

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, HC 1165

Wednesday 21 June 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 June 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 152 - 174

Witnesses

I: Pamela McCreedy, Chief Operating Officer, Police Service of Northern Ireland; Mark McNaughten, Assistant Chief Officer for Corporate Services, Police Service of Northern Ireland; Geraldine Hanna, Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate for Northern Ireland.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [\[FPC0010\]](#) - Police Service of Northern Ireland
- [\[FPC0008\]](#) - Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland at Commission for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Pamela McCreedy, Mark McNaughten and Geraldine Hanna.

Q152 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, where we are continuing our inquiries into the funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. Before we start, it is appropriate to note that today is the annual day of reflection, a day for people from not only Northern Ireland but Great Britain and the Republic to acknowledge the hurt and pain of the Troubles and reflect on what can be done to ensure that such loss does not happen again.

Our first session is with our Victims of Crime Commissioner and the PSNI, probably very much concerned about the budget. Could I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, and say a few words by way of introduction?

Geraldine Hanna: My name is Geraldine Hanna, Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime in Northern Ireland.

"God forbid, if someone was to ask for my advice about whether to report a sexual assault, at this stage I would sit on the fence." These are the words of a father whose teenage daughter was assaulted at a music concert. A few months later, when I met him again, he said that he would tell them to forget about it.

"I felt further victimised by the system I turned to for help. I felt so vulnerable, so unprotected." These are the words of a domestic abuse victim who felt let down by the police while attending numerous callouts and breaches of non-molestation orders.

Unfortunately, those sentiments echo the feelings of far too many victims who have encountered our Northern Ireland criminal justice system. I share those words with the Committee to remind us of the human impact of the issues addressed in this inquiry. We repeatedly make promises to improve the treatment and services for victims of crime, but fail to invest the time and money needed to effectively implement these pledges.

By way of context, in 2022-23, Northern Ireland recorded its highest level of reported crime in 16 years, with 11,571 reported crimes. Trends show the greatest increases are in violence against the person, with sexual offences as well. Approximately 72% of crimes have a person recorded as a victim. I have worked in the victim sector for over 22 years and believe we are currently at a tipping point due to the continued underinvestment and lack of meaningful reform in this area.

Whilst the total block grant has increased by 43% in the last 12 years to 2023-24, the Department of Justice has seen only a 3% growth in budget allocation, with both health and education having seen their budget allocation grow by just under 70% and 45% respectively. The PPS, which receives its funding through the Department of Finance, has seen growth of 2.28% in the same period. In previous years, the Department of Justice has benefited from additional funding through the monitoring



HOUSE OF COMMONS

round process. However, as the budget settlement requires any future Barnett consequential to repay the Treasury reserve claim, it will be challenging to secure bids in future monitoring rounds.

The absence of an Executive and a gap in the block grant has left civil servants in an impossible position, where they are prioritising funding to deliver on their statutory duties. This means that vital services, very often provided by the voluntary and community sector, are being reduced or stopped completely. I have grave concerns about how these cuts will impact on the level of care and support available to victims, both in the aftermath of crime and as they endure the unbearable wait for their case to reach court. I welcome the Committee's invitation to attend today and thank you all for your time.

Mark McNaughten: Good morning. I am Mark McNaughten, the assistant chief officer for corporate services in the Police Service. My colleague is going to make some introductory comments.

Pamela McCreedy: Good morning. I am Pamela McCreedy, the chief operating officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I have just a few words; I will keep it brief.

Thank you for the invitation and for having us here today. We have now received our 2023-24 budget allocation from the Department of Justice. Despite securing some improvement on the indicative budget, the budget for 2023-24 has been reduced by 1.7%, which is £12 million. Combined with rising costs and pay inflation, we are now facing a substantial funding gap of around £107 million.

