

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland](#), HC 24

Wednesday 9 November 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Ian Paisley; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 141 - 174

Witnesses

[II](#): Dr Conor Murray, Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, Ulster University; Dr Brendan Coyle, Lecturer in Criminology, Ulster University; Mark Dennison, Stay Onside Manager and Fresh Start Through Sport Co-ordinator, Irish Football Association.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Ulster University and the Irish Football Association \(IFA\)](#)

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Conor Murray, Dr Brendan Coyle and Mark Dennison.

Chair: Good morning. Is Mr Dennison with us?

Dr Murray: He is. He is using the facilities.

Q141 **Chair:** He is using the facilities. There we are. That has just been broadcast live on national television. I suppose he is the liaison officer on Fresh Start, so that might give him the fresh start that he needs. In the meantime, let me welcome Dr Brendan Coyle, a lecturer in criminology from Ulster University, and Dr Conor Murray, a lecturer in criminology and criminal justice from Ulster University as well. The weak-bladdered Mr Dennison is the Stay Onside liaison officer and Fresh Start Through Sport co-ordinator of the Irish Football Association.

We had better start, gentlemen, if we may. We will start with a question that I will repeat for the benefit of Mr Dennison when he is able to join us. In your view, is there sufficient funding for schemes aimed at tackling paramilitarism, criminal activity, grooming and the like? Would you share the assessment of our previous witnesses, who you were privy to hearing, and as the PSNI was quite keen to point out, that we are talking here not about glorious gangs of brave people wandering around the streets, protecting people, but criminal thugs who use intimidation, extortion, bullying and violence?

Dr Coyle: Thank you for inviting us along to give evidence across a range of really important issues. We are grateful for that opportunity. Mark will almost certainly want to come in on the funding side of things, so it is unfortunate that he is not here at the moment, but we can perhaps chip in.

Chair: Mr Dennison, good morning. I am afraid your requirements have been broadcast on national television. If there is some sort of meme or social media thing, I think you can blame Dr Murray or me. It was nothing to do with Dr Coyle. You are very welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. Let me repeat the question just so that you have it. We were asking about the sufficiency of funding for bespoke schemes aimed at tackling the thuggery that we are looking at.

You will have heard the evidence of the first panel, and you may have picked up on what we were hearing from the PSNI the other week. Do you think it is helpful to move away from this slightly misleading term of “paramilitaries” and “paramilitarism”, and move instead towards the language of “organised gangs”, “criminality”, “grooming” and “child abuse”?

Mark Dennison: It is very useful to have that discussion. Certainly, with the young people—males and females—and adults that we work with, sometimes that is entrenched in their language and their vocabulary since childhood. Changing that conversation and changing that landscape is certainly something that we have to take on board.



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When we work with young people on our programmes, they maybe identify individuals in their areas who are involved in criminality and coercive behaviour as paramilitaries. Again, moving forward that has to be part of the process as well—that the language changes for them also.

Chair: Do you have a word on the funding?

Mark Dennison: The funding is certainly very much short-term funding on any of our programmes. Our Fresh Start programme has year-on-year funding. We try to deliver programmes that have a wee bit of longevity in them. It is not just about going into a community and delivering for 16 weeks. We would like that to involve young people in future programmes.

Q142 **Chair:** You would like to see a multi-year funding agreement.

Mark Dennison: Yes. It is sometimes short-term funding for long-term solutions, in many respects, so it would be very helpful if we could plan in advance, certainly with our academic colleagues as well.

Q143 **Chair:** Does that play into the point that we were hearing earlier from the commissioner, about the potential for duplication or triplication of small pockets of money going to similar things, which of themselves are perfectly well intentioned, but do not, by their definition, generate the bang for the buck because it is three smaller schemes rather than one big thing?

Mark Dennison: That is very relevant. There are an awful lot of programmes being delivered in our communities, obviously through our funders, through DfC and through DoJ. We try not to duplicate the remit of the young people we have in our programme, but I am sure that in that process it is only natural that young people will be involved in other programmes. An overarching programme or structure would be welcome.

