

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland](#),
HC 24

Wednesday 1 February 2023

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Sir Robert Buckland; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Jim Shannon; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 325 - 354

Witnesses

I: Paul Smyth, Executive Director, Politics in Action, and Member, Stop Attacks Forum; Megan Phair, Journey to Empowerment Programme Co-ordinator, Invisible Traffick, and Member, Stop Attacks Forum.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Stop Attacks Forum](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Smyth and Megan Phair.

Q325 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues. Good morning to our witnesses. We have two panels this morning as we continue our investigation and inquiry into the effects of criminal activity and the paramilitaries. Can I apologise to our witnesses for the slightly later than billed start? We got delayed on a point in private session. When you have a number of MPs in a room, we are all paid to talk, so you can imagine how difficult it is to stop that happening sometimes. We are very grateful to both of you for your attendance this morning.

I am going to start with a question that we have been asking all our witnesses, because it is quite important. We use this phrase that has fallen into easy language use: “paramilitary”. There are badges, titles and levels of seniority. One could say it is small men’s complex—I say that as somebody who is five foot seven—trying to be bigger than they are in their own communities.

We are hearing that it is not a useful term, and that we should be talking about organised crime; we should be talking about groomers; we should be viewing it through the prism of safeguarding; we should be talking about people who hide themselves behind either a green or an orange flag while selling drugs, trafficking people, forcing people into prostitution, running extortion rackets and giving loans at exorbitant rates of interest with a view to favours in lieu of payment. Could we have your thoughts on that?

Paul Smyth: For us as a group at the Stop Attacks Forum, we are a little bit torn on it. I agree with all the things that you have just said. We see these groups as groups that exploit communities rather than protect or represent them. They also come out of a historic and political context, and the label is useful to them in terms of preserving a kind of loyalty in the communities, whether through some kind of respect or, more likely, fear. In particular, we think that the paramilitary assaults are the key mechanism of control in the community, so it is difficult.

One of the unanticipated consequences of the change in language for us is that it is now quite difficult, when an assault happens, to know what it is, so it can take a few days before we find out whether it was a paramilitary assault or some sort of organised crime activity. That makes it more difficult for us to call it out, which we had been doing. When it is past the news cycle, you get very little traction on the issue. It is a tricky one, but it is important.

Q326 **Chair:** Is it tricky because it is multi-layered? You have the horrific punishment beating side of the activity, and then you have the slightly casual, door-to-door salesman-type thing, where you could just be doing Avon make-up, canvassing for a political party or anything like that. I don’t know if they still go door to door with Avon make-up. They probably don’t; I’m showing my age. Does that make it difficult? With the



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beatings, you can see that they want to send a message, so that gets publicised, but what about the granular day-to-day stuff?

Paul Smyth: I would encourage you not to use the term “punishment” in relation to the assaults. We have been trying to get people to change language on that.

Chair: Yes, I take that. It is grievous bodily harm or actual bodily harm.

Paul Smyth: Yes, it is the vernacular that a lot of people use, but it is very misleading. It implies that there is some sort of due process, which there never is. One of the challenges is that paramilitarism actually presents itself differently in different communities. Even for us as a group, we have found it very difficult to get youth workers from loyalist backgrounds to be part of our group because of the levels of intimidation in their communities. The scale of membership in loyalist communities is much greater, and it is much more difficult, if you live in those communities, to tell who is part of these groups and who is not. In republican areas generally, most people know who is involved and it is a small number of individuals, and therefore it is a bit easier to stand up to them and to challenge them.

As you say, it is multi-layered, multifaceted and complex. I was thinking about this earlier. The assaults do not just brutalise the victims; they brutalise all of us. Whenever you see one of the attacks reported in the media, if you follow the threads underneath, there are a lot of people who weigh in to support the violence. It is quite harrowing to read what people are reporting, particularly if we are talking about children and young people. They are so violent in their support. Because this has been going on for three generations now, people just think, “This is how we do things”, yet if it was happening in another context people would be up in arms. We look at what the Taliban are doing in Afghanistan, for example, and people are appalled by it, but very similar things are happening in our own communities and people do not seem to care.

Q327 **Chair:** Do you think it falls under this, “Oh, it’s Northern Ireland”? There is always an exceptionalism. “It has always gone on and it always will, so it is a matter of containment rather than eradication.” Here we are, about to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We are now into the second peace generation. We should not be dealing with this horror, should we?

Megan Phair: A lot of the language is, “This is just the way it is”. If you go into communities and try to make an impact and a difference, people say, “This is just the way it is” and it is accepted. In the human trafficking sphere, it is useful for me to tag different things to the paramilitary language. Not only are they paramilitary-style attacks, but it is also a human rights abuse; it is also grooming and exploiting children and young people, for whatever profit there is, and the coercion that happens as well.



Many of our group are youth workers as well. We explain to young people that coercion is the means to do something that you do not want to do—it is how they are threatening you to do that—and the exploitation is you actually doing the thing. Once they understand that, you say things like, “It doesn’t have to be this way. It’s not just the way it is.”

Q328 Chair: Let me ask you about the role of the PSNI. Mr Smyth, a moment ago you were talking about protecting communities, which is what a lot of them will say. We have been hearing evidence and anecdotes from people who have said, “We are on the loyalist side and the police are so far tilted towards the nationalists. It is them and us. We are the only people who can understand and defend our community.” Then you go to the nationalist community and they say, “The PSNI is so biased in favour of the unionists and the loyalists. We will never get a fair crack of the whip, so we are the only ones who can defend our community against paedophiles and nasty people.”

It is the key question but also the most naïve question. What can or should the PSNI be doing that it is not at the moment to try to bridge or make less cloudy that biased, prejudiced, erroneous assumption from both sides?

Paul Smyth: For me personally, the key is community policing, but one of the challenges is that, when the police talk about community policing, they actually have a different concept in their heads from what people in communities have. We need much better dialogue between communities and the police in terms of what community policing should look like.

