

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 26 October 2022

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 44 - 86

Witnesses

I: Mark McEwan, Assistant Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland; Andy Hill, Detective Chief Superintendent, Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#))

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark McEwan and Andy Hill.

Q44 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues. Good morning, Assistant Chief Constable and Detective Chief Superintendent. Thank you for joining us this morning for our important inquiry on paramilitarism and its effect on society in Northern Ireland. We are very grateful to you for finding the time this morning. I wonder if you could kick off by describing, in thumbnail sketch, the current landscape, as you assess it as the PSNI, of the range, scope, activities and quantum of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

Mark McEwan: First of all, thank you very much for hearing our evidence here today. It is important that we start off by articulating the range of organised groups, and I narrow that down in terms of paramilitarism that the PSNI has to deal with. When we think about organised crime groups, as they would be traditionally known across the United Kingdom, we have assessed 68 of those. As a characteristic, they tend to have north-south and east-west activity. They are solely focused on crime, mainly drug importation, as the Committee will be aware.

It does not really matter what the commodity is. They deal in people trafficking and people smuggling. Out of those 68, 22% have a cross-border footprint, and 32% have a direct link to paramilitary groups. When we talk about paramilitary groups as we know them, they operate as OCGs—organised crime groups—but at a lower level. They tend to be localised. They tend to be motivated by both money but also power and local control. They tend to have a political motivation, both in the present day, as we have seen at certain junctures, but also using that as a veneer of legitimacy, reaching back to the past in terms of how they present themselves to local communities and in terms of recruiting.

Q45 **Chair:** When you use the word “power”, does that mean intimidation?

Mark McEwan: It is both intimidation and trying to present themselves as a protector of that community, if that makes sense.

Chair: We used to call them vigilantes.

Mark McEwan: It is more nuanced than that, in terms of how they appeal to young people in terms of recruitment, and how they sometimes assist at times of community strife. They view it as assisting, but then we all know the huge harm that they create by their type of justice and their type of control.

It is also important that we emphasise the work the PSNI is doing, along with partners in MI5 and others, in terms of terrorist groups that are still with us, particularly the New IRA, the Continuity IRA and ONH. If I may just give an idea of the scale of the task in front of PSNI, since its conception the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, which is what we will focus on today, has conducted 842 searches, 373 arrests, 323 charges or



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reports, and over 200 seizures of weapons and ammunition. That is over a five-year period since November 2017.

In the last financial year, the tempo was high for our operational activity. We have carried out 391 searches, 220 arrests and 178 charges or reports against organised crime groups. Since April 2021, the PCTF figures stand at 268 searches, 118 arrests and 111 charged or reported. Indeed, in the Terrorism Investigation Unit, against NIRA and CIRA in particular, we have had 156 searches, 111 arrests, 22 charges and 41 reports. In addition to that, there have been eight arrests in charges in relation to the Lyra McKee murder that took place in 2019.

I outline that to give some sense of the scale of the task facing PSNI. I know we will focus particularly on paramilitary groups, which are primarily acted against by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, but it is important to say that all these other things become conflated in the minds of the community, and they are all pressures on law enforcement. We are a core part of the battle.

Q46 Chair: Do you get annoyed when the media and politicians use the word "paramilitary" rather than just "criminals", "thugs" or "gangsters"? "Paramilitary" sounds rather grand, glamorous, sexy and noble.

Mark McEwan: There is something in the use of language. There is something about how we define people who have a grip on the community and cause harm. We know that, as criminal groups, the paramilitaries tend not to be at the scale, complexity or capability of competing organised crime groups, but they do have that disproportionate control and harm effect in their communities, so it is something that we need to discuss. It is something we need to figure out. It is so baked into the lexicon here. I certainly do not get annoyed by it, but it is worth further consideration in terms of how they then appeal to young people here in particular, linking back to that question about their perceived legitimacy.

Q47 Chair: You talked about the range of criminality. Could you give us an assessment of involvement in fraud and scamming, whether it is welfare fraud or cybercrime? Are they moving into that territory at speed?

Mark McEwan: No. The vast bulk of our fraud now takes place, as it does across the UK, largely by organised groups outside the jurisdiction, so it is cyber-enabled. Where we see extortion, it is probably more paramilitary-based, or paramilitary-focused, money-laundering and extortion, in traditional terms. We saw that particularly through the pandemic in some loyalist areas, where loyalist paramilitary groups called in debts because everyone's finances were becoming straitened, which caused further problems in those communities.

It is not particularly a change in crime type but, as I said earlier, 32% of our organised crime groups have a direct link to paramilitaries, so in terms of importation of drugs, they are becoming more ambitious. They



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are becoming more networked and buying into the business model of an organised crime group. That said, they still do not reach the threshold for the likes of unexplained wealth orders that organised crime groups would, because they are not as successful in monetary terms.

Q48 Chair: We were going to ask about unexplained wealth orders. Is that something we would like to see? It is wrong to impose a uniform hurdle, given the pro-rata size of Northern Ireland.

Mark McEwan: Yes, there is room for nuance within this. We have really good relationships with HMRC and NCA, particularly around the joining up of intelligence systems. Where paramilitary groups do not meet the threshold that organised crime groups would, we have been successful in altering some of those thresholds on an operational basis, recognising the disproportionate impact they have on communities. When we are looking at overall things like unexplained wealth orders, it is something that we would welcome an examination of, to allow us to impact further on paramilitary groupings.