Dr Coyle: On that point, as part of phase 2 of the tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime programme, we are seeing now—I think others have given evidence on this—a much more robust evidence base. So long as that continues, so long as programmes are being carefully evaluated, and so long as we have the oversight over those evaluations, what programmes are doing and what outcomes are being achieved, we can avoid that kind of duplication.

I would echo Mark's point—that, beyond the end of these funding cycles, we need more long-term commitments to those programmes that do show potential to consistently achieve good outcomes, particularly for children, young people and young adults. We are talking about planting seeds for a long-term bloom here, so we need that funding to continue.

Q144 **Chair:** We heard in the earlier session, again from the commissioner, about poverty as being the tide that would bring people up. The very interesting twin impact of that is that, first of all, you reduce the cohort of potential recruits, but you also diminish the demand for cheap loans and so on, because people are feeling more prosperous.



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You are a criminologist. It is an area that we are all familiar with from the telly, but I do not suppose any of us really purport to understand it hugely. From a criminologist's point of view, is there anything else that you think plays into either the narrative of recruitment or the attractiveness of being recruited?

Dr Coyle: I will add a slight asterisk; being a criminologist is a bit of a mongrel discipline that captures a wide range of different disciplines.

Chair: Let us aim for a pedigree answer.

Dr Coyle: Mongrels are often the most robust dogs.

Chair: They are indeed. As a dog owner, I can assure you that that is certainly the case.

Dr Coyle: Poverty and disadvantage is one of a constellation of issues that feed into this. It is possibly the most important; it almost certainly is. In terms of my background and Conor's, the young people we work with and have worked with, across community, share a range of experiences that relate to deprivation, poverty, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, insecure family attachments, the normalisation of violence in their communities and mental health issues.

All those things consistently cross-cut traditional ethnopolitical and community boundaries, and we see those quite commonly. It is a range of nested issues, and it is a very messy picture whenever you try to get into the weeds of it. Addressing poverty at a baseline is one step towards addressing that wider constellation of issues.

Dr Murray: I completely agree with Brendan. Something that we talk about often in our writing is multiple deprivation. It is not just economic; it is social and political. We have spoken to many young people in the research that we have done with Mark and in our own individual research. I spent some time conducting research with young men in prison for a nine-month period in Hydebank Wood. It is aspects of marginalisation and not feeling included in society that can often bring them into contact with paramilitaries—as victims, but also in terms of being recruited to them as well.

Q145 **Chair:** You join the mongrel class of a criminologist, but you are also a lecturer in criminal justice. We were hearing, again, from the commissioner, who has given us a lot of food for thought this morning, about her desire for a real PSNI and justice sweep on this, to mop people up. Let us set aside for a moment that you create a vacuum and other people might come in.

From a criminal justice point of view, has enough been done? Has there been enough of a concerted focus—a shock-and-awe type approach—such as we might see in GB with regards to drugs in London, Manchester and elsewhere?



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Dr Murray: More could always be done in terms of tackling these different organisations. I know there have been a couple of high-profile arrests and sting programmes delivered by the PSNI over the last few years, which have targeted the paramilitary organisations. There could be more focus on those who are involved in drug distribution, but those are more generic, high-level oversight views, from my perspective. It is not something that I have conducted any research in.

Q146 **Chair:** What would your hunch be? If the common usage of words changed from this catch-all, slightly bright and glorious phrase of “paramilitary”, to “child groomer”, “child abuser”, “safeguarding issues”, “thugs”, “criminal gangs” and so on, do you think that that would lead to a more heavy-hitting, proactive approach from PSNI and more energy through the court system to bring people to justice?

Dr Murray: The semantics around these types of things are really important. The evidence that Naomi Long gave talked about this shift in the wording from “punishment beatings” to “paramilitary-style attacks”, and now trying to change the focus to child abuse. That has seen some important changes in the amount of young people or children who are at the receiving end of these types of attacks. Changing the language around it would be useful.

I am not sure that I would necessarily agree with some of the suggestions. I do not see these paramilitary groups as being the same as the types of organised crime groups that might be in place in the likes of England, Scotland or Wales, in the sense that they are so deeply embedded in the communities. They are heavily involved in politics, to a certain extent, and there is the aspect of them potentially being dormant. If something was to arise in terms of politics within Northern Ireland, they could rise to prominence again.

