues later on. My main question is actually a very broad one, so I will ask all three of you to be as concise as you can. How effective have the measures under the Fresh Start agreement been in combining policing and justice measures alongside tackling socioeconomic barriers to eradicate paramilitarism in Northern Ireland? It is a very broad question.

Dr Walsh: There are two points that I would make. Primarily, the benefit that I can see, and I suppose that all of us have contributed to this, is the increasing emphasis on evidence and an evidence-based response to this. The tackling paramilitarism and organised crime programme, in response to Fresh Start, has driven this. It has driven the opportunity to generate, collect, analyse and make sense of a lot of disparate data to understand the needs of populations that we are talking about, but also test some novel responses to what you actually do about it. That is an iterative process and we are working through that. Part of the benefit that I can see is that we are coming to understand some complex issues and test responses to that.

There is the twin-track approach, your justice response in terms of arrest, prosecution and bringing justice to perpetrators who are involved in this violence and exploitation, alongside those more preventative measures of addressing the social issues that give rise to and sustain this. One of the developments post 2015 has been the recognition of the utility of a public health approach. Given that public health approach, which has been widely acclaimed elsewhere—it has been applied in the States, in Glasgow and across England—in terms of violence reduction, it situates the problem on a continuum.

Within that continuum is a kind of nested response at the upper end. We have prosecution and arrest, but, fundamentally, it is about trying to understand the factors that make people vulnerable and intervene and

interrupt pathways into that. Rather than a parallel approach, the public health approach maybe offers a slightly different conceptual frame, where they are more connected and joined up. That is something.

Professor Morrow: It is a very big question. The problem is that you asked for a short answer and there is not one. Inside the tackling paramilitarism programme, a lot of work has been done to co-ordinate a lot of different things. As Colm has articulated, we understand things around coercive control, the public health approaches and the way in which this has to be done at a multi-agency, preventative level. All those things have certainly moved forward in the last five years as a result of the programme. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that, at a macro level, in the issue of the transition to disbandment, for example, I am not 100% sure that that has made the progress we would want to see. Part of that, for me, lies in the fact that the Fresh Start agreement, which is the origin of some of this work, was signed at the end of 2015. The Government in Northern Ireland have not really had the coherent focus on this that is required to ensure that it is driven across as a priority and into communities. There is a sense in which there has been certain understanding of this, particularly in health and some of the youth areas of work, but there is a need to ensure that it is consistent and joined up, that the language is consistent and joined up and that responsibilities are very clear around this.

The third point for me is the real need to develop good neighbourhood policing responses. There is change happening in the PSNI at the moment around neighbourhood policing, but the development of these kinds of collaborative models between the community side and the policing side is one of the areas to look at as a real area for potential development and growth. The silo-isation of some of the policing stuff, the community stuff and the health stuff is somewhere I would look to try to join all that up a bit better, to be honest.

Dr McAlister: I do not have much to add there. I will just reiterate a couple of the points made. Certainly within phase 2 of the tackling paramilitarism programme, we have seen much more joining up and focus on addressing some of those systemic socioeconomic issues that face communities. As we say, if they are not dealt with, we cannot police or arrest our way out of this issue.

It is about sustainability as well. This is not an easy task and it is not going to be something that happens very quickly. We have seen that in the programme. It took time for programmes to take off. We are now into phase 2. Colm's work probably attests to some of the impact of that work, but we need to continue to resource communities. We need to continue to invest within services.

Q15 **Stephen Farry:** You have probably touched on my next question to an extent. To what extent do barriers exist to achieving a society free of paramilitarism? That is a key element of the Fresh Start agreement. As

part of that, could I ask each of you as well to comment on how well or not public agencies engage with the reality of coercive control by paramilitary structures in communities? At times, people have said perhaps that, almost for short-term results, people deal with the reality, but that can inadvertently bolster some of the structures, by giving them some sense of false legitimacy. It is almost like a de facto recognition that those are the controlling voices in certain communities. Maybe each of you could comment on that as well.

Professor Morrow: These are really important questions. We have to be honest that, in some cases, the ongoing political controversy we have had has created a climate for different groups at different times—I am not pointing my finger at anybody here—claiming legitimacy for going back to things. The issues of legacy continue to play into this. The unresolved political environment we are working in certainly means that all the issues we talked us about defending us against them are more difficult to get away from.

Secondly, there is the absence of really clear political drive around this at the core of the Executive, not just as a justice issue—we have talked about this—but as a community issue where there is buy-in not simply from the Executive but right down to local council level. It really gets difficult where there is a relationship in communities between different people and that transition is complex. How are people at local levels supported in making that transition? That requires a direction that is not just a top-down imperative but is something that is really understood at ground level and what that means for people is identified.

In terms of this issue of public agencies, certainly the collaboration of public agencies together—and we have talked about this in the public health approach—is absolutely critical. This being a priority across all the agencies is going to be important, because, as with all interagency things, one of the difficulties if it is a multiagency thing is that it is nobody's responsibility. Therefore, the priority around that very often returns to justice. As Siobhán said, we are not going to arrest our way out of this problem if we do not also deal with the fact that it has community support and is building a better community for people while we are doing it.

Public agencies very often are making judgments about how they manage their service delivery. In our work, we have some concern that this issue that was raised within Fresh Start about agreeing mechanisms and protocols through which there is a proper engagement between communities and public agencies is fully developed. I am not 100% sure that we have really done that yet.

There is a tendency sometimes to devolve the decisions right down to local officers, which makes it possible to get stuff done at a practical level, but that may mean that there are issues still about how we have consistency in terms of coercive control issues and how those are dealt with. There are the issues of how paramilitary presence and physical

presence are dealt with. Certainly a public debate around, first, the real challenges that the public services face, but, secondly, how we intend to resolve those would be very important at this time.

Dr McAlister: Very similarly, there are three main barriers and they are all interrelated: policing, legacy issues and socioeconomic issues. We see it always return to those issues. As Duncan says, at times of political instability, violence reignites support for these groups. They are given more legitimacy. We cannot forget the power of those legacy issues to disrupt.

Also, in terms of policing, it is very complex, but there is still that fear to report behaviour to the police. Added to that, there is a perception that the police, within the communities, are ineffectual in dealing with this. Part of this comes from the fact that there are fairly low conviction rates. While I am aware that there have been more arrests, seizures of drugs and things like that, these groups still exist within communities and that coercive control is still within communities, and the police are the people who are delivering some of the official threats. That, again, gives legitimacy to the idea that the police cannot do anything about this, because, if they know who is making the threat, they would do something about it.

As Duncan says, there is some great work being done on the ground in terms of community policing. Linked to that is the policing of the security threat also within these communities, that heavy armed policing, which then can undo some of the good work being done. There are real issues there around policing.