Andy Hill: Just to echo those comments, you will be aware that the current thresholds for unexplained wealth orders are within the remit of the NCA. There is a minimum monetary value of around £50,000, which is set in legislation, but to speak to your question, some of the key things are around how it gives us a tactical ability to challenge where there is income that we suspect has come from criminal activity, or if they have assets that extend beyond what you would reasonably expect them to be able to afford. We would value any option we have that allows us to challenge that while working with partners.

Q49 Mr Walker: Thank you for the evidence you are giving. The Fresh Start agreement set out to eradicate paramilitarism. From that perspective you would hope that, so many years on, we would see some progress on that. How effective have the measures it set out, combining policing and justice measures, been at tackling the socioeconomic issues behind paramilitarism? Also, if we look at it on a locality basis, which I know you have set out in your evidence as important, are there any examples you can give of localities that were under paramilitary coercion and have come out from under that paramilitary coercion during the period since the Fresh Start agreement?

Chair: Before you answer that, I probably should have said this at the start. Just for clarity, Mr Walker has joined the Committee as of this morning. We have had a number of rapid twists and turns in who is and is not a Minister and when. It is almost like Top Trumps at the moment.

Claire Hanna: It sounds like you are saying, "He is only new".

Chair: No. The point I am making, just for clarity, is that Mr Walker is here as a member of the Committee. Unfortunately, he is not a Minister at the NIO.

Mr Walker: I have not been for some time, to be fair.



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Chair: I know you have not been, but I just thought to say that for the purposes of clarity.

Stephen Farry: The day is young.

Fay Jones: He may be the shortest-serving member of the Committee we have.

Chair: I think that was Robert Buckland, but he could also make a return. Let us move to an answer to that question, having made that clarification.

Mark McEwan: Yes, we are making progress. We are having an impact. In the last 10 years, in terms of security trends, this has been the lowest for the number of shootings and bombings. I am talking about within communities and things like pipe bombs at the lower end as well. It is the lowest for casualties of paramilitary-style shootings and the lowest for paramilitary-style assaults. By those stark statistics, we are making an impact.

In terms of the locality work and where policing sits in this, when we think about the programme itself, the Paramilitary Crime Task Force is effectively an enforcement body, like any other regional organised crime unit that you would see in GB. When it comes to neighbourhood policing and the community safety element of community policing, of course we have a leading role within that, but we are one seat at the table. For us, part of the challenge in discussing paramilitarism is that it is never going to be solved by policing.

In terms of the locality work, we lean in quite heavily where we can, and we have seen a number of successes, but they tend to be quite localised and initiative-based. We are starting to see some of that take shape with greater impact now, just over the last year or so, but these things do take time, so the huge effort that has been done outwith policing within community groups and led by the programme is starting to take shape.

As well as that, we have made great strides in identifying individuals in a more systemic way who might be vulnerable to paramilitary influence or attack. In particular, these are young or other vulnerable people who are subject to fairly chaotic lifestyles. Working collaboratively with other agencies and PCSPs—policing and community safety partnerships—we have made really good progress in terms of identifying them early and intervening earlier but, as I say, policing is one part of that jigsaw.

Q50 Mr Walker: It is that joint working that can often make a real difference over time. It is not something that is necessarily going to deliver at once. Do you feel that the development of multi-agency support hubs has contributed to the effect of reducing paramilitary violence, and those figures that you state in terms of the reductions in injuries? Do you think some of that can be attributed to joint working?



Mark McEwan: In terms of a direct link, I do not know if the evidence takes us there but, from my professional judgment, yes, absolutely. In terms of the piece I spoke about just a moment ago, in terms of identifying individuals who are likely to be preyed upon by paramilitaries or by other groups, whether they be localised organised crime groups or those seeking to exploit people through sexual exploitation, for example, multi-agency support hubs have had a major impact in taking those vulnerable people out of that pathway earlier on.

We have made great progress, particularly through the pandemic, with partners in health and education, both in that regard and in identifying the individuals. Giving credit to the Education Authority in terms of outreach work at the very difficult end, when we were looking at situations potentially tipping over into disorder, they have been there and been able to bring that situation back to normality prior to the police intervening, which is always very welcome.

We need more of that. We need more systemic and probably more ambitious infrastructure and employment-led initiatives to look at areas of deprivation. When we talk about locality work, yes, it is working very well as a community, bottom-up approach. Looking at initiatives, there are many, and the Department will be able to talk much more comprehensively about that. When we look across Executive functions, at the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for Communities and the Department for Finance, the big initiatives, for want of a better description, or that systemic approach around creating employment and changing the local landscape is where we will see a seismic shift, if we can get that up and running.

Q51 Mr Walker: Thank you. That is a very complete answer. I have one last question. Do you see a public health approach to violence contributing to this, or does that create any tensions when it comes to your role in policing?

Mark McEwan: I do not think it does. From a harm reduction and problem-solving perspective, that is absolutely where we want to be. We are seeing an increase in drugs deaths through poly-drug use, largely supplied over the internet. With the crime types that we are talking about here in public space, and the harm that is committed in people's homes, the public health approach has to be the one we take. To try to arrest or police our way out of this simply will not tackle the causation factors. Some of those are deprivation and the mental health issues that we are seeing an increase in, all of which is preyed upon by these groups.