Duncan Morrow, one of our colleagues, made a couple of good suggestions. “Unlicensed armed groups” could be a good suggestion, and some of the suggestions in the first panel, around grooming, were really good.

Dr Coyle: Language shapes our understanding of all these things, and this is no different. The problem with “paramilitaries” and “paramilitarism” is that there is a great deal of heterogeneity in what we are trying to capture with that, but it does serve to recognise the legacy issues that feed into those groups in a way that some of those other terms do not. That recognition remains important because it remains significant within communities themselves.

Any change in language from the top down is always going to meet with resistance. There is a shared understanding of these things within communities, and there therefore needs to be a drive from the bottom up if those kinds of shifts or changes in language are to take effect or be significant.



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In terms of the shock-and-awe angle and how that maybe feeds into policing priorities, while enforcement-led activity in some of these things is obviously extremely important and massively significant, particularly when it comes to safeguarding children and young people, it can only be one part of the picture. There is the risk of putting the cart before the horse a little bit. In terms of what the commissioner was saying, there is perhaps the opportunity for the PSNI to find ways and means of engaging differently with young people and young adults, finding that common ground for those young people to feel able to come to the PSNI with issues. Enforcement can follow on when the air has been sucked out of the room a little bit with regards to community support, or perceived community support, for some of those groups.

Q147 Chair: Dr Murray, let me just go back to something you said a moment or so ago, with regards to the opaque political issue. What is your assessment, understanding, hunch, fear, theory—call it what you will? If there are those links, and politics may benefit indirectly financially through some of this activity, through donation and so on, do you worry it is always with us—let us just slightly turn a bit of a blind eye to it, rather than have a proper politically directed focus?

Dr Murray: I was not suggesting that the political groups were involved with these paramilitaries, apologies.

Chair: Nor was I. You mentioned there was that overlap.

Dr Murray: What I meant was that, if there was to be, for example, a border poll, changes to the protocol or something like that, the paramilitary organisations could come to the fore and increase their recruitment. They could rise to prominence again, and there could be more civil unrest. That is maybe the approach that I was suggesting.

Q148 Ian Paisley: I put on record my thanks to the IFA for the Stay Onside programme. You trialled this in Ballymena and it had a major impact. You asked a question, Chair, about the cost, and I was interested in the bang for the buck. Maybe you could explain to us how much it cost and the number of kids you actually reached. We are always in danger of seeing the cup as half full, but my impression was that you touched the lives of hundreds of kids. A small number are probably in danger of being sucked into this, but the impact that you are having for inspiring young people is very extensive. Is that a fair summary, Mark?

Mark Dennison: It is, just specifically for Stay Onside. We obviously have our Fresh Start programmes as well. Funding for a Stay Onside programme would be around £4,000 to put maybe 20 young people through a programme over six weeks.

There are outcomes from that. We would deliver coaching and volunteering, and provide various pathways for young people. When we do deliver, there is always a pathway element to the end of a programme. Certainly any programmes we have delivered very much focused on consultation and partnership with police and community



representatives about the areas we deliver in or go to. Many young men and women have gained valuable experience. The programme has been fantastic for them.

Q149 Ian Paisley: Is it true that the local football clubs then pick up on the work you do and continue to drive those kids?

Mark Dennison: Yes. A number of the local football clubs would be very much focused on social responsibility. For example, we delivered a programme down in Larne. Larne's ethos in and around social responsibility and working with the community is at the heart of the club. The opportunity is there, and when that has been taken forward it has been beneficial to the club, the community and the young people.

Ian Paisley: It would be remiss of me not to use the opportunity to publicly thank your late colleague, Frankie Wilson, for the hard work he did with regards to youth training and all the rest of it. I am sure you are all feeling that loss.

Mark Dennison: Yes. I appreciate your comments on that, Ian. Thank you.

Q150 Sir Robert Goodwill: We heard in the first session a lot about how socioeconomic problems in traditional working-class areas really impact on young people. It seems as well that there is a mistrust of the statutory, security and governmental organisations. Is that something that can be addressed? Are the organs of the state seen as the enemy in many of these communities?

Dr Coyle: That is not uncommon in terms of the research that we have done. The language of the "enemy" comes up relatively frequently. It is seen as axiomatic—of course the police are the "enemy". It is difficult to think how you move past that when there is that quite fundamental barrier.