The recent statements by the chief constable are extremely worrying for us in terms of the resource not being there to deal with a lot of low-level crime. Most of the time, paramilitary assaults tend to happen to the most vulnerable people in the most vulnerable communities. They are people who are often perceived as being a nuisance in those communities, so it is quite easy for the paramilitaries to act against them, and it is often for what the police might describe as antisocial behaviour. That is the accusation. We are very worried that the reduction in resource in terms of policing is going to make vulnerable people even more vulnerable.

The story of policing in Northern Ireland is quite remarkable. I was at the policing board last week and they were discussing the idea of disarming the police. It is a debate that they have initiated. Since then, I have been asking people this question. Your learned members may know this, but I do not know of anywhere in the world where a police service has been routinely armed and then disarmed. It would be a fabulous example for Northern Ireland to set, but we need to have a public discussion about that. It is a really complex issue, and certainly if I was a police officer I would be quite anxious about that discussion, for obvious reasons. There is very little point in us having these amazing accountability structures such as the policing board, the PCSPs, the ombudsman’s office and all of the other infrastructure, if people do not use those structures and do not



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understand how they work. There is also a public education piece that needs to be going on.

Structurally, we have done a really good job in terms of changing policing in Northern Ireland, but the missing bit of Patten for me was community engagement. If we put the kind of resources into that that we put into other aspects of reform, we would be in a very different place by now.

Q329 **Chair:** Megan, can I ask you a quick question? This is probably best directed to you, but, Paul, chip in if you want to. It is about the split between manifestation and targeting of resources between urban and rural.

Megan Phair: If we think about the conflict as a whole and the ripple effects that that has had, we obviously have the sparks of violence that happen in city centres, but the ripple effect of the Troubles was flooded throughout Northern Ireland. Even now, the attitudes and behaviours of these paramilitaries cross different communities. We need to invest in our rural communities because they are doing a lot of work that is very isolated.

Q330 **Chair:** It is much easier to traffic people into rural areas, if you want to get people to a place off a three-mile track and get them working in a barn that nobody looks at.

Megan Phair: Yes, if you are looking at seasonal work in apple-picking farms in Armagh or things like that, it is easy to traffic people there. The trafficking of local people might not look like that. The trafficking of local people looks a lot more like your drug lines. These people are exploiting children and young people to run these lines. We do not have the term "county lines" in Northern Ireland, and we do not utilise that term, but young people are going from city centres into rural communities, transporting, cooking and selling drugs. It is happening.

Q331 **Jim Shannon:** Thank you for that, Megan and Paul. I have a very quick first question and then the next one will be a wee bit more detailed, probably taking up some of the thoughts that you have mentioned, Paul. In relation to the Stop Attacks Forum, you are looking forward to what I would refer to as long-term strategies. You have outlined some of those. How successful have they been? Paramilitary attacks are still taking place with regularity—I will speak about that in a minute—in my constituency and across the whole of Northern Ireland. It is good to have the thoughts, but where is the evidence of success?

Paul Smyth: Thank you, Jim. It is nice to meet you this morning. First of all, I should stress that the Stop Attacks Forum is a pressure group. We are not an organisation or an agency. We do not have any particular resources other than our members. We started in 2017 because we were finding that the level of attacks at that stage was going up, and there was very little media coverage. The press statements from the PSNI were generally two lines, which said that there was a paramilitary-style assault, the location, usually the age of the victim and then a line that



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said the injuries were not life-threatening. We were appalled by that, because we know from talking to victims and working with them that the injuries are usually life-changing and the psychological impact is obviously lifelong.

There was what we called a societal shrug. Every time these things happened, people would say things like, "They didn't get it for nothing" and the usual stuff. We wanted to lift public discourse on the issue. We talked to Tim Mairs, who was in the PSNI at the time. To be fair to him, he really listened to what we were saying. He went back and the PSNI changed its press statements. They have not been very consistent in terms of the language in their statements, but a lot of their statements in subsequent years have been much better. They talk about human rights abuses, they talk about young people witnessing the brutality, and so on.

One of our successes is getting the issue back into public discourse. That process led, first of all, to a daytime TV BBC news programme doing a piece on it; then Stacey Dooley did a piece on it, so it brought the issue to national attention. Our focus was initially on children and young people. I suppose it is positive that in the last two or three years there have not been any attacks on people under 18, but there have still been attacks on young people. We are hoping that the discourse that we have raised on that has been helpful.

We also engage very actively with groups like the tackling paramilitarism programme. We have had several meetings with the PSNI team working on this, so we are like a thorn in the side. We are there to remind people that this is still an issue, that it is a gross human rights abuse and that people should care about it. That is our role, but we are also deeply concerned that there is no protection for the people who are threatened.

You know this well, but, for the other Members, the police will come to your door, issue a TM1 threat-to-life form and walk away at that point. Obviously, there is significant trauma involved in that. Then, when someone is assaulted, we realised that, in our hospitals, they are literally patched up and sent home with no aftercare. There is no trauma plan within our health system for victims of these assaults, and that is stupid, apart from being morally wrong, because the cost of not supporting those people is enormous.

People are often economically inactive for the rest of their lives. We have seen a lot of young people take their own lives after they have suffered these attacks, or they have attempted to or are using substances to deal with the trauma. It does not make sense for us not to deal with that. It is an issue that people want to put under the carpet, and our role has been to try to remind people that this is not something that we should accept 25 years on from a peace agreement.

Q332 Jim Shannon: Thank you very much for that. I can give some examples, Mr Chairman, from my own constituency. You have outlined some of the issues. The paramilitaries used to be for God and Ulster. It is not God any



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more and it is certainly not Ulster either. The fact of the matter is that they are up to their eyeballs in criminality. When it comes to drugs, they talk about controlling drugs, but do you know what they do? They sell them. That is a fact. That is what is happening. These paramilitaries really need to be taken on.

In relation to protection rackets, I have been involved with a number of them, quite disappointingly, over the years. As an example, developers that are building a project, a number of houses or a factory in an area are approached by the local hoods to say, "We'll make sure that your place is protected all night." What if it is not protected then? Your JCBs may be damaged; your newly built walls will be pushed over and you have to start again. These are all things that are happening in reality in the society that I live in and represent.