Briefly in terms of public agency responses, I return to the issue for children and young people. We have not quite moved forward enough in defining the experiences of children and young people as child abuse. We still talk about recruitment, instead of child criminal exploitation. We still talk about paramilitary-style attacks, instead of framing this as a child abuse and children's rights issue.

Where I sense we need some work is around child protection issues, again within communities, going from what they tell us. Youth workers often talk about picking up the pieces. They feel that they do not have the support of the police or social services. Again, it is important to get right down to the ground within communities and see how they are experiencing all these policies and programmes.

Dr Walsh: I absolutely agree with everything that Duncan and Siobhán have said. One of the main barriers is that there is often, and traditionally there has been, a focus downstream, on the end result and where the most significant harm happens, without adequate attention being paid to upstream and how we can prevent pathways for some individuals to become involved in these groups, but also for quite a substantial subgroup within communities to be very much affected and traumatised by the actions of these groups.

When we look at the profiles of both those people, perpetrators and victims, we can see that actually the profiles are very much the same. The issues are systemic. Even though the issues are systemic, I do not think that the system has really caught up. There has been some significant progress. The community safety board has been established, which brings together multiple departments and statutory agencies.

We have now, which is quite new and speaks to some of the barriers that Siobhán was talking about, a task and finish group on child criminal exploitation, which is digging down into what that looks like in the context of Northern Ireland and how public agents should be responding. That is a really good example of the Department of Justice and Department of Health, particularly in relation to child protection, co-ordinating a response together, which is great. Fundamentally, there is still a way to go in terms of joining up these systems.

Other barriers that phase 2 of the programme is trying to address is how we increase resiliency in communities. If the end goal is for the disbandment, as Duncan was talking about, of paramilitary groups, in the short term how do we make communities more resilient to the effects of their enduring presence, while we attain that fundamental goal?

Also, this is a long-term task. We know that it is long term. We are talking a few decades since the Good Friday agreement, and we see elsewhere that there has been very much strategic emphasis put on other things, like violence prevention. I look with envy across the water sometimes at the investment that is coming from the Home Office, the establishment of the violence reduction units and the establishment of the Youth Endowment Fund, which have really given a long-term vision to understanding and addressing these issues, for instance over 10 years. We need to think long term, not to lose sight of short-term gains, but we cannot achieve and unpack these complexities that everybody has alluded to within two or three-year cycles.

Q16 **Fay Jones:** Good morning. I wanted to ask a little bit about what we have just been talking about, in terms of where things are not joined up and what the different Governments can do to make sure that things are. We have just been talking about that, so I am sorry if I am asking you to go over old ground. Specifically, with some of the problems that you have just identified, what do you want to see the UK Government, the Executive, when it is restored, hopefully, and the Irish Government do to tackle that issue of inconsistencies between operation and delivery?

Chair: Who wants to take that one? I might suggest that we will look to one response to a question from one witness, rather than a triptych, if that is okay. Who has the most value to add to that question?

Professor Morrow: I will say a couple of things. One is that we really need a focus on this as a long-term interagency programme. We need to refocus on it. The opportunity is absolutely there, but not until the Executive gets up and it is seen as an interagency priority. We are stuck

with a very complex political environment. That is a very easy thing to say, but that is number one. As soon as it is up, it needs to be back on the table—how we are going to move into being a fully democratic rule of law society. That is one.

The second one is that there are real opportunities in policing. There is this issue of developing neighbourhood policing. Very often, this falls back on people saying, "It is a police matter". It is not a question of a young constable gathering all the information and not having any witnesses and having any evidence. This is clearly an issue where we need a very strong problem-solving approach. We have good structures for this, potentially—they have just never been used, as far as I can see—around the PCSPs and the different bodies where interagencies come together and take this on as an agenda.

How will people eventually become free to feel that they can give evidence, act as witnesses or provide mechanisms in the community for proper transition for people out of these opportunities into community development. All these things have to be resolved at some kind of problem-solving level, not just in terms of it being a police matter, because they will not have the evidence; it will all be intelligence-based. It will be seen as an attack. It will get tied up with political matters.

We need to join up the politics, recreate the focus, drive it right down to the bottom and create a policing model. The last thing is this issue around encouraging this public health approach. That is the joined-up approach between the agencies, which tries to clear this up, understand it as a problem and understand it as the whole of the problem, not just as a tackling paramilitarism problem.

Q17 **Fay Jones:** I might just follow up on what Professor Morrow has just said before we go on to the other witnesses. Professor Morrow, I completely agree with you in terms of the solution that you proposed there. We have heard already this morning that the police are maybe not seen to be trusted. When we talk about community policing models, they often live within police forces. They are housed out of a police force and might comprise multiagency groups. They are seen as the softer end of policing. Could the police deliver that with all credibility, in view of the points that other witnesses have made this morning?

Professor Morrow: One of the great benefits of Patten, potentially, was the creation around policing of all these local agencies. They are called policing and community safety partnerships. They involve politicians and statutory agencies. This is a caricature, so it is not fair in total, but it tends to be that the police go, they report and then that is the end of the meeting. That is a caricature. The key thing that Patten foresaw was that they actually worked with the police to develop appropriate mechanisms.

As a one-off example—and I cannot say whether it would work or not; it would need to be tested—we talked to people in the community who said, "We want a development of some kind of street triaging"; that is what

they called it. That said that, together with the police—it would have to be appropriately human rights proofed and all these things—where there are issues, the community, the youth services and the mental health services could work through which is the best way to approach these questions. It would move through the community and create credibility for the police, because they would be operating on behalf of and together with allied agencies with deep roots in the community.

Building those roots in the community seems to be something we need to explore, particularly if you are talking about groups that have taken on, however coercively, a policing function within their own societies. If they move out, there is this allegation, whether it is true or not, that the situation will then get worse. How do we develop something that is community appropriate, with roots, and not necessarily soft? The issues you are talking about here are people being frightened to provide evidence, being scared to go forward as witnesses.

How do we get that information into a place where it can go through a court? How do we move those situations into something where community disapproval can be expressed, where there are opportunities to actually object to coercive control and so on? You are right that it is soft at one level, but at another level it is trying to deal with appropriate mechanisms to deal with what are genuinely very serious and hard problems about both policing credibility and the quality of life in communities.

Q18 **Fay Jones:** Dr McAlister, I do not know if you wanted to come back on the original question about what specifically you would like to see Governments do to prevent the problem of a lack of joined-up thinking and delivery?

Dr McAlister: Duncan has probably covered it quite well. I do not have anything to add.

Q19 **Mr Campbell:** Welcome to our witnesses. You may or may not be aware that the Committee has undertaken this investigation, but the responses have been very considerable, which would tend to lend itself to the fact that many in Northern Ireland find this a very important, persistent, ongoing problem that has to be dealt with. This is just a commentary, not a question. Many people would say that part of the problem is that paramilitaries, however you define them, were given a sense of legitimacy 24 years ago. When they ceased killing people, or at least reduced the killing, 28 years ago, the problem was that, in the ensuing years, they were elevated. Now they are in a position in society where society finds that they are still a pernicious influence on society.