As a result, we are implementing a range of significant saving measures, including reductions in recruitment, overtime and the full range of non-pay support costs. We are looking to review and reshape our operating models but, with these actions, we still face an unaddressed gap of some £38 million. I am concerned that, as things stand, even with our savings plans, it is difficult to see how further savings can actually be delivered in 2023-24. We have already slowed and paused recruitment, and tightened control of future internal promotions and selections. As a result, the Police Service will shrink over the next number of years.

Last year, we reduced officer headcount by 300 to 6,700. This year, a further reduction will take us to 6,300. If this trajectory is maintained, we will see the Police Service go to under 6,000 officers by March 2025. That is significantly less than the Government committed in "New Decade, New Approach", of growing officer numbers to 7,500. It is a marked contrast with the uplift programme for police in England and Wales.

These cuts are happening at a time of increasing demand, as Geraldine referenced. The Northern Ireland population is growing. New legislation is coming online and investigations are becoming more complex. Serious crime and road deaths are increasing, and as you are aware, the terrorist threat has recently been raised to "severe". Police officers remain the primary target of that threat.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Chief Constable has already made clear the wider impact of a smaller Police Service. The Police Service will be smaller, less visible, less accessible and less responsive. Attendance times will deteriorate and non-emergency calls will take longer, investigations will slow down and intelligence gathering will reduce. We will do what we can to protect our neighbourhood policing function; it is the foundation of community confidence and our foundation to prevent crime, but this too will shrink.

Again, we welcome this conversation with you, but we have to be honest with the public about the sort of emergency response service we are moving towards as a result of the budget actions. We are now at a crossroads. Without intervention, some very difficult and unpalatable decisions are going to be needed. Some of those decisions will take years to reverse. Without sustainable funding very soon, the Police Service is going to be unrecognisable from the service and vision of Patten and, indeed, "New Decade, New Approach". It will be unrecognisable compared with that which the people of Northern Ireland have grown to expect, deserve and which has been so crucial in supporting societal change in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years.

Q153 Sir Robert Buckland: Thank you all. The two panellists who made statements have in some ways answered the question that I wanted to ask about justice allocation. Can I deal with the PSNI budget? It is a £12 million reduction. Is it about £750 million overall? Where are we now with the overall figure?

Pamela McCreedy: I will let Mark come in, as it is his core area, but yes, £816 million is what we have been allocated. There was a £12 million cut to our baseline budget this year. I commented on the funding gap. Mainly, that is pay inflation, which then is not recurrently funded. Really, utilities and contractual CPI pressures have added to that, but the £12 million was the real cut.

Q154 Sir Robert Buckland: You are having the usual pressures that all Departments, including ones here in Whitehall, are having on energy and on wages.

Pamela McCreedy: Yes.

Q155 Sir Robert Buckland: There is an overspend. There are overspends in some of the Departments—in justice, in education and in infrastructure. According to the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, only about 70% to 75% of the overspends are covered. In Whitehall, the position is somewhat different, in that the Departments here are mostly expecting to stay within their spending limits. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has suggested that that might imply a weakness in budget management. I want to press you on that issue, to see what PSNI says about that observation.

Pamela McCreedy: When we say we still have £38 million that is not covered, to the point you made, we have identified in-year savings of close to £70 million. That is a significant part of our budget. Pay accounts for 80% of our budget. The only way we can save on pay is natural



HOUSE OF COMMONS

attrition. There is no mechanism on our police staff side for a voluntary exit scheme and there is no mechanism for redundancy of officers at all. We are constrained in many ways with the maximum saving we can achieve through headcount, which is 80% of our costs.

Q156 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Would that mechanism need legislation, to allow it to happen?

Pamela McCreedy: Locally in Northern Ireland, on the police staff side, we would need a voluntary exit scheme, or it would cost us significantly more to enable people to go than we would save in-year. That is the challenge with single-year budgets. Unlike forces in England and Wales, we have no precept; we have no reserves; we have no borrowing mechanism. We are constantly seeking to deliver in-year and last year it was month 9 before we received our budget. It is hugely constraining., we are very constrained to the 20% of the £816 million in what we can actually save beyond headcount.