I think the patterns are similar in working-class communities outside Northern Ireland. This is not an exclusive Northern Irish problem, but there is an added element of course because of issues around the legacy. As I said previously, there is a job to be done in terms of figuring out how to engage effectively with children and young people, and to create less enforcement-led hostile interfaces with young people.

One of the problems we have is that, based on the data available and on police practice, they are going to be coming into contact with quite similar groups of young people from the same sorts of communities because they are engaging often in forms of criminality, potentially. A lot of that might be normative. It might be adaptive behaviour of young people, but it is bringing them into contact with the police. All we are left with is a hostile interface, and those perceptions can harden very quickly.

There are examples of good practice. Fresh Start Through Sport is one of those examples where there is an opportunity for young people to come



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into contact with officers, see them as people, have the opportunity to speak with them, and get that sense of policing with the community that is intended to be accomplished. If you try to improve relations through enforcement, it is never going to happen. There is an entirely different conversation to have about improving relationships.

Q151 Sir Robert Goodwill: What about social workers? Are they seen as the enemy? Often, if you have children who are vulnerable, they could be taken into care and families can be hostile. Are social workers doing good work in some of these areas?

Dr Coyle: It is not something that has come out strongly in the research we have done to date. That more vitriolic language is directed towards the police fairly exclusively.

Dr Murray: From the research that I have done with young men in prison, along the same point of discussion, paramilitaries do not often come across as being portrayed in a positive sense by these young people. Of the cohort I spoke to, more than 60% had been victims of paramilitary-style attacks and there was a direct opposition towards paramilitaries as well. It is not like, "We do not like the police, and we glorify paramilitaries". They see themselves in direct opposition with paramilitary groups a lot of the time as well.

Q152 Sir Robert Goodwill: Often, the way out of these socioeconomic problems is through education, getting skills and getting work. Is there really no optimism among some of these communities that that is the way out? Here in England, some of our south Asian families understand all too well that getting your kid a good education means they can have a better future than you have had.

Dr Murray: There is a rather alarming statistic that Northern Ireland has had the highest amount of children and young people not engaged in education, employment or training across all of the UK for a relatively long time. I am not sure if it is due to a distrust in these types of organisations. It is not something that we have found in the research that we have conducted.

From speaking to young people—this finding has contributed to how Fresh Start Through Sport has been shaped over the last few years—I know that they do want qualifications and they do want to achieve educationally. Through us speaking to these young people and including it in our research findings, the IFA, through its Fresh Start programme, has introduced an OCN and has got the Fresh Start Through Sport programme accredited through Ulster University. There is a desire to improve themselves educationally, but it might just be that there is a distrust with the mainstream education. I am not sure.

Q153 Sir Robert Goodwill: How does the lack of safe havens, where children can find some escape from the community pressures—maybe even through sports—impact on these young people, particularly those who



have developed mental health or behavioural problems?

Dr Murray: That is a really important question. There are a very small number of safe havens to which people can go to speak about these issues. The first panel talked about church groups; youth clubs are usually a very good place, but there is also the Fresh Start Through Sport programme and other sports clubs. Coaches often become parent-like figures in young people's lives and offer them opportunities to speak about issues they are facing in the community, in education and so on.

Through the research that both Brendan and I have conducted, we still see a reluctance, particularly from boys and young men, to talk about the issues they are facing. There are elements of masculinity and bravado intertwined with the dynamics of childhood and young adulthood. There is a reluctance to talk about some of these issues, regardless of whether these places exist or not.

Q154 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** For some deprived communities in places like the north-east of England, it is often a career in the armed forces that people see as a way out. There is some tradition of people, certainly on one side of the community, joining the armed forces. Is that seen as a way of escaping?

Dr Murray: It is not something that I have come across. I have had very little discussion on it in any of the time I have spent conducting research with young people, young adults, or adults in the community or in prisons. Mark, maybe you have come across it.