Given that they still have a pernicious influence on society, some people in communities, particularly in working class communities in both republican and loyalist circles, turn to them to deal with problems that they, the community, are affected by, whether that is drug dealing, low-level crime, the antisocial behaviour or a whole series of things that the

police seem to have difficulty in grappling with.

Duncan outlined, at a high level, a series of things that could or should be done. On a low level, in the next couple of months, say, in working class estates, people may come to me or to other public reps and say, "I have reported this to the police. They do not seem to be interested. What do you think I should do, because somebody said I should go to my local UVF, UDA, IRA, INLA dissident commander to deal with this drug dealer?"

That puts people like me in difficult position, because I refer them back to the police. Of course they should not go to some person in the community. How do you think we could start that this week, not setting aside but leaving the longer-term issues that Duncan was alluding to? How do you start that tomorrow and next week?

Professor Morrow: It is a very good question, but I am going to not properly answer it, so I accept that. Here is my best guess at this. The first thing is of course you do what you have just done, which is that we have to take this to the police. The second thing, in political terms, is that, through political parties, one of the very good things that could happen would be that representatives on PCSPs and so on could be alerted to these facts and encouraged to work with the police to say, "Are there other things that would make it more possible for the police to come forward? How is this evidence to be brought forward?" and so on.

For example, on hate crime we have had to develop ways for people to report things that are not necessarily directly to the police but to a trusted third party, who then reports them back. That kind of issue is how reporting is done, how information is conveyed and how people are kept safe. These are the issues that, as far as I can see, are there for people. Using the structures we already have, all I can say to you is that we need to maximise the pathways today.

You are talking about an issue where somebody rings you tomorrow. What do you do? These are the things that I would immediately do: first, convene with the police; secondly, deal with the agencies around them. Thirdly, there is an issue here. You put it in terms of paramilitaries involved in the political process. There is a sense that there is still, particularly at times of difficulty and crisis, a role given to paramilitaries to articulate things. We need—and this is a longer-term issue—to develop ways for communities to be able to articulate their problems without having to turn to paramilitaries. There is a need for political parties to get involved in how they do that.

Also there needs, for working class communities in particular, to be new instruments developed for that. If we do not talk about safety in those areas, those issues will fester and they will go to somebody else. We need to take this in a holistic way.

Q20 **Mr Campbell:** I have found that, while middle-ranking police officers, and even some senior police officers, respond positively when these issues are raised in the community, there is a fear that, at very senior

levels within the police, when they are dealing with issues that become pseudo-political, in terms of potential paramilitary involvement, there is a tendency to tread very carefully, not to rock the boat and to always play safe in terms of further investigations into people who may or may not be giving the police information on other issues. I accept that that puts the police in a difficult position, but is that something that you have come across, in terms of liaison and discussions with community representatives? I am not talking about politicians now. I am talking about community activists who you may have had conversations with.

Professor Morrow: The allegation is certainly there. To turn it round, not just for the police, there is a whole series of agencies that have to work in communities and get their job done. We have all heard the phrase, "Community worker by day, paramilitary by night", that is used. I am aware of your short-term problem. I do not have a short-term answer to this question. I have a series of steps that will need to be taken where we have to measure the progress on this.

You are correct that one of the measures of success is the kind of calculation that you are alluding to there, which is, "If I lose my contact here, I will lose more than if I arrest this person for this thing". That kind of a calculation is clearly a red light that we have some serious issues to sort out here. How does that get resolved? I am not here to tell you what to do in an individual case. I can say that I know that this is exactly what this programme was meant to deal with, to enable communities to deal with this more preventatively and to try to make sure that the police or our agencies are not put in that position and our agencies act appropriately.

Q21 **Ian Paisley:** I would like to follow up on a question that Fay had elucidated some really good answers to. Professor Duncan, it is back to you, I am afraid. It is about the systemic problem that exists in policing. That is that there has been underfunding and not sufficient numbers. The police is probably down by somewhere between 700 and 1,000 officers to what it really needs to be. In terms of Patten recommendations, the numbers were significantly reduced, but we never actually hit the numbers that it should have been brought to.

I wonder why that issue is never publicly spoken about in the way in which it was spoken about here in GB whenever there is chronic underfunding of policing or chronic lack of numbers. To do the sort of triage service that you mentioned, you need more officers, essentially, on the street, and yet we never hear calls for this from organisations like Queen's University or any organisations. They focus on all the other stuff. I have yet to see a report identifying that one of the key problems here is that Patten has not been followed through in terms of the numbers of police officers or the lack thereof.

I hear the police board going on about it. I hear senior police officers briefing about and the Police Federation demanding it, but that is who you would expect to talk about it. I wonder if we can focus on that

systemic problem, that there are not enough police officers serving the community, hence the community services failing. Do you agree?

Professor Morrow: First of all, we are at the stage where neighbourhood policing, for example, in my view, tends to come too short. As soon as there is a requirement for phone calls or immediate response, the place they are taken from is neighbourhood, and we definitely have to say that this is not just a soft piece of work. This is a really important piece of work of building confidence and creating networks for information for the police to be able to do their job, so that is the first thing.

The second thing is that that resource in question needs to be taken seriously because, if you cut your police beyond a certain point, you cannot expect them to do all these things and they inevitably retract.

The third thing that I want to say is that there is a tendency to think that the answer is more police rather than more policing. Some of the stuff that, for example, Siobhán and Colm have been talking about there, such as that we need better preventive work to stop people being recruited, should not actually be a police task. It tends to end up there, but it should actually be something that social services and people like that are picking up.

There are issues that the Housing Executive and councils should be picking up. There are issues that youth workers can pick up. We have never used it, but one of the things in Patten that we have potentially to try to triage this stuff is this PCSP system, which does not work to its maximum benefit yet. It has everybody around the table. It has a lot of stakeholders, including political representatives and all the agencies. We need to start to understand how they are resourcing in that, whether it is the police.

I will give you one example, just to say why I am nervous about police officers. At a particular time of tension, there were a lot of young people on the streets in a particular part of Belfast. The police response was to try to reduce the number of young people on the street because of the potential for public order problems, so they moved very quickly to supporting what became known as midnight soccer or midnight basketball, where they pulled young people off the street. That actually reduced the number of people on the street, particularly the at-risk people, by about 50% and made its job much easier. It was actually relatively cheap, but the police cannot go on providing those kinds of services. Those have to be services that are then passed across to the appropriate agency to do midnight soccer. It is not a police job.

I am really just saying to you that I absolutely accept your position, which is that we have to put more focus on this. As I say, we have run our police numbers down, and we need to think about that, but it is not just about more police. There is a more sophisticated approach to policing in there that we need to think about.