Q52 Fay Jones: Mr Walker has largely covered it, and I think I know the answer to this question, but you were talking about the multi-agency approach there, and I think you called for more infrastructure. Do you think there ought to be one single body that has the responsibility for overseeing that multi-agency approach, or do you think that is happening at the moment? Should there be a board that co-ordinates that?



Mark McEwan: We have the tackling paramilitarism programme and the community safety board, both of which have produced effective results in the last couple of years; the tackling paramilitarism programme did so before that. When I talk about infrastructure, I merely used the Department of Infrastructure as an example. Looking at the problems of this type across Northern Ireland, where there is a correlation between paramilitary grip on communities and deprivation, what I am referring to is, at an Executive level, how investment and job creation feature at a macro level in terms of breaking that grip of paramilitaries by creating other alternative employment opportunities.

For example, for people who join any organised group, whether it is an organised crime group or a paramilitary-style group, or potentially even in terms of violent extremists, a lot of research, both here and in places like London, has shown that people are creating identity, status and security. These are all the things that people in traditional society do. These competing groups have their own social and justice structures, as perverse as they are, and an ability to provide some of that status and economic reward, so that is what we are competing with. At a macro level, we need to understand how to create, within traditional society, employment, security and identity for those people as an alternative to these groups.

Q53 **Stephen Farry:** On a slightly different tack, and without mentioning any individuals by name, I just want to ask about how the police approach people who are well known and understood in certain communities to be paramilitary leaders, but who are also wearing a hat as community leaders or community representatives. How do the police engage with those communities while avoiding, at the same time, inadvertently reinforcing the status of those people at the expense of other voices inside those communities?

Mark McEwan: Our commitment to neighbourhood policing is clear. We have a push and an effort to hear different voices in our communities, such as women's voices and those of the most vulnerable, and indeed through the broad spectrum of communities that are changing. We will also go where the evidence takes us. There is an underlying train of thought that we are sometimes political in how we approach this, and we are categorically not. Where we find criminality, we will deal with it. Where we suspect criminality, we will deal with it. There are leaders within communities who do not have a formal role, but we will engage with them as well in terms of understanding that community and finding out how best we can address their needs.

Q54 **Stephen Farry:** In that regard, do you appreciate that there is a risk that, if short of criminal evidence, you are engaging with people to negotiate and broker outcomes in communities who people understand to be paramilitaries? Does that contradict the broader message of the anti-paramilitarism agenda, in the sense that you are sending out a very big mixed signal?



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Mark McEwan: I do not know that policing is sending out a very mixed signal. We work with communities. Policing with the community is our overarching strategy. We seek to hear people's voices. We seek to hear the voices of everyone in the community. The nuances of Northern Ireland make that an allegation that is easily made and difficult to refute. It is not unique to policing.

Stephen Farry: It is certainly not. I agree with you on that point.

Mark McEwan: We have a very clear focus around dealing with criminality, supporting communities and working very hard at community level to hear voices right across the community about their needs.

Q55 **Chair:** Just following up on Mr Farry's question, would you do, for want of a better phrase, due diligence? A number of people are concerned about giving people the imprimatur of status and legitimacy by engaging with the police, identifying them as community leaders. Do you do as much as you can in order to ensure that you are not sitting down with gang leaders who happen to be wearing a different or more convenient hat that day?

Mark McEwan: The short answer is yes. We engage with people at quite a complex number of levels, from PCSPs, which are the formal route, to properly constituted community groups and local groups, as you would expect police to do in any part of the United Kingdom. We follow a model of policing by consent. It is inevitable in Northern Ireland that there will be individuals within some of those groups who have a different past, and we will work our way through that. Where we believe there are people who are currently involved in criminality, we do everything we can to do our job and to pursue a justice outcome against them. That is not always feasible, but that is our role.

Q56 **Chair:** What do you mean when you say it is not always feasible?

Mark McEwan: If we have people we might suspect are involved with criminality, we make appeals to the public to give us information. We need intelligence and information to work off. I just mean that, at the very lowest level, there may be speculation within the community that someone is involved in something, but that is different from proceeding with a criminal justice approach to them.

Chair: Unless somebody provides—

Mark McEwan: That is not what I am saying.

Q57 **Chair:** Does that rule out being proactive? That seems a rather reactive approach to these matters.

Mark McEwan: No. I have given at the outset some very clear commitment to proactive law enforcement activity.

Chair: You did, which is why what you have just said seemed to be in slight contradiction to it.



Mark McEwan: I think where Mr Farry is going with this is, at a very local level within communities, there are people who seek to act as gatekeepers who are connected to paramilitary groups. Do we reinforce that position by negotiating with them? No, we do not. We do not negotiate with them. We hear from our communities at a varied and complex level, which is what I have tried to outline here.

Q58 **Stephen Farry:** The answers are helpful, but for a lot of elected representatives, we nonetheless see this pattern happening repeatedly. For example, I once remember a new commander coming into an area and the first photograph that appeared in the local paper was him shaking the hand of the person who was widely known to be a leading paramilitary in the area. That type of thing sends out a signal that those are the people that the police are talking to, and if an alternative voice wants to have the courage to come forward, they may not get the same audience or they are not going to be listened to.