Mark Dennison: Occasionally, but not so much. Just to add to the comment Conor made earlier about young people wanting more than just sport, something that probably surprised us on the programme is that, when they came in, it was not just about playing football and GAA, getting on the ice at the SSE or playing rugby. They wanted something tangible at the end of it. They did see it as an opportunity. That is something we have taken on board with our ambassador programme, OCN and sporting pathways—but examples are probably limited when it comes to maybe a career in the Armed Forces.

Q155 **Chair:** Mr Dennison, are both communities attracted to and involved in your work and initiatives, or do you find that there is a disparity?

Mark Dennison: No, it is both traditional communities and BAME communities. There is around 30% of female participation on our programme. When we go into an area, the PSNI would maybe look at causation factors for issues in that community. Any programme we put together takes quite some time. It is not just about us going into an area, should it be Ballymena or Larne. We sit down with our partners and we try to select the right young people for those programmes. It is certainly across the board within communities in Northern Ireland, and that is across all our IFA foundation programmes. We touch all communities. That is the power of sport.



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Q156 **Chair:** Dr Murray, I have two questions for you, if I may, on what you have been saying. You have mentioned work you have been doing in prisons. A young man—it is predominately young men—is found guilty and serves their time. They went in as quite a junior operative in a gang, and they come out as a senior operative. Are we doing enough within the prison system to put people back on the right and proper path?

Dr Murray: When you say “gangs”, do you mean paramilitaries here?

Chair: Yes.

Dr Murray: It is interesting because in the Northern Ireland prison system, those politically affiliated prisoners are housed in Maghaberry. They are on a separate regime from each other and from the general prison population. I have spent some time in there with Mark, conducting research, but it has been very educationally focused. There have not been discussions about paramilitary activity or things like that in those discussions. Those types of young men would not be in Hydebank.

Q157 **Chair:** Just going back to Sir Robert’s question with regards to education, the children of the sharp-elbowed middle classes, be they Protestant or Catholic, will understand the importance of education perfectly well. We fall into a trap, do we not, of talking about an amalgam of a community, and there are strata in each? Is it a common problem among working-class Catholics and working-class Protestants that the importance of education as the route up and out is not readily understood enough, or is there a differential?

Dr Coyle: Some of the available information, not directly related to the research we have been doing, is that young people—young boys in particular—from Protestant, Unionist and loyalist backgrounds have lower levels of educational attainment. There is some form of disparity there.

Q158 **Chair:** You are never quite sure if these things are urban myths or not, because you never quite get the data, but there was always a view, was there not, that the Catholic community understood or maybe had a greater appreciation of the importance of education, counterpointed against Protestant, Unionist, loyalist. Would your research and information suggest that that is still the case?

Dr Coyle: Again, that is based on more widely available information in terms of educational attainment. It does not play out very strongly. Again, there is a lot of cross-cutting of issues, and in terms of experiences of education.

Chair: There is not one line that takes you from A to Z.

Dr Coyle: Absolutely not. It is a complex picture on that front, and I am sure the research of others who have given evidence more directly speaks to that.

Chair: I am grateful. Thank you.

Q159 **Mr Walker:** In your evidence, you talked about how joining paramilitary



organisations can provide a degree of intergenerational affirmation for people. How can that be tackled? I guess it is fairly obvious that that intergenerational affirmation is often something that comes through sport. You get parents engaging, watching their children play and so on. How do your programmes seek to tackle that issue of removing intergenerational affirmation?

Mark Dennison: The programmes we deliver, should it be Fresh Start Through Sport or Stay Onside, sometimes have strong parental involvement. On occasions I speak with many parents directly, and they maybe do not want their children going down the path that they once trod. That comes across quite strongly on a number of occasions, where people have been through that cycle.

In the work that I deliver in prison, through Stay Onside, those conversations will take place with some of the more mature prisoners, who do not want their children following the same path. On any of these programmes, it is crucial that you have the parents on board. When you have success in any young person's journey, the parents can be part of that process.

On occasions, the young people we deal with maybe do not have parental support. It is looking at the person—maybe the youth leader, maybe somebody within the community they have done some work with—and tapping into them.

An example I would have of a recent programme is a Barnardo's worker. We have two kids from care on one of the programmes. Again, it is crucial they have that support. It is about breaking down those barriers and ensuring that there is a more positive pathway. There needs to be a more holistic approach as well.