Ian Paisley: Yes, but are we not missing the point, Duncan, in that we cannot do the good policing stuff if we do not have sufficient numbers? Police are always going to be stretched, and we are always going to pull people away from neighbourhood policing for the very reason we do not have sufficient numbers. In Northern Ireland, 700 more officers would make such a significant difference to the overall reach of policing. I wonder about Queen's and other organisations that sit above policing and analyse this stuff. If this was a medical issue, we would be going on about not enough doctors or nurses and proudly putting that out there, but we have no bite from the organisations like your own that are saying, "We need to back the police and have more police officers."

Chair: Professor Morrow, tying into Mr Paisley's question, is it a question of not only quantum, which is a perfectly valuable question to ask, but also from which community those police are drawn? We still, unfortunately, have to view it through this prism. If there is a disproportionate confidence in one community towards the police, more numbers from that community may very well help.

Ian Paisley: Can we set aside that issue of where they are drawn from because, ultimately, if they are drawn from the community, the fact is let us get to the point that is that we need more police officers? That is a fundamental failure that Patten has not delivered.

Chair: It is established that more are needed.

Q22 **Ian Paisley:** Getting the right officers becomes another question, and probably a more controversial question. Why is the key issue of getting more numbers not pushed by organisations like Queen's, and criminologists and others, which is a systemic failure to deliver good governance?

Professor Morrow: The reservation is not that we need to have a real and serious conversation about ensuring that policing confidence is what it should be. At the end point, that is in agreement. The slight hesitation is that the focus on only police numbers as a straight thing needs to be just making sure that the key focus is on maximising policing confidence in the communities.

Ian Paisley: Duncan, you know that the police service delivered in Northern Ireland is probably on a par with anywhere else in the world. Its domestic violence policing is one of the best in the world. In terms of policing to do with young people—you have mentioned some of the youth soccer and all of the rest of it—some of the best stuff in the world goes on in Northern Ireland policing in terms of leadership, but the depletion in numbers affects the reach of that. Northern Ireland really needs organisations like your own to be speaking our more and saying, "We need these number issues addressed".

Chair: That is a point you have made, and we have a lot of territory to go through.

Q23 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** A lot of the evidence we have heard so far this

morning is related to the effect that paramilitarism has had on the communities that spawn them, in the main, but I wanted to ask a little about the effect on the wider economy.

Something happened about 10 years ago. I went to visit a friend in County Armagh who had a little bakery on a farm, and he had just brought a brand-new van to do his deliveries to supermarkets and filling stations, et cetera. I said, "You have this brand-new van. Why don't sign-write it? Why don't you drive around the area advertising the fact that your cakes are the best in Country Armagh?" He said, "No, I wouldn't want to draw too much attention to my success because the old boys would come knocking for some extra insurance". That was a few years back. Would that be the situation? If I had a business in Northern Ireland, could I expect somebody to come knocking on the door for some extra insurance and threats of violence if I did not pay it?

Dr Walsh: To a certain degree, that still continues. It is actually not just with businesses but with individuals living in communities with very few resources. I have just done a study called Risk in Refuge that speaks to some of the comments that Siobhán and Duncan were speaking about around connectivity with the community. Essentially, there were a few key messages that came out of that.

One captured the narrative of the ways that individuals are exploited. One participant in that study basically said, "I have nothing left to give them." In that sense, what he was describing was an ongoing, persistent attempt by paramilitaries within his local community to get some kind of material gain. By the way, these are often new personally to these victims. They had taken money and car keys. I think they had taken three cars from that person, so, in pockets and clusters, which seems to be a theme that we have all been referring to, that absolutely still goes on. I would caveat that by saying it is not limited to businesses. There are different ways that these groups organise themselves and exploit people from within their own communities for material gain as well as other things.

Q24 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Would any of that activity be reported to the police or is the level of insurance premium that is paid seen as just one of those things you have to do, shrug your shoulders and not have the hassle of possibly having your business burnt down, for example?

Dr Walsh: Yes. I will use this participant as the example to that in the response. Their exposure to paramilitaries and the various ways that they are exposed to paramilitary organised crime groups have persisted over time. In that one sample of the study I am talking about, on average, the participants were first exposed to paramilitaries when they were 13 years old. By the time they are reaching late adolescence and early adulthood moving into the place of work and have some materials that may be of interest to these groups, they have already been traumatised and exposed in multiple ways.

Very often, one of the common responses is, "We contacted the police years ago. Somebody visited. It was never followed up, and we generally were left with the impression of, 'What's the point?'" This is the message. "What is the point of contacting the police when, actually, the perpetrators are not necessarily going to be brought to justice, I am not going to be any safer and the community are going to see me in a certain light for passing information on that, in some cases, they believe should not have been passed on and should have been kept within the community". It comes back to that there really is a challenge for the police, but I have to caveat some of the challenges that have been put to the police. As much as they accept them, there have been really good examples of really good police work along with communities.

In the context where individuals are at risk of exploitation, whether it be a business or an individual, there has been a pilot that began in west Belfast and has now extended into north Belfast. The aim for that is for the police, alongside other statutory agencies in the community, the Housing Executive, the Health and Social Care Trust, the Youth Service and community groups that have some kind of community intelligence and know what is going on in communities, collectively, to assess and appraise the risk that individuals are under and provide a co-ordinated response to that. That has been really effective, and these people who come to that vulnerability hub, if you like, that structure, are really at crisis point. Some of them are at significant risk of significant harm as well as exploitation.

There are examples of where the police work has been exemplary in how they work with communities and where they have found really beneficial solutions to reduce risk and exploitation. They reduced these kinds of things that you are talking about and increased confidence in people that they can find alternative ways of managing and mitigating risk without recourse to negotiating with the organised crime groups themselves.

The problem has been that it has not been replicated. The police as an institution has not seen where this really good work has been happening and look for ways that it can be mainstreamed in some ways. There are examples there. There is a really good example of fantastic work in the north-west, in Derry. Again, that was the police going out on a limb to try something different, the youth service trying something different and the community giving this partnership a go, and that really paid dividends. Unfortunately, the learning from that has not been mainstreamed or scaled up in any way within the police.

Q25 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Thank you for that very comprehensive answer. Another point I would like to raise is that apparently recent statistics on paramilitary activity show a long-term trend in paramilitary-style shootings going down while assaults have remained broadly level. How do you interpret those trends, Dr McAlister? Is there any underlying reason why that is? Is it access to firearms or is it a different type of person who is involved in these assaults?

Dr McAlister: The first thing I would say is we need to be cautious about the focus on these. They do not really capture the level of activity and the full extent of coercive control. While we see fluctuations over time, we also know that looking year on year is not useful because things agitate the situation, so, as Colm says, we need to look at a range of pieces of evidence. The security statistics gives us a partial indication of things that are happening, but, on the ground, in communities, we know that the sense and experience of threat is actually much more pervasive than what these statistics show at all.