In relation to prostitution, another thing they are involved in, they do that as well. Maybe the PSNI does not have as much information on that as I would like it to, but I have made the police aware of certain locations, for want of a better description, where it is taking place. On moneylending, it is quite unbelievable. The poor people who are desperate are the ones who go and borrow the money. They borrow £200 and, before they know it, it is £800 or £1,000—my goodness. I have worked alongside guys in church groups that I am involved with to try to address these issues in the communities. They have a stranglehold in some communities and in some estates where they have prominence, for want of a better description.

I am not going to mention any names because it would not be appropriate, but just to give an example, last week, a guy got himself into a bit of bother. He borrowed money. He is not able to pay his money back. He has some very severe health problems, almost to the point of suicide. I know him well, but local boys lean on him knowing that he cannot respond in any way. The desperate situation for some of those people is real. I just want to say that, in that case, they have put pressure on. To pay back their debt, young people are then asked to sell the drugs as well. They then become dependent upon those drugs for their own physical life, and then are trying to entice other people into the project as well.

Paramilitaries have a real issue. Community policing, as Mr Chairman said in our previous session, is so important. It is important in my area that you have someone in the police you can have confidence in, and that you have a face you can respond or relate to, so that you can take that problem forward. I would like to see the police having that continuity of police officers because, for many people, you do not build up a relationship of confidence in someone who changes every few months.

Chair: We heard that about Derry/Londonderry about people going.

Jim Shannon: My question is in relation to the police. First, what do you feel would be the best way for the police to work within the community? Secondly, I am very mindful of the extreme hardships, which I have



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outlined with some of those examples, for working-class communities. How can we create conditions that are better to address the problem? I see things happening. They are not always reported. How can we make sure that loyalist beatings are reported? This is my last point.

Chair: You always say it is the last point.

Jim Shannon: Sorry, Mr Chairman, I just have a lot of things on my mind. I am trying to get them all out at once. Sometimes paramilitaries, and loyalist paramilitaries in particular—I try not to use the word “loyalist”, because they are not really—will ask someone to appear at a certain venue. They might have fallen out with a sister or a brother, and sometimes they have a role in policing that has nothing whatsoever to do with policing. It is a real frustration. You probably realise that from the words that I have said, but I just want to get your thoughts on how we could do it better.

Megan Phair: The key thing is that we put a lot of emphasis on the PSNI, but we need a holistic approach to deal with paramilitaries. We cannot police this issue away. We need a health service approach; like Paul said, we need to be trauma-informed when we are dealing with these victims, especially victims in debt bondage. If you think about young people, in 2020-21 in the Lanark Way riots, young people were rioting to clear drug debt. We know that. We were told that, and I am sure you have heard that as well. If we look at the Easter Rising march and the dissident republicans, groups were using young people.

Q333 **Chair:** Correct me if I am wrong, but I think that is the first time we have heard about them effectively saying, “You can reduce your debt if you go and protest or riot.”

Megan Phair: From my knowledge and from what I have heard from young people, it was up to £80. “If you riot, you can get £80 of drug debt cleared.” I am sure it was higher for some others.

Chair: It is like a speed awareness course; you can go on that and you do not get the points.

Megan Phair: Yes, it is the exact same principle. It is shocking that those are the tactics they are using. They are not stupid. They are using these tactics because these young people are terrified. They do not have £50 or £100, but they can go out and riot. These young people, who we can argue are victims of exploitation and coercion, are then being criminalised in the same system that is meant to protect them. We have significant safeguarding issues that need this holistic approach, not just policing. We need to think about health and social care trusts and how we can support and protect them.

Q334 **Chair:** You mentioned health, as did Mr Shannon. Could you give us a word or two about housing or housing allocation? We have had drawn to our attention an estate, which we will not name, where, from memory,



something like 85% of the people living there are young single mothers, and they are a magnet to people who go door to door offering cash. Particularly coming up to Christmas, people want to give their kids a couple of presents and all the rest of it. They are trading on human misery. They are profiting off human misery. What are your thoughts on how better to avoid—I know it is a strong word and I do not use it ill-advisedly—the ghettoisation that effectively creates a captive audience, if you will, of likely victims? I use the word “victims” advisedly as well.

Megan Phair: It is an interesting point because, like you said, it is a magnet. These young women should have a right to live somewhere they feel safe. They want to live within their communities, but what we need is a holistic approach of support for these women. That looks like funding programmes that are supporting young mothers. It is about educating these mothers on the risks when these people—“your friendly neighbourhood paramilitary”, who goes door to door like the Avon salesperson, as you said—come to their doors. It is about using the relationships that social workers or support workers have with them to educate them on what this is and what it could look like. If they cannot pay back the loan, that is when they get into things like being sexually exploited. If they have older children—say 11 or 12 years old—they will need to run a package and that package will obviously be drugs.

Q335 **Chair:** Or, “Can you hide this package in your loo cistern or under the floorboards?”

Megan Phair: Or behind drywall. We have seen that with people who might have severe learning difficulties. They have been hiding weapons behind drywall. That is exploitation. That is using someone’s vulnerability to exploit them.

Q336 **Jim Shannon:** It is another way of doing things as well. By the way, there are many boys and ladies who have walked away from their past and make a constructive contribution to society. What they have done positively should not be ignored. Government have brought in some grant schemes and initiative schemes in some of the estates. The rural community network in Newtownards, which goes across Stephen’s territory in North Down and mine in Ards, are doing fantastic work when it comes to moving forward.

There is a role, I believe, for Government, not for volunteers, to constructively look at things: for instance, to do training for HGV lorry licences, to do initiatives in the community for elderly people, or to do initiatives for women and girls to train them, bring them forward and take them away from the paramilitary influencers out there. Is that something that you have seen happening? From what you have said, Megan, you probably have, but it is something to say that there is some positive work happening as well. It is important that we look to ensure that that happens. If we are looking at solutions, as we are, that is a solution.