Q160 **Mr Walker:** Murals, flags and emblems in communities have reinforced the narrative of people belonging, and that they belong to paramilitary organisations. Is there a role perhaps to promote more emblems associated with sport and cross-community sport as against those that reinforce a narrative about different identities?

Mark Dennison: Yes. That would be very welcome from our perspective and from a sporting perspective. Sport promotes positivity, inclusion and wellbeing. As a small country, we always say we punch above our weight when it comes to sport. Our iconic figures being part of that community and being highlighted in such a positive way would be very welcome.

Q161 **Mr Walker:** You are working across multiple sports. You listed some of those—football, the rugby side, the GAA and that side of things. Is there any differential impact that you see across the programmes in different sports?

Mark Dennison: Being primarily a football person, I think, with myself and with participants in the programme, you do get to appreciate what all the other sports bring to the table. It does not matter what community



our young people come from; no matter what sport they play, they enjoy it as a sport. It takes away, maybe, any previous perceptions.

Belfast Giants has been a partner that has had a massive, really positive impact. They have been in Northern Ireland for only about 20 years, and there are no previous perceptions in and around their history or stuff like that. When people engage with the Giants, that is something very neutral. It is such a positive experience for them, and it always gets really good feedback.

Q162 Mr Walker: You mentioned the figure of 30% engagement by girls. Do you think that is about right, given that young men are more likely to get involved in criminality, or would you like to see that figure being higher?

Mark Dennison: One of our programmes—the United Nations programme—was developed on the back of the success of Stay Onside and Fresh Start Through Sport. The UN was very impressed with our work. Its focus was strongly on female and BAME engagement. Sometimes, depending on our programmes, there can be that focus on female participation.

Dr Murray: I would like to commend the IFA and other sporting partners on that because, particularly in a research context, throughout the conflict and throughout the period of tentative peace that has followed it, there has been a glaring admission of girls' and women's experiences of the troubles and how it has impacted them, as well as how these different paramilitary-style attacks have impacted girls and women within communities. Mothers in particular bear the brunt of the paramilitary-style attacks towards their children. They often have to negotiate with paramilitaries, maybe bring them to appointments and so on.

The inclusion of girls to such a high extent within these types of programmes is really good. We are lucky in the sense that we are going to be able to capture some of their views about their experiences of community life as well.

Dr Coyle: Just to rewind a little to talk about the differential impact in terms of sport, Northern Ireland is relatively unique in that different sports can be politically laden in various ways. One of the things that we see playing out, particularly in our qualitative research with young people, is exposure to GAA, or Gaelic sports, from individuals from Protestant, Unionist, loyalist backgrounds. That is a striking thing that continuously comes out. Being exposed to the sport itself—that kinaesthetic quality of just getting out there and playing this sport—has a pretty profound impact in terms of their views of the other, and has that really beneficial cross-community impact that we see.

That multi-sport element, particularly given the context in Northern Ireland, plays a pretty direct role in feeding into helping address the underlying vulnerabilities, risks and stuff.



Q163 **Mr Walker:** What numbers of people from Protestant Unionist backgrounds are getting engaged with GAA?

Dr Coyle: It is not clear how many are getting involved with GAA after the fact. Once Fresh Start ends, it is something for us to follow up, potentially, with the GAA and do a little more research into. I know, having spoken to some GAA facilitators and organisers, they are really keen to see more people from that background then picking that up and running with it, so to speak.

Mark Dennison: Our IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby PEACE programme has just come to an end over the last year. Again, there were big numbers. I do not have the numbers at hand, as it was not one of my programmes, but certainly there were big numbers engaging across all communities in the PEACE programme.

Q164 **Carla Lockhart:** After the session, I would be keen to pick up on some of the initiatives that you do across my own constituency. What steps can be taken to challenge community attitudes that might lead to the legitimising of paramilitary-style attacks, such as paramilitary-style attacks “by appointment”?

Dr Murray: I talked a bit earlier about the semantics around it. The changing of the language is something that can work to reduce these attacks. Other things can be done, such as starting to address the legitimisation of violence and communal support for it, because we still hear from children and young people that there are people within communities who are going to paramilitary organisations before they are going to the police. That is the first point of contact to report antisocial behaviour and any other issues they are having with young people within the community.