Sir Robert Goodwill: We need to treat them with a bit of a pinch of salt.

Dr McAlister: Yes, absolutely.

Q26 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you to all of our witnesses. It is a very interesting conversation. The 2018 Life and Times Survey, across Northern Ireland, says that most people disagree with the idea that paramilitaries create fear or crime in their area, but the survey found that a much greater proportion of those living in Belfast agreed with the idea that there was paramilitary influence in their area. What do you attribute that to?

Professor Morrow: First of all, the phenomenon that we are taking about of armed groups in communities is more concentrated in some of the urban areas and more visible in some of the Belfast and Greater Belfast area, so we would start from the area of visibility. It is locality and culture. All of those things are present in Belfast.

As I said to you at the beginning, some of this stuff about language is really quite important. What a paramilitary is now has become very complicated, and so the idea there was a central control and you just close them down and they are like an organisation is very often not the case. They are very locally variable. They may vary from almost entirely criminal groups in some areas to groups that regard themselves as part of community development. That may be highly contentious, but nevertheless that variation means that people respond very differently in different places to what you are talking about here.

The second thing is that, as I said to you, in Belfast it is part of a long culture too. There is this thing about defending your areas, so it is a thing about moving towards how you get into the rule of law, ensure that coercive control is not normalised and ensure that people have a sense that there are other routes and probably also just the whole relationship with the police, to be honest. On the historic relationship with the police, we still have a lot of work to do to make sure that confidence is built into statutory services.

Q27 **Claire Hanna:** What is the effect of paramilitary flags and murals that fly and stay unmolested on street furniture for a lot of the year, or certainly many months of the year, in a lot of parts in Belfast. What does that convey about the willingness of authorities to address paramilitarism, if you were somebody who was being menaced or your child was being dealt drugs or whatever? What does that project to people about how

seriously we are taking it?

Professor Morrow: The real issue is about the visibility of control and who is in control and how that is brought under any sense of, "Who is actually in charge here and who is the person I have to worry about?" There is a really clear thing about that, and it seems to be unregulated, so it is variable by geography, time and space. It seems to be quite difficult to find a consistent way to respond to that.

The second thing touches, usually but not necessarily always, on the ambiguities that we talked about, with people saying, "This is my community. This is your community". It has an effect, clearly, economically and socially. It has an effect in terms of a sense, particularly, when they become not just flags but painting and murals and all these kinds of things where people feel that it is a coercive instrument and a way of identifying a certain coercive control.

Also, in terms of economic deterrents, it is something about which people start to say, "This is an area that is at risk", so it goes down to this point that we continue all the time here, which is that, to work forward with community consent, this has to become something that is de-normalised. The coercive issues are the really big issues here. We have a community where the problem is that we cannot distinguish between whether these are coercive or are something to do with celebration. Moving forward on that is really going to be critical, and it leaves this whole issue of paramilitarism as well as paramilitaries as a multi-agency approach, which we are going to have to deal with on a lot of different fronts at once.

Q28 **Claire Hanna:** Siobhán, you were nodding there. I do not know if you might want to come in, but I also wanted to ask this. There is obviously a whole strand of work about memorialisation and fetishisation of paramilitaries and things that paramilitaries did that is still bubbling along and sending bad messages. Is there an issue with still organising and funding people on the basis of their identity as a loyalist or a republican, ex-prisoner or paramilitary? Are we perpetuating that, given that people are out of jail for a quarter of a century at this point? Are we locking in some of those identities for people in a way that is elevating those people on that basis as well, making them key community pillars on the basis of that part of their life?

Dr McAlister: I will come in again about the symbolism of the flags and murals and, as the young people called it in our research, the writing on the wall. That is the real firm evidence to young people that you do not speak about this or report this because your name is on the wall one day, and, when your name is scored off the wall the next day, that is the symbol of power that this has been dealt with.

Again, there have been moves there where, as soon as things go up on walls, communities try to remove them very quickly because there is a real understanding of what happens in terms of the labelling of these

individuals, not just in terms of the abuse they experience but then how they are viewed within the community, and almost their so-called punishment being legitimised. This is a huge problem, but it also partly symbolises the difficulty and the issues around policing it.

On the issue around ownership and identity, I was at a meeting recently where Duncan spoke about that. Do you want to come in on that, Duncan?

Professor Morrow: I have probably said enough for a while.

Dr McAlister: I will go back again to research with young people. It is very mixed. Identity is important to young people, and it is important to recognise it and celebrate it and to recognise difference, so it is not always about recognising our similarities but recognising our differences in terms of working communities with young people around identity. Celebrating identity but not in an oppositional manner has really progressed. Again, Colm's work will probably attest to some of that.

Q29 **Claire Hanna:** Colm, is there anything you would want to add to that?

Dr Walsh: I will add one or two sentences on top of what has already been said. There was an interesting piece of work that I was involved in in the aftermath of last spring's riots. That was very much concentrated in PUL communities, and the issue of identity did come into some of the narratives that young people used to explain what was going on in their community and the push and pull factors as the way some young people decided or believed that they should have got involved while other young people were able to maintain some distance from the violence.

One thing that struck me was that, in some communities, there was a real sense of threat from the outside. Part of that threat was changing demographics in their own community, and so symbolism within the community was a way not necessarily to intimidate or to threaten—obviously, there are those connotations—but for those young people, in the way that they explained it, to portray what they believed their community was about, who they were and what their identity was and, in some ways, protect that from what they saw as the threat from outside. That was very prominent across all the interviews. Not all of them described murals or graffiti but there was this sense of threat. The symbolism of murals, flags and graffiti somehow speaks to that.

Q30 **Claire Hanna:** You have all, in some of the questions from colleagues, talked about some of the flaws in the terminology and whether or not "paramilitarism" captures the complex influence exerted by the individuals in groups and also whether it risks legitimising and giving status to criminals who are using coercion and control. I wanted to ask each of you whether it should be defined in a different way and whether there is a way that you can simply distinguish paramilitarism from organised crime.

Professor Morrow: We did a bit of thinking about this. The term "paramilitary" is, as you say, deeply ambiguous. It sometimes gives a cover. The stuff about paramilitary-style attacks seems to suggest it has some kind of legitimacy in attacking young people, so, on that coercive point, it is really very important that we change our language around that and start focusing on the victims rather than on the alleged legitimacy around it because it is never legitimate to do that as far as I can see.

The second thing is there is a problem with the term "paramilitary", as I say, because very often it ends up on the ground, and people say, in some communities, "This is nothing to do with us because we do not have paramilitaries". In other communities, they say, "This is all about targeting us because loyalists are the only paramilitaries", so it ends up being anti-loyalist.