Mark McNaughten: In terms of the financial management point, we have a sound financial record. We are very close to balancing budgets, we have unqualified accounts and all the rest of it but, in terms of the year that we are in, we have found it very difficult to have mechanisms to cut costs quickly enough. Really, we have gone as far and as fast as we could. We are really constrained. That gives us the concern about breaking even this year.

Pamela McCreedy: We have broken even every other year.

Sir Robert Buckland: I take your point about the lack of a multi-year settlement, which must make things very challenging for you.

Q157 **Chair:** Geraldine, in your opening remarks, you outlined the big differences in the funding levels that you have received and the uplifts compared to education and health. How is that impacting services being delivered on the ground? How is that affecting the way victims and witnesses can be supported?

Geraldine Hanna: As I said in my opening remarks, Chair, at this stage our system is close to breaking point in terms of justice. That is not just with the recent budget cuts; it is over a series of years. Since devolution, really, justice has been the poor relation. We have tried to progress new legislation. For example, last year we brought through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, which introduced coercive control into Northern Ireland, later than England and Wales. We unfortunately are bringing forward initiatives without the associated resources to properly implement them.

That means that both PPS and police are not getting additional moneys to train and cope with that demand. That is having an impact both on their ability to respond effectively to those issues and ensure that the legislation is applied appropriately, and on confidence. We have victims coming through our criminal justice system who are coming away from it saying they would not report a crime again. I had one sexual violence



HOUSE OF COMMONS

victim recently tell me that the actual court process was ten times worse than the experience of the assault itself. That is unsustainable for us.

Then, with the recent budget cuts, we see the likes of health and other services cutting their discretionary spends. Most recently, the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland has seen a total removal of the core funding it received from health. It is very hard to quantify the actual impact that is going to have, but we know it is going to be devastating. Just as Pamela outlined around the impact on staff recruitment, the pause on police recruiting and how long it will take to make that back up again, it will be the same in our voluntary and community sector.

What I would say about justice is that, with the likes of both police and prosecution, the PPS is saying to us that it has seen an increase in its caseload since 2015 of around 57% in domestic abuse cases and 25% in sexual abuse cases. Those cases are very complex. They require a lot more digital material to be reviewed, and disclosure is another issue for victims, but unlike their counterparts in the UK and Ireland, no additional moneys are being found to deliver on that. That is increasing the delays.

Traditionally, Northern Ireland victims, leaving aside the pandemic, would have been facing having to wait double the time for their case to reach court. That is impacting on confidence and people's willingness to stay with their case, so they are withdrawing.

Q158 Chair: Typically in, say, a rape case, how long does it take to get to court? Is it difficult to give generalities?

Geraldine Hanna: I can give you the median. Crown Court cases typically took 535 days in 2021-22. For sexual violence cases, that is 742 days. We are also seeing an increase in the length of time it is taking for our prosecution service to make a decision to prosecute. In 2021-22, it took 209 days on average for the PPS to make a decision, and 274 days for sexual violence cases. That is the median. I see victims from sexual violence cases waiting for between three and five years.

More recently, we had a case of child sexual assault, physical assault and child cruelty. It took eight and a half years for that man to get to court. He reported in 2015 and that case just recently finished in our courts in 2023. I would be here all day trying to explain the impact, both physically and psychologically, that that wait has had on that individual. That is what our victims in Northern Ireland are unfortunately facing.

Q159 Chair: To what extent are the funding problems putting more burdens on the voluntary sector? Presumably there are a lot of people who freely give their time to support victims. Is that putting more pressure on them? Is that taking some of the slack out of the system?

Geraldine Hanna: The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland provides a lot of the additional emotional and psychological support that victims of crime need. Justice funds quite a lot of those services and health funds some, but unfortunately there are budgetary cuts within the statutory Departments. I have just outlined the impact on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Women's Aid. Our voluntary and community sectors are facing either cuts or else flatline budgets. They are facing the same issues as just outlined by the police. They have increased running costs and increased staffing costs, so they are feeling pressured and squeezed as well. That again has an impact.