To be fair to you, Mark, this is an issue across the public sector. This is not purely a police issue, but far too often the impression is that the public sector often engages through the line of least resistance in communities, which is to talk to the people who are the loudest voices at the expense of others.

Mark McEwan: I cannot speak to the individual incident because I am unaware of it. Where people who have had former paramilitary connections are involved in other constitutionally formed groups, we engage with them. They are often supported through various levels in government. We work incredibly hard to hear a wide range of voices across the community spectrum, and that is recognised in the sense that policing is probably at the forefront of that.

We are also at the forefront, as you would expect, of carrying out enforcement activity against these groups. Whilst I understand the point that you are making, Mr Farry, given the nuances of Northern Ireland, it is unfair to levy that at policing. As you have said yourself, it is a problem across the spectrum and also one that requires political will to move this on.

Q59 **Stephen Farry:** I do not want to labour this for too long, but this becomes particularly apparent around things like paramilitary flags going up, and murals and walls that are celebrating paramilitaries. The approach from the public sector police and road service is that we remove these by negotiation, which means negotiating with the people who put them up in the first place. Is that type of mindset a particularly challenging one?

Mark McEwan: Obviously, flags and emblems are greatly contentious in Northern Ireland. On a number of occasions, we have been through the legal groundings around what is and is not commemorative, which I know, from Mr Farry's point of view, will seem almost pedantic, but it is a legal issue that we have to work our way through.



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I have also spoken with politicians around how we go about addressing these issues. I would point to our approach to internment-style bonfires in 2020 and 2021. We saw a huge reduction in those bonfires when politicians at ministerial level empowered other agencies, with the support of policing, to take action early to deal with the issue. What we have here is a societal issue that needs to be addressed across the board, across the spectrum of the Executive, and at various levels of political leadership within Northern Ireland, to empower other agencies to do their bit, supported by the police, but it is not something where we wait until it happens and then get on the toes of the police to say, "Can you solve this for us?"

Q60 Chair: Mr McEwan, you have twice used the phrase, "the nuance of Northern Ireland". None of us around this table is deaf to what you mean by that, but can you give us an assurance that there is not too much of an attitude of, "We all know the history. It is Northern Ireland," and so on? Can you assure us that the policing of organised crime, intimidation, sex trafficking and people trafficking is not in any way diminished as a result of a nod to nuance, and is as robust as if it was taking place in Dorset, Worcestershire, Yorkshire, or Brecon and Radnor?

Mark McEwan: For clarity, Chair, when I use the word "nuance", I am talking about the complex make-up of communities.

Chair: I am aware of what you meant. What I wanted to see is how that translates into policing in comparison with GB.

Mark McEwan: I am coming to that. It is important to say that that is a community nuance that I am referring to. In terms of policing, if you look at our results, we are as robust, if not more so, in our campaign against organised criminality, working with partners in An Garda Síochána as we see further exploitation of the common travel area; working closely with the NCA and HMRC in dealing with paramilitaries; and working with immigration to try to dismantle the drugs importation, bringing people to justice and breaking that cycle of community grip that paramilitaries have.

We have clearly condemned and taken action over the last year, and I might turn to Andrew just to articulate how much action we have taken. We have done that right across the spectrum, as I have been keen to outline at the start, against organised crime groups, terrorist groups and paramilitary groups, including the UDA, the UVF and the INLA. We are fearless in how we go about pursuing them, and we will be relentless.

Again, we have shown that in terms of a number of investigations and arrests in the last financial year. These investigations have been going on for a number of years. We continue to service the criminal justice system to ensure that people are kept on remand to do everything we can to keep people safe. I can absolutely, categorically, assure you that the complexities of a post-conflict society in no way waver us from our relentless pursuit of criminality.



Andy Hill: Just to pick up on that point and add to what Mr McEwan has mentioned there, it is important to recognise the environment we work in. We work with strong partners in the Organised Crime Task Force, which is led by the Department of Justice, bringing all our partners together. We are active around the Joint Agency Task Force, working with the guards and other partners. We have strong relationships with the NCA, HMRC and other local partners.

In terms of some of the impacts, I know Mr McEwan spoke to this earlier, but even looking over the period since last October, that is 391 searches and over 220 arrests in terms of tackling organised crime. I would certainly echo those comments that we are relentless around that pursuit of organised crime in all its forms.

Chair: That gives me considerable comfort. Thank you.

Q61 **Claire Hanna:** Just briefly, following on from the previous discussion and with a focus on scrutinising public money, in your written submission you had referenced the hoax bomb incident at the John and Pat Hume Foundation event in the spring. Following that and the arrest that flowed from that—and I appreciate that proving membership of a paramilitary organisation is challenging—are you aware of people who are currently aligned to paramilitary groups, but who are also paid from the public purse, for example on boards or PCSPs? The current chief constable has referred to community workers by day and troublemakers by night. Are you aware of individuals who meet that description?

Mark McEwan: No, not specifically at this point. What that shows, though, is that we are supportive of Departments and other bodies who are trying to carry out due diligence in terms of the constitution of boards and who might be receiving public funds. Again, where we suspect or where we have an opportunity to deal with criminality, we will deal with it without any fear or favour, and will then bring that to the attention of the appropriate authority in terms of that funding. Where we find that, we will do that.