Paul Smyth: There are a number of promising initiatives. One of the difficulties is that the resources tend to come in very short bursts, so a



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lot of the funding is only one-year funding. I personally do not believe you can achieve anything with one-year funding. To talk about outcomes is ridiculous. With short-term funding you get short-term thinking. We need to really be thinking, planning and resourcing for the long term. This is a very stubborn, wicked problem that is going to take us a long time to resolve.

Q337 **Chair:** We need multi-year settlements.

Paul Smyth: Yes, and we have made some mistakes. The attitude after the agreement was to try to buy people in.

Chair: The audit trail needs to be much more transparent and far clearer, yes.

Paul Smyth: Yes, but we know, for example, from research on gangs around the world, that the things that really turn people's lives around, as Jim was suggesting, are meaningful jobs. That does not mean just any job, but a job that the person gets a sense of meaning from and good relationships in their life. Nothing else has worked, because there are so many attractions to being involved in a gang in terms of income and prestige. Particularly for young men, there is a sense of machismo. We need to replace that with something else, but this short-termism is just putting sticking plasters on. It is not really leading to the systemic change that we need to see.

There are a number of people who have transformed their lives remarkably, but we do not make it easy. It staggers me in Northern Ireland that we do not have any process to prevent recruitment to these organisations. In England, so much resource has gone in through the Prevent strategy and so on. I am not suggesting that we take that strategy to Northern Ireland, but we need to develop something.

Q338 **Chair:** Why not? Part of the thrust of Prevent is to avoid and avert radicalisation. In essence, this is radicalisation of young people.

Paul Smyth: It is, absolutely, and it is grooming as well. A number of senior police officers have talked about paramilitary assaults against young people as child abuse, but we have never seen anyone prosecuted for child abuse for these crimes. It would be a game changer if we did.

Chair: Were they to be tried and imprisoned, you do wonder what would happen. We know what the prisoner experience is for people who abuse children, so that might change the dynamic.

Q339 **Jim Shannon:** I have one last point, because it is very important that we do this as well. These are crime gang leaders. I have been in touch with the police back home on numerous occasions about this issue. The gangs need to be taken on and their assets removed. Some of them are in legitimate businesses, whether it be shops, construction, or maybe just owning houses and rental accommodation. These are things that they are doing. Government need to take the assets away. I do not know how



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many times I have talked with frustration to the PSNI, and indeed to Chief Constable Simon Byrne, about this very issue. Take the big boys out, and take them out quick.

Paul Smyth: The PCTF has had some success in that, but to go back to your earlier point about policing, Jim, a problem in all communities is that the police put a community team in, the community work hard to build relationships with that team of people, and then they tend to be all moved at once. It is nonsensical.

There is a friend of mine in the police who talks about the idea of streetcraft. It seems to have just disappeared. People are moved around all over the place. There is so much churn in the police that it is difficult for people to feel that they have a relationship. It is also very harsh when they have that relationship and it is working well, then someone else comes in and the tactics change completely, and you are back to square one. It really exhausts people on the ground. They believe in community policing, they want things to change, but we just keep going in these circles that are getting us nowhere.

Q340 **Chair:** Mr Shannon was right: we are trying to find solutions and suggestions in these inquiries. We try to identify the issues and the problems and then recommend to decision makers what they might do. You are not the first to make that very important point, and for repetition it is helpful. Going back to my earlier point about the lack of trust or suspicion towards the police from both traditional communities, that point speaks to stability. If you are starting a relationship not from ground zero but in minus territory, it takes a lot of time to build up trust to the point of people saying, "I can see that you are neutral." That surely has to be a pointer to greater stability of policing, with people staying in their area for many years to build up those relationships. Is that a fair point to make?

Paul Smyth: It is, but there are two sides to it. We were supposed to be joined today by two colleagues, and they cannot be here because there have been enormous cuts in the youth service budget in Northern Ireland. These are people who are right on the frontline in terms of these issues and they are losing staff. You need to resource the community and the police at the same time so that those relationships are developed and sustained over time. If you are constantly churning staff, you are also starting from scratch every time a new person comes in.

On the policing side, absolutely, I do not see why people cannot be promoted but still stay in the role, but it seems that it is almost like the civil service; they are moved across departments without any real thought given to the consequences of that.

Q341 **Chair:** I have a quick question on that point about the youth service. There have been plenty of people in the recent past who have said, "I was tempted to go down that path and I pulled myself back" or "I was way down that path but I managed to get off it and get on to the straight



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and narrow", for want of a better term. How do youth service workers and others recruit role models for each generation: people who dress like them, sound like them, listen to the same music, play the same computer games, watch the same sports and talk in their lingo? There is no point in older people saying, "Do not do this. It is frightfully dangerous. Why don't you go and become a milkman?" They need people within their own peer group. I know they are not here, but how does the youth service try to identify those people who can carry so much power?

Paul Smyth: I think you visited Divis with our colleague Stephen.

Chair: We have visited lots of places.

Paul Smyth: He is incredible because he mentors young people through the youth club. Young people often grow up through the youth club, and the youth club is often the one place where they feel safe in the community. If they are having a bad experience in education, in particular, the youth club becomes extremely important in terms of building their social capital and so on. A lot of those young people start doing youth work training and become a volunteer in the youth club. They might then get some paid work, and they might end up doing their degree and coming back to work in the community or in a similar community. That is extremely important.

At the moment, there are a whole bunch of people who are studying for their degrees in youth work at Ulster University and part of the condition of them being on the programme is that they have to have a job, and they are about to lose those jobs. They will lose not only their job, but also their qualification. It is catastrophic and counterproductive. If we are trying to deal with paramilitarism, in the lives of young people who are coming under threat and coercion from paramilitaries there are very few adults they trust. The youth worker is often one.