A broader issue that I see as being a problem—it does emerge frequently in our research and other research—is this stigmatisation of young people. They are often seen as a threat or a problem within communities as opposed to being assets, resources or means of problem solving. We need to bring them to the fore and make them feel more included within communities.

A study by Harland and McCready, over a five-year period, found that not one of their participants felt that they were in any way involved within the peace process. We need to encourage young people to maybe become more involved with initiatives, like, for example, this inquiry. I am not sure how many children or young people were involved in giving evidence to this, as an example, and yet a lot of the discussion is about children and young people, who are often the victims of these types of attacks.

Carla Lockhart: I suppose there is maybe that fear element of them articulating their views and concerns on it. It is important that we do absolutely hear those voices, but I am just conscious, with the nature of



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what are discussing, that it is maybe hard for them.

Dr Murray: Young adults, from the age of 18 to 24, are often the people who are most likely to be victims of these types of attacks. I do appreciate there is a degree of vulnerability there.

Q165 **Carla Lockhart:** Is there any data on the mental health and wellbeing of young people involved and who have got caught up in this?

Dr Murray: I do not have any statistical evidence but more qualitative stuff, in terms of just speaking to people through interviews or focus groups. As you can imagine, the victims of such attacks experience trauma, distress and anxiety. Quite a few of the young men I spoke to in Hydebank were living under threat. They had had death threats made against them.

When you spoke to them about their aspirations for being released back into the community, they would often say, "Well, I have a death threat against me, so I cannot go back to the community that I am from", which impacts their opportunities to secure accommodation and employment. It also distances them from their family and friends, which can contribute to marginalisation. As we have mentioned already, those who are marginalised can often be the ones these paramilitary organisations target for recruitment. All those issues contribute to stress, anxiety, depression and so on.

Q166 **Carla Lockhart:** At what stage does the money cease for the likes of the projects?

Mark Dennison: For Fresh Start Through Sport, it is year-on-year funding. That continues to 2024-25, and that is obviously determined by Government.

Q167 **Carla Lockhart:** Do you have a commitment?

Mark Dennison: An application will be made by DfC and DoJ for 2023-24 over the next few months. We will probably wait until that is confirmed.

Q168 **Chair:** Dr Murray, taking your point, we have a lot of these inquiries where we reach out to the academics and leaders, and you often then get this feeling that sometimes we are talking to the people who do the things, not the people for whom the things are done, if that makes any sense at all. It is very often the case that a lot of people find that things are done to them rather than with them.

We always try to reach out as a Committee, as much as we can, on every inquiry. If any of the three of you have anybody who would describe themselves as a young person, who has something to say or wants to get involved, would you please try to make some sort of contact? We are very keen, as a Committee, to hear not just from those who are—and I do not mean this disparagingly—sitting in offices writing strategies, but those who then live the implementation of those strategies. That is an invitation to colleagues on the Committee representing Northern Irish



constituencies as well. We can deal with things in a sensitive way. It does not all have to be broadcast. We can sit in private and so on. That would be enormously helpful.

Dr Murray: Can I just respond to that, Chair? It is something that we are very keen to do whenever we are doing research. We call it co-creation or co-production. We often encourage participants from previous studies to come on board and talk to us about how we are designing our research. After the first study we conducted on the Fresh Start Through Sport programme, we encouraged the IFA to create this role of an ambassador—someone who has been through the programme before who now sits on a panel and tries to steer the programme going forward. Mark has a couple of case studies that he could share with you now anecdotally, but I am sure they would also be more than willing to contribute.

Mark Dennison: I have a couple of brief case studies across our Fresh Start Through Sport programmes. The first is a young man of 18, who was involved last year in public disorder linked to the protocol. He was one of nine arrested by the police. The police engaged with the young man and referred him to the Fresh Start programme. We worked with him and his parents. His mum was really distraught about how he had ended up involved in this.

He attended the full programme. I provided a letter to his solicitor, for the court. He was fully engaged, and we had some very real conversations with him about how it had impacted his life and potential for employment. In the end, he was the only one of nine who did not serve a prison sentence, because he had engaged in the programme and it had made that difference in his life.