Q62 **Claire Hanna:** What do you think we can do in terms of public money that is going, in theory, to transition and problem solving and community development, making sure that it does not increase the grip people have on their communities—it does not elevate them, it does not make them the go-to person in that community and it does not further cement their identity as being of or related to or transitioning from a paramilitary group? In nearly every single case, these people are out of jail or on ceasefire far longer than they were ever in as prisoners or in paramilitary organisations.

Mark McEwan: This comes down to due diligence by the funding bodies. We will be supportive in that. There are a lot of questions in that arena that are not directly a role of the police service. When we look at the demands of policing, some of which we have outlined here today, that does not touch upon serious demands around public protection, the



delivery of neighbourhood and local policing and dealing with large-scale events and potential disorder, and dealing with all of that facing a £90 million in-year hole in our budget.

There is a lot of this stuff that sits outwith policing, but we will be supportive in terms of other organisations that are attempting to carry out their due diligence to ensure that people who are connected to paramilitaries or organised criminality do not manage to get their hands on those community levers, if you like.

Q63 Claire Hanna: Your point is well made. We cannot police our way out of political failure. These are society-wide problems, indulgences and legacies. On that, I wanted to pick up on other ways these figures are elevated and profiled. Stephen Farry mentioned paramilitary flags and murals, and ways to control community thinking, but also to demoralise people who would seek to challenge the authority of these groups. If their logos are flying unmolested in constituencies like mine and elsewhere for months of the year, you would have very little confidence, if you go to the police or if you try to raise issues about drugs being sold to your children or whatever, that you could get success in standing up for them.

You mentioned some of the successes in tackling bonfires. I appreciate that the legislation needs to be updated and that there are technicalities around when a UVF flag is a UVF flag, but do you have the political cover you need to take a proactive approach when it is clear that these materials are being used for community control and intimidation?

Mark McEwan: Yes, we have the political cover to do what we are required to do and what we need to do. When we see something that is purely hate-crime-related, shall we say—because I think that is the language you have used—we will take action.

This goes back to the earlier discussion around the public health approach. Again, we are coming back to whether the police have the top cover to do everything they need to do. This needs to be joined up at an Executive level to empower other agencies to play their part in dealing early on with issues that they see, with our support, and to address the societal issues in terms of education and housing—all the areas that we could talk about for a long period of time—which take place before the issue becomes a policing issue, rather than allowing these things to take place and then turning to the police to say, “What are you going to do about it?”

As you and other Committee members know, by the time it gets to us, we have a number of considerations around balancing human rights, the legality of what the symbol might be and a legal obligation to reduce and minimise our recourse to the use of force, bearing in mind public order outcomes that may materialise when it becomes a policing issue. For me, this is about getting a community-based joint solution across the Executive before it becomes a policing issue.



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Q64 Claire Hanna: That is exactly why I am asking about political cover. You will know that a lot of time, genuine engagement and public money was just spent on FICT, for example, to try to devise solutions, but no actions have flowed from that. If there are UDA flags on the Upper Malone Road or UVF 1916 flags on Ravenhill Avenue or D Company flags on the Falls, do you have the political cover to go in and take those down when they are very clearly there to strengthen the identity of paramilitary groupings and to intimidate people who would oppose those groupings? Would you and your officers feel empowered to go and remove those flags?

Mark McEwan: We are in danger of reducing it to a question of, "Do police take action?"

Q65 Claire Hanna: I am asking if you have the political cover. Do you believe that, if you went and removed those flags, political representatives would stand with you and say it was the right thing to do?

Mark McEwan: Where something is explicitly unlawful and into hate crime territory, yes, I believe we would have that cover. However, as the members are well aware, there is a lot of work that goes on at Executive level to try to wrestle with this issue. Again, I come back to the need for a solution before we get to the point of policing. Of course, the police will support. I go back to pointing to the work around those bonfires. The police will be there. The police will deal with disorder when that occurs. We will ensure that people are kept safe trying to do their job in removing material that is causing those issues, but it is not solely a policing issue.

Q66 Claire Hanna: It is absolutely not a policing issue, but I know many of my constituents have corresponded with me for many years about exactly that sort of material. I am trying to get at the political issues and the political failure to address these issues for many years, and it seems to me that, in part, the police are not empowered to deal with the end product, never mind the upstream developments.

I have one other question. Earlier this year, in spring and around the election, tensions were fairly high and there were a lot of events. If we end up having another election, I assume that will be ratcheted back up. Organising a rally is absolutely not a crime, but are you aware of any individuals linked to paramilitary organisations who were involved in organising events billed as peaceful protests earlier this year?

Mark McEwan: I am assuming you are referring to what were formed as coalition-led protests.

Q67 Claire Hanna: I am talking about what were billed as anti-protocol rallies. Of course, organising a rally is certainly not an illegal thing to do. I am asking whether you are aware of any individuals linked to paramilitary organisations who were involved in those events that were billed as peaceful protests?



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Mark McEwan: In terms of the protests themselves, there were a number of them. They were generally organised by what were formed as coalitions. Now, there may be members of those coalitions who have links to paramilitary groups, absolutely, but that is not to say that the coalitions themselves are controlled by paramilitary groups or otherwise.

Q68 **Claire Hanna:** I did not say they were. I was just asking whether there were individuals linked to paramilitaries involved in organising those rallies, and you seemed to indicate that you think there were.

Mark McEwan: Yes.