If I give you an example, there was a young guy who lived in west Belfast who was shot by the paramilitaries. He was fortunate that his wounds were through the muscle rather than bones, so he was patched up in hospital and sent home. He was given a physio appointment. The physio appointment was in the Ulster Hospital, which is in east Belfast. He had no idea where that hospital was. He had no idea how to get there. He did not have the resources to get there, and when he found out it was a Protestant area, and he is from a Catholic community, he said, "There is no way I am going there." Because he did not turn up for his physio appointment, he was taken off the service, and that was a very important follow-up for him.

We would argue that he could have a place of trust and a person of trust in the local youth centre. Often, in the local youth centres, the paramilitaries know they cannot cross the door. They have a very clear understanding that that is not to happen. Why can the physio not go to them? There are things like that that are not terribly costly but are based around understanding. Those who have been through this are probably



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the most likely people not to turn up for an appointment. If we know that at the time, why can we not start reengineering the systems so that we give them the support they need?

Chair: That is a point to be considered. I find this topic so fascinating that I can dilate on it for hours, much to the frustration of colleagues who are chomping at the bit to get in. I am now going to shut up.

Q342 **Carla Lockhart:** This is a very quick point in relation to youth services. I note that you have a number of church representatives in your group. Do you find that that role is still very strong? Could it be bolstered to support youth services? The church still very much has a place within Northern Ireland and can do really good work among communities. I am just keen to understand whether that should be bolstered and funded so that the church can help.

Paul Smyth: First of all, I should say that the representatives in our group are there in an individual capacity. They are not representing the churches, or they might not be able to say the things that they do say. Church-based youth work can be really effective for some young people, but there are also young people for whom it is the last place they would go. It depends.

I know that in your constituency, for example, the YMCA is brilliant. I was out with them last summer. They were going round the bonfires in Portadown and keeping young people safe. Some groups have that grassroots engagement; other groups seem to be a little more detached from young people in the communities. It varies a lot from place to place, but, if there are people who young people invest trust in, that is where the resources should be going, whether it is a church-based programme or some other kind of programme.

We need to better skill youth workers for doing this kind of work, because not all youth workers are willing to do it or to challenge these groups. We need to be looking at how we support people to do that work. To be fair, the Education Authority Youth Service has been the one public agency in the tackling paramilitarism programme that has really gone out of its way to think about how we support vulnerable young people. Ironically, it is the same group that is now cutting a lot of the frontline services.

Carla Lockhart: Yes, and herein lies the point. If our statutory body is cutting, it is often left on the shoulders of voluntary bodies. In terms of youth service, what bigger organisation of volunteers is there than the church? There is definitely some work that could be done around that.

Q343 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Good morning. I am also fascinated by this whole issue. When we went to visit Northern Ireland just a few weeks ago, it was fascinating. Some of the things that I had been unaware of were eye-wateringly shocking, but we also saw so many wonderful groups doing that community engagement, and the programmes that they have to divert people, especially young people, away from the paramilitary



groups. One fascinating thing was the way they led the programme based on a public health approach, seeing violence as a virus. Doing it that way was genius—looking at trauma and mental health, and using that as the basis of a programme.

My question is a little bit drier than that. How do you think the UK and Irish Governments can better support any newly formed Executive to take action against these groups?

Megan Phair: We have said it, so I sound like a broken record. The big thing is to fund this great youth work that is happening. If you think about being a young person growing up with this conflict architecture everywhere and with society being divided, they are looking for civic leadership rather than actual leadership within Government because of the lack of an Executive. Who plugs those gaps? The gaps are sometimes plugged by paramilitaries. They are the role models in communities.

Some young people go down the path of seeing a youth worker as their role model and the person they aspire to be like. People like Stephen in our group support young people and work through that but, as Paul has said, we need to be thinking about long-term solutions for these issues and long-term funding strategies. We need to think about how to tackle this and prosecute people who are exploiting children and young people. We need to have a strategic plan around that, not being afraid to use language like “exploitation of young people” and “child abuse”. We need a definition for child criminal exploitation. There is not one yet.

We need to utilise the national referral mechanism. There has never been a boy from Northern Ireland referred to the NRM. We know that boys are being exploited in our country. There was one person, a girl, who was referred in 2022, but there has never been a boy referred. These paramilitaries are exploiting, trafficking and using young boys for that purpose.

If we look at the stats compared to England, Wales and Scotland, there are over 5,000 young people in the NRM this past year and 67 of them are based in Northern Ireland, but only one is from Northern Ireland. We need to look at what is available and what can be utilised that we are not utilising, and then fund those things and educate people on things like exploitation, coercion and human trafficking.

Q344 **Mary Kelly Foy:** I could not agree more. It is obviously going to be a long-term issue. My background is community development and public health. I know all about that. It was a different level, though, in Northern Ireland, where there is that shared history of violence and trauma. It was fascinating for me, but, while those programmes are going on, the paramilitary groups are still working. They will always be thinking of new ways to get into those communities. What do you think can be done in the policing and criminal justice system to increase the clearance rate for these attacks? It is only 2% at the minute.



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Paul Smyth: That clearance rate is appalling and I have talked to the police for over a decade about it. To be frank, there is a culture in the police, as there is in our society, that this is just a problem that we cannot really deal with. I was in a meeting one day with a senior police officer and she was explaining to us the process that happens whenever one of these attacks happens. She said they did door-to-door canvassing. I was quizzing her and I asked, "When those officers are doing that, who is protecting them?" They say, "There is another team in the community that is protecting them", and she talked all the way through it. I said, "Do you ever get any useful intelligence?" She said, "No, never". It is a huge resource that is being wasted. We need to be thinking about whether there are more effective ways.

I believe that, if people feel they have a relationship with an individual officer, they are much more likely to have a conversation with them. You are never going to do that on your doorstep in one of these communities. Apart from anything else, you do not want your neighbours to even see you talking to the police. There is a lot of ritual that is very wasteful and is not being productive, so we need to be thinking more creatively.

Also, at the community level, people go to the paramilitaries because they see the police—they blame it on them, but it is actually the whole criminal justice system—as being pretty ineffective. Even if someone is arrested, they are usually released pretty quickly, and they might be back doing the things that they were accused of in the first place. The community think, "The justice system does not work for us", but there are really good examples around the world.