We need to move to "unlawfully armed groups" because the actual prize here is not even paramilitaries or paramilitarism. It is this thing about exclusively peaceful means and that everything in this society should be resolved by exclusively peaceful means. The objection is this organisation of organised, armed, unlawful groups.

There is of course a difficulty in something that is so deeply ensconced in this language. At the same time, we really need to be very careful about our terminology now because of either giving legitimacy to it, as you say, particularly in relation to coercive control, or, on the other hand, targeting certain communities and not seeing this as a more general issue.

Thirdly—this is something we have to face—paramilitaries are not organisations with clear-cut membership where you close the door like a company and it just ceases to trade. They exist within wider concerns that Colm has articulated there a little bit about, for example, the political and culture future of the community where that legitimacy needs to be dealt with on its own way.

Also, a final thing, which is complicated, is something that I did refer to, which is the fact that sometimes, at times of political crisis, for example, the voice of paramilitaries is raised into the centre of the political environment. It seems to go right up to the top and so on. That becomes really problematic if you are saying that is or is not a legitimate voice. It raises the question of where the voice of the working class community comes from. That is a particular problem at the moment among loyalists. If there is not a voice from there, how do we get a proper community voice coming into that? That is a challenge to unionist political parties, but it is also a challenge to us, to make sure there is not a democratic conversation that leaves large parts of our community outside.

Q31 **Claire Hanna:** Colm and Siobhán, do either of you want to add anything to that?

Dr Walsh: I have one very brief point, just in terms of terminology. Not to go over what has already been said so far, but one of the other problems with maintaining this language is not just around how we frame it. Also, we actually lose sight of the evidence beyond the shores of Northern Ireland. There is a lot we can learn from decades of evidence around some of this stuff, but the continual focus on paramilitarism and this sense that we are somehow unique within the context of the rest of the world and what is going on means that we lose sight of the wider evidence base. That is not helpful.

It has been helpful, as everybody has alluded to, to draw on the evidence base around public health, but part of that is that we need to shift the narrative and change the definitions to be able to access some of that evidence around what potentially can enable communities to thrive and reduce vulnerabilities more broadly.

Q32 **Chair:** Can I just ask about children and young people post 1998? The Prime Minister made an observation in the *Belfast Telegraph* on Monday where he spoke of a growing number of people not viewing themselves as living in a post-conflict society because that is all they have ever known because they are the post-1998 generation. For some, however, there is a romanticisation of what we colloquially call the Troubles. There is a bravado and a testosterone nature to it all, et cetera, and a simplification and glorification of violence. People do not remember the blood on the streets, the burnt-out buildings and cars and the body parts of the bomb victims, et cetera, being picked out of rubble and the like.

How do we ensure that the current generation of young and future do not fall back into thinking that this was a time of great glorious tribalism and all the rest of it, i.e. there is no merit in slipping back? One of the ways they will do that is, of course, by joining paramilitary groups as runners or lookouts, providing snippets of information or carrying stuff in bags and so on and so forth.

Dr McAlister: It is perhaps a bit of a simplification to think that children and young people do not have an understanding of what happened during the conflict.

Q33 **Chair:** My question was about how we make sure that everybody remembers and knows about the full horror.

Dr McAlister: Many do because many hear about it within their communities and families. Many families are reliving the trauma of the past in this so-called post-conflict environment. It is on the news all the time in the form of historical inquiries and threats of violence, so children and young people are surrounded by the legacies of the past and violence. Certainly in our research, there is not much evidence that violence is glorified. There is evidence that it is normalised in some respects because communities have lived with this for generations and decades. Children and young people grow up with it, so this pervasive

undercurrent of control and threat within their communities is the backdrop to their lives.

What children and young people tend to do is manage their lives in ways to keep safe within that environment. Part of that process is normalising, keeping your head down and feeling that it does not have any impact on you because you do not bring yourself to the attention of these people. When you look more deeply into children and young people's experiences, you see the many ways in which living within these environments very much impacts upon their lives. It impacts on how they feel safe. It impacts on that sense that violence could erupt at any time. There are lots of examples that they point to in relation to that. It impacts on freedom of movement and how much they feel they can actually say about things, so we have to recognise that this issue is pervasive, so children and young people experience it all the time.

In terms of the pulls into paramilitary groups for young people, we have all alluded to these. There is that political pull, and part of that is potentially some individuals glorifying the past or igniting tensions and issues, but a lot more of it seems to be related to socioeconomic issues and lack of opportunities and alternatives. It is partly there where our focus has to be.

Additionally, we also need to call this out for what it is. We need to call it child criminal exploitation, as I have said, rather than recruitment. There are very clear examples from our research of young people being groomed and not even realising that they are getting involved in these groups because they are doing jobs for them or doing favours. It then turns into drug debts, and then they cannot get out of these groups. Those are some of my reflections.

Chair: That is a very useful observation with regards to the idea of grooming, because grooming is not just about sexual exploitation; it can be all sort of others.

Professor Morrow: I have a couple of points to add to that one, because it is important. Peter Shirlow's research suggests that there is a bit of a division and that, in other words, what the Prime Minister was referring to—this generation of people for whom the Troubles are behind them—is very strongly represented in some of the suburban and middle-class parts of Northern Ireland now, where there is a sense that, "That has nothing to do with me anymore". That is very different from some of the areas where paramilitaries are present, where, frankly, in some parts of Northern Ireland, I would describe it as walking around in an open-air museum, where you simply are reminded of everything around you all the time.

There is a stark division, which may be something to do with income and class as much as anything else, so we have to look at this as a continuing issue. The second thing that derives from that is this process of tackling paramilitarism for communities also needs to be framed as a positive

process where the main benefit is actually in the communities. It is not simply taking out a cancer, which would also take out a large part of the healthy material of already difficult communities. It is actually about developing pathways, for example, towards what a healthy community might look like, away from coercive control, for example, away from intimidation and threats, where weaponry is no longer the only option you have.

We need to articulate that some of the benefits of this are not just for wider society; they are actually very local, and this is actually about dealing with some of this glorification; there are better pathways. That is where some of them multiple-messaging and multi-agency approach has become very important again.

Q34 **Chair:** Could I ask one of you just to give an observation or two on unexplained wealth orders?

Professor Morrow: The unexplained wealth orders are ways in which we might be able to tackle. In the south of Ireland, they have been much more able to use the criminal assets approach to dealing with some of the obvious concentrations of unexplained wealth. That might be something to explore. I was speaking to people in the Policing Authority in the south. They were saying they have made a lot of progress on some of that, so there may be learnings to be had, which would actually be a vehicle through which some of this could be tackled at a policing level. I do not know enough about it in specifics to be able to say more than that.