Q69 **Chair:** Ms Hanna has just mentioned the protocol there. Have there been any elements of the protocol and trading arrangements post the UK's departure from the EU that have, in any way, helped policing?

Mark McEwan: Can you repeat the question? I am not entirely sure.

Q70 **Chair:** It just struck me that there seemed to be, in recent months, some quite high-profile drug seizures and the like, which were very much in the media. A number of people thought drugs have been getting through, but if there are spot checks aligned to the operation of the protocol, preparation for the protocol, or trials for the protocol, then that may in some way be helpful in disrupting the flow of drugs from GB into NI. Is there no correlation at all?

Mark McEwan: I would attribute the success in drug seizures and what we have just described in terms of tackling organised crime to closer working and collaboration with the NCA, United Kingdom Border Force and HMRC. We have increased our presence at ports. We work very closely with An Garda Síochána in terms of cross-border traffic. We have seen an increase in exploitation of the common travel area in terms of people and drugs being moved between Dublin and Belfast. Without getting into a political answer, which is not my sphere, that is what I would attribute the success of those operations to, Mr Chair.

Q71 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** We have heard you talk at length about the importance of a multi-agency approach. Is that the same thing as the whole-system approach that is being used to eradicate paramilitarism, and what opportunities will there be to deepen that whole-system approach?

Mark McEwan: Yes, I think it probably is. There might be a slight difference—I will not use the word “nuance” again—in terms of the terminology. When we talk about multi-agency, for us in law enforcement that is primarily with other law enforcement agencies, such as the UKBF, HMRC, immigration, An Garda Síochána, and of course the NCA. At an operational level, we then work very closely with health trusts, particularly social care, both in public protection and now broadening the safeguarding arrangements to take in those people who are vulnerable to exploitation by paramilitaries and other groups. Of course, we also work



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with the likes of the Education Authority, which I have already spoken about in terms of their outreach workers.

When we talk about whole-system, probably the slight difference there is that we are talking about it at a strategic level across, as I said earlier, where the investment is going in terms of areas of deprivation. Where are the big employment creation opportunities to try to break the cycle that enables these groups to have a grip on communities in the first place?

- Q72 Sir Robert Goodwill:** Do police officers go into schools and engage with children, encouraging them to believe that the police are actually on their side and not the enemy. That presumably is the way to catch some of these young people when they are still too young to understand some of the paramilitary temptations and organised criminality.

Mark McEwan: Yes, we have very proactive neighbourhood and community safety teams across Northern Ireland. Again, though, what I would say on that is that I pointed earlier on to the £90 million hole in our in-year budget. This is something that comes up again and again about building trust and confidence in policing, and that it is for the police to go into schools to do. When children are in school, they are in the safest place with the safest people at the safest time. Actually, where else can we start to build trust and confidence in the whole system, including policing? That is where the discussion needs to sit.

- Q73 Sir Robert Goodwill:** How will the collection of data by the tackling paramilitarism programme help to further understand the socioeconomic effects of paramilitary activity and target the funding and measures to combat that problem. As you have said, you are short of funds, so you are going to have to make some tough decisions about where you put your resource.

Mark McEwan: In terms of the wider programme, it will absolutely help. It will help to understand what other actions can be taken by agencies across the spectrum, particularly when we look at housing allocation and things like that. I know that the witnesses you will have on next have a lot more information on that. In terms of data around organised criminality, we are moving to the ATLAS system from CrimNet, which will give us a deeper and broader understanding of organised criminality, allowing us to make those sharp decisions on the enforcement front.

Andy Hill: In terms of the data that the programme collects, observation-wise—I appreciate you have them as witnesses later—certainly it helps inform decisions that are evidence-based as to where the threat and the harm are. It certainly helps then focus and target where some of those initiatives are that Mr McEwan has spoken about earlier, and then also robust evaluation as to what works, so we can learn from that and then scale that up more broadly.



In terms of the ATLAS system that was referenced there, that is an NCA system. That will help us understand data in terms of threat, harm and risk across Northern Ireland and in fact more broadly as well. Again, that will help us target our interventions in tackling organised crime in all its forms.

Q74 Sir Robert Goodwill: This is the big question this Committee usually asks, and usually the answer is that it does not help. How does the lack of a functioning Executive and political uncertainty in Northern Ireland impact upon attempts to tackle this paramilitary activity?

Mark McEwan: Again, without being drawn into the political sphere, I have mentioned, on a number of occasions, the funding issues that we have. There is no light at the end of the tunnel in the next two or three years that we are planning towards on that front. Within policing itself, the biggest impact is that £90 million hole where we are making really tough decisions about how we allocate resources across organised criminality, paramilitary groups, violent extremism and public protection. We have a sixfold increase in demand for our child protection team since they were formed eight years ago.

We have to find ways of dealing with the issue and keeping people safe at the same time as providing that local and neighbourhood policing model to build trust and confidence and to service the ever-growing needs of our communities as they face a cost-of-living crisis. In terms of enabling the whole-system approach that we have discussed, it is about enabling better co-operation and a societal solution to what are too often labelled as policing issues and become policing issues in Northern Ireland because they are not dealt with upstream. Those are the challenges we face because of the lack of an Executive.

Q75 Sir Robert Goodwill: Are some of these decisions that you are making decisions that you would prefer to make in consultation with politicians, or rather new projects and initiatives that you think should be coming forward, but they can only actually come forward as new initiatives with a functioning Executive?