In Red Hook in Brooklyn, for example, they have a community court and a full-time judge. Dozens of civil servants from Northern Ireland have visited the court over more than a decade, and they come back telling wonderful stories about it, but we have never actually implemented any of these models. It is often because of short-term thinking and systemic thinking. We need to be a wee bit more radical.

In terms of where the investment goes, when you look at what TPP is funding, I think a lot of what it is funding is good, but a lot of the money is going to big organisations and to statutory organisations. To use an Americanism, you want to get more bang for your buck. Am I allowed to use that one in Parliament?

Chair: With dispensation, yes.

Paul Smyth: I have done it now. If you invest in frontline voluntary services, it is much more cost-effective and there tends to be a much higher level of trust. We could be a little more creative in terms of the resources that are available and where they are going, but certainly we should not be taking resources away now when we know that the paramilitaries are salivating about the political vacuum and the austerity environment. It is the perfect storm for them, and it is going to make young people a lot more vulnerable.



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Mary Kelly Foy: Thanks for that. It is very useful.

Q345 **Stephen Farry:** I just wanted to come in with a follow-up from Mary's questions there. On the criminal justice response, there are probably two issues. The first one is the evidential test. You are, by definition, very reliant on the complaining witness issue, and they are going to be very reluctant. Do you have any thoughts as to how we could get around that particular hurdle in terms of evidence?

The second question relates to the unfortunately very rare cases where someone is convicted, and the sentencing and charging around these cases, where there are situations such as grievous bodily harm. In that context, would you see the case for some sort of aggravating factor to be added to the sentencing the same way we do around hate crime, to reflect that this is not simply a case of two people involved in a fight, but a situation where there is clearly a coercive control element above and beyond the actual violence itself?

Paul Smyth: Convictions are so rare that it is difficult to know. Also, on policing and gathering evidence, I am not an expert in that. I watch enough crime programmes, so I have a few ideas. Quite often, young people are given their threat by text. Quite often, other people in the community know what is going on.

The approach the police are taking currently is very clearly not working. Again, it would be interesting to have some discussions within communities involving the police about what community policing should look like. We can put some of these tricky issues into those conversations and ask the community how the police could be more successful in catching these people. It is important that terms like "grooming" and "human rights abuse" are used. We need to repeatedly use that language to wean the community off the idea that these people are somehow the harbingers of justice. That takes time, and we need more and more people to be involved in that.

Q346 **Mr Walker:** The original question I was going to ask was along the lines of your written evidence, which said that the Northern Ireland Government were in breach of their commitments under the UN convention on the rights of the child. I do not think I need to ask you, given what we have already heard, why you feel that.

Perhaps this is a more useful question: can you give other examples beyond those you have already given in health and the criminal justice system? Are there other examples where you feel that they are not meeting those commitments? More broadly, how do we raise the visibility of this issue of grooming and, fundamentally, the coercion of children? That seems to be one of the fundamental factors in what has been coming up, in both your evidence and what we have heard from the NICCY.

Megan Phair: You mentioned the UNCRC. If we look at the articles, there are so many that we are breaching and failing young people on. It



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is as simple as article 6: "Young people have the right to life". I could rattle off different articles, but I will not do that.

I was looking at some research in preparation for this, and Siobhan McAlister and others were doing research in 2018. There were quotes from young people in that. It is important that their words are heard today. Think about young people who are witnessing this violence. There is a young person named Aidan in the research who has seen his dad get shot five times. He tried to run out the door to save his own life and got thrown against stairs, which had no carpet, so he was hit with nails.

There are people in the community who are seeing this happen. They are hearing the gunshots. They are terrified. There is a failure there to protect these communities in the sense of having these safe spaces. If we utilise relationships with community police officers, we can create safer spaces for people coming to share their stories and their truths. For these young people, as I and Paul have said, a lot of the time youth centres are those places. What was the second part of your question?

Q347 Mr Walker: It was about any further examples. The second one was around this issue of grooming, effectively, and coercive control. Do you think that is useful language to be using in this space? Should we be promoting it more?

Megan Phair: "Grooming" is the most useful word. We do not need to reinvent the wheel here. These young people are being groomed, coerced and exploited. Through the programme and the work that I do for Invisible Traffick, we talk about these terms, so young people have the language. It is the same as young people across the world who maybe do not understand that they are being sexually exploited. If you explain to them what that looks like and what that is, then they know the language.

It is the same in communities. Communities do not understand that this is coercive control, and that these paramilitaries are controlling them and wanting to have their own power. If we listen to the words of young people like those in that research, it is very clearly stated. Another young person had said, "You could not have a childhood." A childhood is the right to rest and play. They have a right to be protected from exploitation, so there are all these different examples. If we are listening to the words of young people, and giving them a space and a voice, then we can utilise their words and say, "The words for that are 'exploitation', 'grooming', 'fear' and 'control'."

Q348 Mr Walker: In the system more generally we have approaches to safeguarding. You mentioned the Prevent strategy. I appreciate that it cannot necessarily be lifted and shifted for the Northern Ireland context, but something similar could presumably be designed with more contextual awareness. To your point about recruitment, is there a broader role for safeguarding approaches in this?



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Paul Smyth: I am sure you saw the footage of the riots that happened in Derry last Easter. There is very clear footage of kids who were 11 or 12 years old throwing petrol bombs. If that does not start a safeguarding review, I do not know what should, but apparently it does not. As a parent, it seems very obvious to me. As a parent, I was appalled by it. How the hell could a child that age be caught up in this? What are their parents doing? Also, what is the state doing to protect them?

Often, our approach is to criminalise the young people who get caught up in these things, and that gets the groups off the hook. It is a bit like the housing intimidation stuff. We pay millions every year because people are intimidated out of their homes, rather than looking at who is doing the intimidation and whether we can prevent that from happening. We have developed systems that, in many ways, facilitate these groups rather than making life extremely difficult for them. A shift in thinking is needed. Particularly within our health system, that change is very important.