The second one is probably our biggest success story in and around this. A young female of 23 was coerced by paramilitaries, or those within the community who were focused on violence and criminality. She struggled with her mental health from a very young age, and, as a result of the influence by those individuals, she did try to take her life on a number of occasions. She was referred by her probation officer after being arrested by police for a minor offence. She got on board on the programme, and that was the one thing that she would say saved her life. She is now an ambassador. The United Nations has captured her story, and her video has gone out worldwide. She is a guest at the World Cup next week, from the UN. She is taking part in two youth-led focus groups and conference events in Qatar next week. She is going over with a member of our staff to share her story. She needs this programme every week. She works now and she has that focus. Those are some of the real stories that we can capture.

Q169 **Chair:** That, Mr Dennison, speaks very powerfully to your need for that reliable two to three-year funding stream, to give those vulnerable people the confidence that you are going to be there to get them from A to B, does it not?



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Mark Dennison: That is correct. As I said before, it is not just a case of going in, delivering and stepping back out of that community. She will rely on us to keep her engaged in the programme, being an influence and ambassador to others as well.

Q170 **Chair:** We have come to the end of our pre-ordained questions. Let me do the "Columbo" point to you. Is there anything that you hoped we might ask you or that you were very keen to tell us that we have not touched on? Now is your opportunity to get it off your chests.

Dr Coyle: Going forward, the evidence around Fresh Start and some of the other related programmes is still very much emerging, and the evidence that we have to date is fundamentally coloured by the context of the pandemic. That does not render it insignificant, but it makes it very different. We would be keen to continue sharing that evidence as it emerges and to continue the conversation.

Q171 **Mr Walker:** Engagement with sport often relies on the infrastructure being in place. In the communities that are particularly vulnerable to paramilitarism, are there any deserts of sporting facilities or sports clubs and people who are able to support that? Is that a concern and is it something we should be considering?

Mark Dennison: Finding facilities is always a huge problem on any of our programmes. It takes quite some time to book those facilities. When you do put those facilities into communities, there is no doubt that they are used to capacity. Going forward, if there is any investment in that infrastructure it always has huge benefit, should it be engagement, mental health, or just being involved in sport and giving that focus.

Q172 **Chair:** We are all familiar, from visiting, flying over or seeing on the television, those rows upon rows upon rows of terraced housing across Belfast and, indeed, elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Do the city planners and developers get involved in those conversations to say what is needed, or is it just bricks and mortar, commercial, leisure, retail, resi? I can see Carla is smiling.

Mark Dennison: Carla is smiling at that one, so she might be able to answer it better than I can.

Carla Lockhart: I am sure Stephen will agree with me that it is hugely frustrating in Northern Ireland. There has been a real lack of joined-up planning and zones. We are completely out of date in terms of our zoning allocation, so it is hugely frustrating. However, since the new council has formed, there is community planning, which has been a delegated power to the councils, and there is much more of a joined-up conversation. The only problem is the finance to go along with it to actually make the change.

Mark Dennison: Sometimes a small contribution can lead to an awful lot. We were working with a refugee group in Carrickfergus, covering a few sessions for them to play football once a week after our programme,



and that meant so much to them. Sometimes it is not all about lots of money. It is about maybe just using it sensibly.

Q173 **Chair:** What about the private sector? Do businesses get involved, sponsor and help?

Mark Dennison: There will be sponsorship. We do not have sponsorship in and around our programmes, but certainly, yes, there is a focus on engaging with the private sector. It probably is something that we are looking to develop more as well.

Q174 **Chair:** Is the private sector responsive to that or is it, "Nothing to do with us, guvnor"?

Mark Dennison: That is really tapping into the private sector, and those who maybe are committed to social responsibility and providing funding in and around social responsibility. We would maybe have a grants officer who would identify those organisations and pockets of funding, but we could do a lot more in and around that. It would be most welcome trying to get more engagement from a business point of view.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you so much on behalf of the Committee for your attendance and your time this morning, for taking our questions and for answering them so comprehensively. We are very grateful.

Let me close by just re-extending that invitation or offer; if there are young people you know who would be willing to talk to us, we can find the platform to hear their voices, irrespective of how they wish to communicate with us. Thank you so much. Thank you, colleagues.