Mark McEwan: I think the ability for considered and genuine discourse as to funding issues that we face and the level of harm and risk that we are grappling with and how to deal with that would help.

Q76 Sir Robert Goodwill: The sooner we can get an Executive in place, from a practical point of view, the better for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and its anti-terrorism and anti-paramilitary work.

Mark McEwan: I have outlined the challenges we face.

Sir Robert Goodwill: We are getting a bit political there, maybe.

Q77 Chair: Just on that, there is obviously the potential by the end of this year for fresh elections to the Executive. They are likely to be held in quite a tense atmosphere. That might be an understatement. Do you



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have policing concerns in or around that event taking place?

Mark McEwan: We have dealt with elections and tense atmospheres before. We will do it again. We did see, as the member alluded to, the level of hate incidents that we saw that we are investigating previously in the year. Again, we will do whatever we have to do to enable that.

Q78 **Fay Jones:** I was going to ask this question a little later on, but it seems pertinent to ask now. Could you just expand a bit on the budgetary pressures that you briefly mentioned there, Chief Constable?

Mark McEwan: As the Assistant Chief Constable—

Chair: You promoted him.

Fay Jones: I beg your pardon.

Mark McEwan: We have talked a bit about the in-year pressures and then planning towards further pressures in the next year and beyond. I am very much focused on what is within my purview in terms of organised crime, particularly public protection. We have been able to ringfence the officers and staff that are there, but at this point in year we have already taken 69 officer posts out of the crime department, which is a department of around 2,000.

Within policing and neighbourhood policing more broadly, the Chief Constable has given a commitment to maintaining and supporting neighbourhood policing as a function and local policing response, which is absolutely imperative to deliver for people as they face the cost-of-living crisis. The reality is that in year we are looking at around 300 officer posts having to come out of the police service in Northern Ireland overall, so there are hugely difficult and challenging choices that we have to make, while we strive to have greater success against those who are seeking to cause harm, and build further collaboration with law enforcement partners and others.

Fay Jones: Thank you. That is a helpful illustration.

Q79 **Mr Walker:** You have already said quite a lot about children and young people and the role of education in this, and the work that you do with the education side. Are there further steps that you think could be taken to tackle the involvement and engagement of children and young people? Also, perhaps as a supplementary to that, what role does neighbourhood policing have in dealing with the issue of children out of education, missing from education, and is there more that could be done on that front with data to ensure that we spot early the signs of people who are disengaging from the education system?

Mark McEwan: I will take your second point first. Neighbourhood policing does have a role in that. We work closely with the Education Authority. Again, through the multi-agency support hubs, we are identifying young people and children who are not in education. Through



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that process, we will identify the tailored response to that individual and who is best to lead on that.

By further developing that and, as we are now doing, baking that into the safeguarding protocols, that is probably the most appropriate way for policing to intervene on that. Beyond the local, more traditional neighbourhood role of understanding your community, knowing who people are and knowing the children who are at risk, there may be a reason why, while they are not in education, they are not in their home. We have made great progress on understanding who those people are and of course trying to exploit our data in recent years, but there is more work to be done there.

Q80 Mr Walker: There is a UK-wide problem and challenge, particularly since Covid, of people who perhaps disengaged from education and have not reengaged. Do you have any evidence to suggest that paramilitarism might be having an additional impact on that in the Northern Ireland context?

Mark McEwan: It would be speculation. I would not have any evidence at this point.

Q81 Chair: The recently published census confirms what a recent inquiry of this Committee identified and acknowledged, which is the growing and changing face of the population of Northern Ireland. It is not just about two distinct communities. Could you just give us a flavour of how or whether the tentacles of organised crime paramilitarism are extending into new communities coming into Northern Ireland as a result of refugee settlement and the like? Also, allied to that, what about the Irish Traveller community, who we took evidence from during our inquiry and who felt very left out of the piece in a lot of areas of public policy?

Mark McEwan: Yes, it is. We have been very alive to, and spoken to this Committee on a number of occasions about, the common travel area and the movement of particularly north-south, but to a lesser extent east-west. When we look at organised criminality, we are very quickly into international realms. Particularly in people smuggling, human trafficking and exploitation for sexual gain, we have seen a number of organised crime gangs both moving people into Northern Ireland and between Ireland and the north in that respect, in terms of exploiting people who are already here. Sadly, there are recent examples from Ukrainian refugees, but I will ask Andrew to comment more specifically on some of those.

Andy Hill: Just to pick up on that point, it is important to recognise that the demographics of Northern Ireland have changed slightly. That presents opportunities for organised criminals, but also victims as well, in terms of then being exploited and vulnerable. Earlier on, Mr McEwan made reference to 22% of our OCGs having a cross-border element. We are very much alive to that. We are very much alive to the changing nature of victims and the changing nature of crime as well. That also



comes back to why it was so important that we work with the NCA, HMRC, immigration and under the Joint Agency Task Force, so that, where we are seeing that cross-border international element, we are well equipped and well positioned.

- Q82 **Chair:** What about on the smaller scale? I recall hearing in conversation that the sector of the Northern Irish economy involved with the night-time economy, particularly around takeaway food outlets and the like, was very susceptible to intimidation, extortion and protection rackets? Can you give us a flavour on that alongside the big-ticket items as well? I do not wish to be dismissive.