One other issue I would like to link to that is something that Siobhan McAlister brought up in her presentation to you. We think it is a very important issue. A lot of our understanding of violence is very gendered. Often, when we talk about violence, we are thinking about young men. A lot of the resources are aimed at young men. We have only scraped the surface in terms of understanding how young women experience that coercive control, paramilitary violence and sexual grooming.

There is another more upbeat side to that, which is that young women are probably one of our most powerful resources in terms of changing the behaviours of young men. The young women in their lives can probably have a lot more impact than I can as a middle-aged guy. We need to be running programmes with young women that allow them to build up their resilience and strength, and help them to work together collectively in their communities to find ways of extricating guys from this violent culture. We have not really done that, so, again, there are opportunities there to think differently and develop different kinds of programmes that might help us to shift some of this stuff.

Megan Phair: I have an example of a community response to the Lanark Way riots. A friend of mine was living in the community, and people from the community were going out and telling other members, "Bring in your recycling because they are going to use those bottles as petrol bombs" or "They are going to use those bottles to throw at the police". There is a community resilience, but there is too much expectation on this community resilience, especially the resilience of children and young people.

There are 23,095 children from March 2021 who are recognised and known to social care services as children in need. This is the big gap. These are not children who are in care, these are not children who are getting social worker visits all the time, but they are children in need, and they are the children who are being missed. These 23,000 children need



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not only to have resilience within their communities but to have support from statutory bodies.

If communities can lift bottles that are meant to be thrown at police or thrown at other people from other communities—a friend of mine was doused in petrol but was still lifting these bottles to protect her community—that ownership is really powerful. That is unique to Northern Ireland. People are very proud to be from Northern Ireland even though there are all of these issues and problems. Let us give these communities some security and protection. Let us look at safeguarding strategy. Carlene Firmin, who is an expert in contextualised safeguarding, talks about this. We have covered the safeguarding issues within the home, we look at safeguarding in schools, we look at safeguarding in youth centres, but what about that in between bit? What about this extrafamilial abuse?

Q349 Mr Walker: Talking of extrafamilial abuse, have you seen evidence of grooming in publicly funded places? What, if anything, can be done about that? That is one of the concerns,

Megan Phair: It is hard to speak to that because it is hard to know people's intentions. A lot of good work has been done. Individuals' motives might not be the motives of an organisation. It is easy to say—when we first looked at CSE in Northern Ireland, we heard this—"That doesn't happen outside of families; that happens just within families", but we know that is not the case. There needs to be some research carried out or something to give you the answer that you need or want there, because we do not know the motivations of individuals.

Q350 Sir Robert Buckland: Stephen has asked something of my topic about the criminal justice response and the evidential challenges, but I was really struck, Megan, by what you said about the fact that only one child has been referred under the NRM for modern-day slavery. The legislation in Northern Ireland is as it is here in England and Wales, yet there is only one child. Correct me if I am wrong, but that suggests to me perhaps a woeful lack of awareness and training in what modern-day slavery actually covers.

Secondly, do you think that the criminal law in Northern Ireland is sufficiently developed to cover all the activities of adults when it comes to child exploitation? There is some debate here in England and Wales about whether we need a new child exploitation offence to cover things. I am a bit of a sceptic about just creating new laws and then finding them not being used, but I would really welcome your thoughts as to whether we have a proper framework here to deal with the adults who are exploiting children.

Megan Phair: It is unique in Northern Ireland as well, as you know. It would be great to have an anti-slavery commissioner. There has not been one for seven months, I think. There is a lack of awareness in Northern Ireland about what human trafficking and exploitation are. A lot of what I do in my job and role is to talk about that, to train professionals and to



do my best in that forum. There are different pockets of organisations that are doing the same thing.

We do not recognise what is happening to our young people as human trafficking or exploitation. If you were to pull any social worker off the street and ask them what an NRM was or how you fill in an NRM, I am confident in saying that they would not be able to tell you what that is. There is a lack of awareness and training there with social services that needs to happen. I am happy to be corrected if that is not the case. If they know what it is, that is great, but it is very evidently not being utilised, because we only have one female. What was she referred for? Sexual exploitation. We do not have quarter four statistics from 2022, but we know from the first three quarters of the year that that is one female who has been sexually exploited. There are numerous young men I have heard of who have been through the criminal justice system. They are being criminalised, and think of the cost of that alone.

It costs over £800,000 to have a young person in Woodlands juvenile detention centre. We need to have a general awareness around what human trafficking and exploitation are, and to train professionals—our legal system, the prosecution service; all these different professionals—to recognise how to safeguard these young people. How do we see this as a welfare issue and a health and social care issue rather than a criminal justice issue, which a lot of the time it is?

We have a lot of work to do around that. It is not easy; it is going to be a difficult road, but every time I train a new group of youth workers or train new people—and I have brought a lot of the language around child criminal exploitation into Stop Attacks as well—it is educating our little group to then spread out to bigger groups.

Paul Smyth: For us a group, having Megan involved has been really important. I had not heard about NRM before Megan joined our group. It is a new idea to people within the justice system in Northern Ireland. They are very slowly playing catch-up on it, but it is potentially a game changer in terms of how we support young people who are being groomed and recruited into these organisations, protecting them and then going after the people who are doing the grooming rather than just criminalising another group of young people.

Q351 **Sir Robert Buckland:** I was going to say that there has been a lot of learning here in England and Wales about this. We have been on a journey. I will give you an example. The British Transport Police has worked on NRM and unaccompanied minors on trains. They are really taking a much more intelligent view about not arresting the youngsters but talking to them and getting them on side. Then, of course, those youngsters are able to help co-operate to stop those people who are exploiting them, and it is really having an impact on county lines here in England and Wales. It is easy to draw glib parallels, and we have other dimensions as well, which we are all aware of in this room and elsewhere.



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It sounds as if you are talking to other groups and agencies across the UK and maybe in the Republic as well to work out a more intelligent way in which we can safeguard youngsters.