Q35 **Chair:** I remember very clearly a community leader saying to me that everybody just sees this as being endemic and perennial, because you have godfathers who are making a lot of money on the black market, cash in hand, extortion and HMRC are nowhere to be seen, et cetera. Why would you want to break that model when you would actually have to get off your backside and get a PAYE 9-to-5 job and go legit? You then feel perfectly normal rather than a small man—I say this at five foot seven—being made to feel bigger by having lots of young running around you and doing your bidding. It is small-man syndrome, is it not?

Professor Morrow: This is where this issue of paramilitarism becomes complex because there are some areas where that kind of picture that you have portrayed is very much the picture that comes across about the type of coercion that people are under and that it has become a way to economic power for people who otherwise would not have it, and there is unexplained wealth, which, as you say, is continuous. I certainly think that that kind of intelligence-led type of approach to policing has opportunities to deal with that and that it should be explored. I am sure it has been explored within the policing frames.

Q36 **Claire Hanna:** Again, you have mentioned young people and women and the specific impacts that it is having. In terms of the presence of paramilitaries, does it affect educational attainment and social

development of children and young people? To what extent is the state meeting its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child? Siobhán, I thought that would work well with your research.

Dr McAlister: It is a really important issue to raise, and I think it is really important that we frame this as a children's rights issue. It may have taken some time for us to do that, but we are seeing changes there. When we ground this as a children's rights issue, we see the wide range of impacts that this type of violence can have on children and young people and on families. By employing the definition of violence used in the UNCRC, we also move away from this hierarchy of violence, where we almost privilege and prioritise particularly types of physical violence in our media campaigns and our service responses.

It is very clear. Obviously, as I said, I have concerns about the statistics. We have talked about concerns with the language of paramilitary-style attacks. It really grates on me when some of these figures come out and says that no one under the age of 18 was attacked, yet all the evidence from all our research shows the multiple ways in which children and young people experience violence, this type of violence and the harms related to it within their community.

We also know that, when children experience violence, it impacts on lots of their other rights and their ability to realise their other rights. This is where some of the really in-depth qualitative research can pick up those experiences for young people. We have the generic, everyday experiences of violence within communities and how that impacts, as we say, on children's rights to movement, to free assembly and to feel safe. We then have those children who are threatened, abused and exiled from their communities. It is not only the impact of that physical violence. We actually really know very little about the long-term mental health impacts of these.

Again, just to draw on examples from our research, we had an experience of a young man who was given a threat order. He was put out of his community for his own safety. That resulted in him being put out of his course in college because he was seen as putting others at risk by being there. He was completely isolated from his support networks and his family. It also sends a message to the community that this person has done something wrong, so it is almost like layers and layers of harm that are impacting on young people.

When we frame it in terms of human rights and children's rights, we see that the state has a duty to prevent violence against children, including paramilitary-style violence. It has a responsibility to protect children, and this is where these issues are around child protection and naming this as child abuse but also in terms of redress. What are the services there? If we do not see this as an issue or define it as an issue and if we are not measuring it, then how are we responding to it? Our current generation of children are our future generation of parents. We talk about this cycle and this trans-generational impact and legacy of trauma and trans-

generational trauma, so it is important to ground it in rights because it allows us that wider view and analysis of the issue and impacts.

Q37 **Claire Hanna:** To what extent have women's and young women's experience in particular of paramilitarism been understood? How can we understand that better and utilise that to tackle the effects of paramilitarism? I know there have been workstreams in the Fresh Start addressing, trying to address or proposing to address women in paramilitarism. How successful have they been specifically?

Dr McAlister: Again, if we look at how violence and political violence have been defined and measured, research tends to focus on particular types of violence. Therefore, it invisibilises other experiences, so we have found that women's experiences have been very invisible, and young women's experiences have perhaps been even more invisible. That was very evident in the first phase of the tackling paramilitarism programme, whereby youth services, by default, focused on young men and the women in communities programme focused on adult women. What happens if we do not write young women into policies is that they fall by the wayside almost by default.

It is the same with research. There has been research done specifically on young men or young people, but very little has disaggregated some of that. If we do not start to examine this issue, we are never going to respond to it. What our gender approach to looking at young women's experiences showed is that they do not define their own experiences of harm and violence as legitimate because they compare it to the public narrative about what the most harmful forms of violence are. Again, this perpetuates this notion that some people are more deserving of services or victim status.

To be fair, there has been some change in that, and Colm has alluded to this. One of the positive aspects of the tackling paramilitarism programme is that they draw on evidence and different types of evidence because you do not get to that granular detail of young women's experiences without taking the time to talk with them. They are not going to pick it up in some of the more—

Q38 **Chair:** Could I just clarify: when we use the word "experience", is that experience by experiencing the disruption and the impacts or the experience of being recruited to be a practitioner? All the pictures we ever see on our TV screens and newspapers and the like are young men in hoodies, usually; you do not see young girls wandering around throwing petrol bombs and the like. When we talk about experience, is it experience as in impact or experience of getting involved?

Dr McAlister: It has to be both. The point is that, because our programmes and our research focuses on young men, we do not know the full extent of the experiences of women. We know that young women are exploited by these groups, if we want to call it that, in terms of being

recruited through debt and drugs. Again, vulnerable young women are preyed on in similar ways to young men.

Q39 **Chair:** We are teasing this out. Yes, through drugs, through debt, et cetera, they are the victims of this, and that is important. In terms of the practice of extortion, illegality and anti-social behaviour, are you saying that your hunch is that women are taking part in it or that we do not know because nobody has ever thought to look?

Dr McAlister: We have some evidence that women are absolutely being involved in this for similar reasons, in terms of those socioeconomic reasons and the precarious position that some are in. Some of Colm's research on the women's programme might speak to that.

Q40 **Claire Hanna:** It is not quite a tangent, but we had a very good session last summer with different voices and women from across the women's sector. It was around some of the tension and the projection around the protocol. It was post those spring riots. They characteristically got a lot of flak for coming and giving contrary narratives to us.

Is that an issue as well in terms of myth-making, defining identity and projecting the view of a particular community? Is there anything you are finding in your research about the extent to which women's voices are or are not being included. Obviously, I am not under any coercive control by paramilitaries in any way, shape or form, but I know a huge amount of the commentary that I get is about speaking too much and getting above your station and all that. It gives a wee bit of an insight into a mindset about the role of women.

Professor Morrow: I want to confirm what Siobhán said about this being an extremely gendered experience, in my experience. The nature of the participation and harm is therefore complex. The Chair's direct question about who is actually doing the extortion tends to put the focus on to men. The harms are then what is left, which are an extremely gendered coercive control model in which there is a strong sense of what you are talking about: the marginalisation of certain voices, having to be always on the receiving end of those kinds of controls, so that is a question on two sides of what is sometimes referred to as toxic masculinity and, on the other side, as coercive control. That whole issue has a gendered element to it.