Mark McEwan: Yes, absolutely. We know that paramilitary groups, in particular, as we spoke about earlier, are involved in extortion, whether that be a percentage of takings in small businesses, traditionally hot food outlets, or installing unlawful gambling machines in those outlets and taking the takings.

Chair: And venues for drug sales as well.

Mark McEwan: Yes, of course, and we do take action against that. We have also seen exploitation of new communities in Northern Ireland from ethnic minority backgrounds, and I have heard this anecdotally through our own ethnic minority police association. Young people are being exploited into running drugs and inducted into paramilitary groups in that local area because of where they have ended up.

- Q83 **Claire Hanna:** What impact is the cost-of-living crisis having? Are you worried about the impact it will have on the exploitation of communities by paramilitaries due to illegal money-lending practices?

Mark McEwan: If I start more generally with the impact, we are potentially seeing an increase in shoplifting, albeit with businesses not necessarily wishing to pursue it to a criminal justice outcome. We have all the concerns that we do in times of austerity around a rise in acquisitive crime.

I mentioned earlier some evidence of an increase during the last lockdown period of paramilitary groups calling in loans and getting involved further in illegal money-lending. In terms of the cost-of-living crisis, that is something that we would have real concerns about, and I will bring Andy in on that in a second. Also, there are the mental health issues that go alongside it, the poly-drug use, the access of drugs online and the increase in drugs deaths, which are not necessarily solely linked to paramilitaries. We know that drugs are the biggest business, but that is of huge concern to us as well. We fear that will only get worse as the cost-of-living crisis bites.

Andy Hill: If I can just pick up on that, in terms of the cost-of-living crisis, obviously it links across to acquisitive crime. What we would see is that generally there has been a bit of a downward trend over the last five years, but we are very much alive to it. Mr McEwan referenced there



about a potential increase around shoplifting. In the current cost-of-living crisis, we are very much alive to the impact in terms of fuel, food and what that means to individuals.

Taking that in the context of this conversation here around paramilitarism, we are very much alive to what position that places individuals in, whether that be their susceptibility to being exploited for additional money-lending by paramilitaries or even coercive control. Recently, the programme has run an illegal-money-lending campaign and we were supportive of that, but again, we are alive to it. We are really keen to do what we can to support that, to support victims and to support the work of the programme in tackling any of that organised criminality by paramilitaries.

Q84 Claire Hanna: On a different but related issue, what do perceptions of an ineffective or slow criminal justice system do to responses to paramilitary activity and public confidence? There is the issue of people feeling that, even where arrests are made, it is often a very long time before people go to court. People have to wait for many months and years to go and relive those awful experiences they have had. What is the problem there, and what can be done to speed up criminal justice?

Mark McEwan: I can probably discuss the impact rather than the problem. There are people better placed to discuss that in the justice system than ourselves, but certainly the length of time it takes to get a resolution or criminal justice impact does have a huge effect on victims. It also has an impact on offenders in terms of those who are seeking to turn their life around and move on. For us particularly, it is the concern around attrition where witnesses and victims become disengaged with the process, and then that has a direct impact on success for a criminal justice outcome at court.

We have made huge strides around helping victims with the likes of Women's Aid, Victim Support, the men's advisory service and other partners within the criminal justice system. One of the things you mentioned was the re-traumatisation of having to relive their experiences. We have been able to minimise that by working with the court service and our partners. However, particularly in cases of both criminal exploitation and paramilitary cases, but also primarily in serious sexual offending, where it is particularly traumatic for the victim, and domestic and sexual abuse, these are the areas that are of huge concern to us. We work closely with partners in the criminal justice board, chaired by the Minister, to try to unblock some of those issues.

Q85 Mr Walker: You have said in your written evidence that you want to see a renewed focus and effort on a Government-led process of transition. Could you just explain that a little bit further? What would characterise such a process of transition, in your eyes?

Mark McEwan: We are often asked about transition. At a very basic level, from a policing perspective, whenever anyone wants to transition



from a pattern of criminality, whatever form that takes, we are still wedded to and determined to pursue our criminal justice outcomes where that is appropriate. In the broader scale, there has been a discussion around whether group transition is still relevant in the Northern Ireland context. From a policing perspective, the ability for people to exit whatever path they have chosen and to choose a better one, accepting that that may still entail a criminal justice process, should be supported. That is basically where we are at.

Q86 Mr Walker: Lastly, how do you make sure that your engagement with groups, and paramilitary groups in particular, on this supports that transition rather than necessarily reinforces their position? How do we make sure that we are moving forwards from the situation where paramilitarism has come to be accepted as a fact of life to one in which it is unacceptable?

Mark McEwan: I think our engagement with this, just to be clear, has not been with paramilitary groups. We have our own intelligence assessment of where they might be, and we can help inform the debate around it, but it is not for us to engage in this. That is part of why we have stated that we would seek for that to be Government-led and process-formulated. We have seen where this has and has not worked in the past in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind that in a post-conflict society we are still reasonably immature. It is worth exploring, but it would have to be taken at a Government level, and I think that is the point of that. It is not for the police to try to figure that out.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning. It may very well be that, as this inquiry progresses and we hear from other voices, we may want to come back to you and bounce some of the things that we hear from them off you for your response and input. It would be exceptionally kind if you could make yourself available should that occasion and need arise. In the meantime, thank you very much indeed.