Megan Phair: If you look at the common travel area as well, it is so easy to traffic people across the border from the south of Ireland to the north of Ireland. The common travel area is a contentious subject, but it is also difficult to measure what level of trafficking has happened. Maybe because of issues getting drugs into Northern Ireland, young people might go to Dublin to get drugs and bring them up. There are these county lines type issues but, like I stated before, we do not recognise county lines as an issue.

Through the organisation Invisible Traffick, we have been pushing for youth workers to be first responders in terms of utilising the NRM and the youth service in that way. We are recognising that safeguarding issue in the safe space that these young people are in. If youth workers are able to fill in an NRM or tell social services, or whoever the first responder may be, that they need an NRM, and say, "This child is a victim of modern slavery", then that is transformative. We can change so much and protect that child and make sure that they are not in the criminal justice system and then being further criminalised, in order to protect them.

Our colleagues have had some young people who have been presented with TM1s in a juvenile justice centre or in a secure care unit. They are presented with that with a social worker and then they are just sent on their way into a room to process all of that. These issues have real people behind them. This is the problem. We can look at all the statistics and figures in the world. That one girl is a beginning, but the countless young men and women who are being exploited and trafficked in Northern Ireland without any kind of protection is insane. Once we can utilise the tool of the NRM, we are going to see a massive influx.

Chair: We started late and I am conscious of the time. PMQs will start in due course, which some colleagues may wish to attend. I am perfectly relaxed about it. I am going to ask for short questions and short answers, although I know there is a huge amount of information.

Q352 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Very briefly, you are right to focus on sexual exploitation of girls. We have heard evidence about sexual exploitation of boys as well. It is very hard to reach that issue for stigma reasons. What are your experiences about how better the authorities can target, identify and protect young men and boys from that sort of exploitation?

Megan Phair: The first step is to recognise that there is the exploitation. This is the issue. We do not want to recognise that boys are being sexually exploited as a form of control. That is the coercion element. We have seen it in the community. It has been happening since the Troubles that young boys have been raped as a means of control. Trying to get those young people to communicate and talk about that is very complex and difficult. The same happens within county lines structures in



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mainland UK with young people being forced to smuggle drugs inside of them. They are being sexually exploited not only through rape, power and control but also through putting drugs inside their body, which is very alarming. That will be happening in Northern Ireland as well.

Q353 Claire Hanna: Thank you very much for your really impactful evidence. We do need reminding that we have such an insane tolerance of things that should be intolerable. Clearly, just allowing that level of menace and dysfunction in the system is part of the problem. It is all reinforcing other aspects of how we behave.

I am very aware of the time. I think criminal justice is absolutely key here, because there are so many issues in communities where people do not see a line between an action and a consequence. It is making them lose more and more faith in getting things done, and that is what the gangs are exploiting.

We know, as you said, about people who are perceived to be a nuisance in one way or the other and, "Sure, the courts will never deal with that," or whatever. On those lower-level issues, as well as getting justice to the people who are doing things like this, our criminal justice system is just so completely broken and unfit for purpose, and that is a whole other ball game.

You have addressed the impact of short-term funding cycles; you covered that off very well in just the fact that people are living quarter to quarter and year to year. Is the 2024-25 tackling paramilitarism programme dependent and conditional on there being an Executive? What are the issues if that programme has to fall because there is no Executive in place?

Paul Smyth: I am not entirely sure what the answer to that is, but I would assume that it is more dependent on there being a budget and whoever is setting the budget agreeing that those resources would go to the programme. We have literally just started this process and it would be catastrophic to end it.

As the people involved in TPP always say, we need to think not just about the money that is going into the programme but about the whole Executive budget. Chairman, if you were to do a Venn diagram and you had three circles, and one of them was all of the young people in the care system, another was the young people who are known to the criminal justice system and the third was young people who had been excluded from school, you would catch almost every young person who is being exploited or recruited by these groups. You are still only talking about a low number of hundreds of young people in total. Northern Ireland is a tiny place. We really should be able to find ways of dealing with these things.

When President Clinton came to Northern Ireland after the Good Friday agreement, I remember that he talked about Northern Ireland as a beacon of hope for the rest of the world, and I am often embarrassed by that, because there are very few places in the world that have the



resources and the good will that we have. In Northern Ireland we have a responsibility to set an example to other places in the world that are struggling with the same kinds of issues, but often our systems, our silo thinking and our short-termism let us down and we do not really develop the ground-changing ideas that will allow us to transform as a society.

We should not let our failure on that set us back. We need to get creative minds together and think about how we change this. Bishop Tutu always asked why we are pulling people out of the river instead of going upstream and figuring out why they are falling in. That is the key consideration here. For most of the young people who end up being beaten and shot by paramilitaries, you could predict that when they are 10 or 11 in terms of their life trajectory, yet we do not have good enough interventions at that stage to stop that happening.

Q354 Sir Robert Goodwill: A common theme that this Committee returns to, sadly too often, is how the lack of a functioning Executive means that many programmes are always under threat and surrounded by uncertainty. I noted, Paul, that you said earlier that short-term funding leads to short-term thinking. Do you recognise the risk that funding for the tackling paramilitarism programme for 2024-25 might be greatly reduced if there is no functioning Executive?

Paul Smyth: Yes. Even if there is a functioning Executive, will they have the commitment to that programme? That is a question that is out there. There are lots of things that are making this a very difficult environment right now but we need to figure out how to ameliorate some of those problems going forward. Apart from anything else, it is important for young people to see that our politicians are meeting, that they are acting and that they are doing things that actually make a difference in our communities.

I do not want to be drawn into party political discussions but it is much better if we have a functioning democracy that young people can engage with than this sort of vacuum. The vacuum in the different phases in which we have had a collapse of the Executive has always suited the paramilitaries and served their interests. We need to be conscious of that in terms of our commitment to getting the institutions back up and running.

Chair: A textbook short question and short answer, Sir Robert—thank you very much indeed. Can I thank you both on behalf of the Committee? You are very welcome to stay and listen to the second panel, whom I encourage to leap with alacrity and enthusiasm towards the front row of the stalls.