At a more generic level, and quite importantly in terms of moving on, part of what we are looking for here is not just getting rid of paramilitaries. It is creating healthy communities. Creating healthy communities, women's community development, the whole involvement of how we do democracy in these communities and who gets a voice and who gets a say are really big issues in gender in terms of building that on. Now, of course, that can become a very broad focus, but, in this work, we always have to keep our focus on two things. One is the focus on the perpetrators and victims, but the other is this wider harm and the creation of a community we are going to move forward to, where there is

a huge amount of gender work, both at the contributory level but also at the problem level, that we have to address.

Q41 **Chair:** Could I just ask one of you to talk us through your understanding, experience or knowledge of coercion, grooming, intimidation and recruitment through social media, that invisible but often pernicious platform?

Dr McAlister: I can say a little about that. I assume Colm probably can in terms of his research with young people. Yes, young people certainly talk more about gaining knowledge about attacks and threats. It goes back to that point that, in some respects, this is everywhere. It is everywhere in your community and now it is everywhere in the different mediums that it comes from, so there is pervasive knowledge and information going to young people about this. Also, some young people talk about receiving threats via social media as well, and they never know how real those threats are or whether they are ever lifted. Often, they are living long term under this fear that they could be attacked at any time.

In terms of recruitment through social media, there is some research that has spoken to inciting young people towards rioting and violence and using social media as a means of disseminating information on that. Colm, I do not know if that came up in relation to your work on the recent riots.

Dr Walsh: Yes, absolutely. It was very clear from what the young people were saying about those pull factors towards the riots. There was definitely a social media aspect to that, which is interesting and also dangerous because, when we put that in the context of criminal exploitation, a lot of the time the messages that young people were getting were not directly from paramilitary groups. They were not from individuals that are believed to be associated with paramilitary groups, but, actually, there was a snowball effect, which often happens where messages that request they attend certain places go viral within peer groups. If you work it back, it was very clear that it was instigated and organised, and one can assume that the individuals who were organising it were associated with paramilitary groups, so it is interesting. I agree with Siobhán. I have not come across much evidence of the use of social media for recruitment as such.

Q42 **Chair:** I was shown something this morning posted on Facebook. Let me just read you a little bit of it: "Loyalist paramilitaries should now be thinking of joining as one army. Forget all the jealousy and feuds and backstabbing. The people of our country are calling for unity. I believe this must start in the ranks of men"—there we are: "men"—"who are prepared to stand, fight and win, which there is no doubt they will. A united Ireland is a pipe dream and Sinn Fein know it. If England won't stand with us then we can stand alone. We done it before and we will do it again. Politicians are not to be trusted, and so we go on. Ordinary loyalists are sick and tired of empty promises. If you can't stand up then

get out of the way and let true men sort this out".

Are the social media platforms doing enough, conscious of the history, to monitor more closely these things and take down what is clearly a clarion call to violence and illegality.

Dr Walsh: Broadly speaking, that is a difficult one, and that is an ongoing challenge in a whole range of areas. In some ways, I am not surprised by that message.

Chair: It is, but I am asking about this one.

Dr Walsh: Yes, absolutely, and the incitement there is, in some ways, not surprising. I suppose that is the point. In terms of the role that social media companies have in that, I am not sure there is an easy answer to that. It is an ongoing debate.

Professor Morrow: There are two sides to it. Young people are facing an amplification of all sorts of things through social media, also even the attention and the way coercive control is reported is right across social media. Young people come under pressure at an individual level. That is one thing.

The other thing is, working with youth workers, we also, as well as being horrified, need to look at it as an indicator of things that are actually happening in the community, so there is both the direct issue with what the social media providers and what they are allowing on to their platforms but also then the recognition that some of this is reflective of the discussion that young people are in from all sorts of different pressures. For us, it is a very good wake-up call that some of these things are moving around our communities, so it is that slight double thing. There is no doubt at all that it amplifies the coercion on young people and that some of these issues, at various times, do heighten the nature of the debate.

Dr Walsh: I have one point on that, to pick up on what you are saying, Duncan. Within that, it is very difficult to regulate, particularly whenever there is a lot of anonymity on social media. It is very difficult to regulate the messages that are posted. What the response could be and should be, and where there is some demonstrable impact, is about the supports that young people have in the community to break down these messages, to challenge some of the rhetoric that is being used and some of these truths that are being presented to young people.

To use that example, Chair, that you presented there, for a young man, given the way that this is presented, what is the alternative for them? They are put in a position where they feel that, if they do not defend their community they are not part of the community or they have let down their community, which speaks to some of these narratives around masculinity. Duncan mentioned toxic masculinity, so you find that youth workers are very often in the space of engaging vulnerable young people, targeting those most vulnerable and challenging some of these messages

that are being publicly put out through unregulated social media messages. That is where we have seen some impact.

Q43 **Stephen Farry:** I have one final question, which is primarily aimed at Duncan. How do we define what a transition is, either for an individual or a group? What would be the characteristics of that? Just as a second aspect to that, what are your views on the concept of a dedicated process of engagement aimed at disbandment or transition, as the Independent Reporting Commission has been suggesting?

Professor Morrow: Our feeling is that the first thing is that transition is just a description of movement. We need an end goal; the discussion has to have an end goal. This issue of disbandment and the definition of disbandment needs to be at the core of it. Otherwise, we end up with an endless loop with people being in transition, but it is more like Brownian Motion or something; it is cells moving around in different ways. This is a process with an end goal, and that goal has been set by Fresh Start, as far as I know, which is that there is no longer any practical coercive presence of armed groups in the communities. That is measurable at all sorts of different levels. Now, there are all sorts of questions about the process of transition.

The second thing is that it is a group issue. The disbandment of groups is the disbandment of groups, but, in practice, we also know that the groups that currently exist now in Northern Ireland are of various variable natures, so our difficulty is that the practicalities of this will have to be discussed. The transition process needs to be about the practicalities of moving towards disbandment and how we achieve that.

The question of engagement is similar. Engagement is, of course, a useful process, and, as far as possible, if we can do this in some kind of form, that would be useful, but there is another sense in which engagement too becomes detached from its purpose and that the idea is actually, again, engagement to enable the process of disbandment. You asked about definitions. We need a common definition of what we mean by disbandment, and it has to be, essentially, to do with the ending of all activity related to coercion in armed and non-legal activity. Then the question of what that means in structural terms need to be defined.

The second element is that this issue of both transition and engagement being to the wider purpose of disbandment needs to be put back into the equation, as far as we are concerned. Otherwise, it ends up being a very long-term discursive process without any goals or measurable goals of where we are actually trying to get to.

Chair: Can I thank our three witnesses very much indeed for your attendance this morning and for your contributions? You have given us plenty of food for thought, information and ideas to explore in future evidence inquiries. Thank you very much indeed for your time.