Services that rely on volunteers are facing difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteers because of the cost of living crisis and other issues. The impacts of austerity mean that people are not always able to volunteer their time anymore, because they need to secure their own employment in order to cope.

Q160 Claire Hanna: You have painted a fairly grim picture there of the context, particularly in policing, of the increase in security issues and in the complexity of mental health challenges, which I know are a huge part of the PSNI's workload, and the dysfunction upstream in the justice system. The police numbers, I understand, in the last financial year went down to 6,669, the lowest level since the PSNI was established. Have you been able to define what police numbers you are looking at now with the budget?

Pamela McCreedy: Linked to the point I made earlier with regard to natural attrition, within our vision of the 2024-25 budget we had allowed a little bit of recruitment to come through. We have had 6,685 in April, May and June, but that number will go down to 6,663 by March 2024 and then potentially below 6,000 in 2025 if that is continued. The number of leavers is at a sort of natural level of attrition, at around 6%, and is predominantly around retirement and so forth. Those numbers are going against a very small number of recruitments.

June is the last intake of a small number, 17. Those students will come out in the autumn after 21 weeks' training and then, at the minute, there are no further plans. Our students, through the probationary period, go into their local policing teams for two years. It starts to have an impact on the pipeline. Our commitment to maintain the neighbourhood policing function is there, but our pipeline to be able to sustain the numbers is not there. Those people need to progress through into aspects of the investigative teams, as we have heard about. It does, by default, mean we have no real ability to ensure we maintain numbers as we would like in the neighbourhood teams.

Q161 Claire Hanna: What message does it send when, in England and Wales, there is the impression of an uplift programme and increased numbers of police on the street?

Pamela McCreedy: That is a recognition of the importance and the increased areas of crime. Crime is constantly changing. We have touched on very human aspects of crime here this morning, but there is cybercrime and other aspects of crime. In the Northern Ireland context, we also have counterterrorism and so forth, given the threat we are facing, and maintaining public order with a presence on the ground. It is concerning.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I know part of the questions from the Committee were on understanding the Barnett consequential impact. You could say, if England and Wales have recognised the investment in it, does that come to the block? We are all well versed that, yes, it does. That is the challenge of a current live programme for Government, but does that prioritise policing? You made reference to the NI Fiscal Council. We are 24% behind our UK counterpart Department in the total justice budget. It is concerning.

In numbers, effectively an officer a day is leaving the organisation. We have an ability to recruit up to 350 or 400 in order to keep our headcount at its normal levels. The challenge is that, even if somebody did produce funding, it takes three years to replace the officers that we lose every year. We are not recovering this quickly and that is of as much concern for me, if I am honest.

Q162 Claire Hanna: Colleagues are going to touch on some of the specific, complex areas of policing, but we all strive towards policing with the community and in the community. Are aspects like that vulnerable with a budget like this?

Pamela McCreedy: I know we all have varying names for it—community policing, neighbourhood policing. We had significantly increased the numbers into neighbourhood policing over the past five years. We were sitting at 600 or 700. The Chief Constable at the last Policing Board stated that that could become 250 or 350. We are committed to the function, but the hours that it is available or, indeed, the number of teams that are out there will undoubtedly be fewer as we move forward.

You are right. That is our connection with the community; it is where our confidence comes from and where a lot of our ground-level understanding and intelligence comes from. It is the preventative piece, so the impact on, as I phrase it, the emergency service is huge going forward. That intelligence on the ground and connection with the community helps us prevent crime and have that early intervention. That will undoubtedly reduce.

Q163 Claire Hanna: Geraldine, you very clearly outlined the impact that waiting for their turn in the justice process had had on people. Does the lack of visibility of officers also have an impact on victims while they are waiting?

Geraldine Hanna: Yes. My concern there is around the fear of crime. For the last few decades we have really worked hard to try to increase confidence in our justice system and in policing. The neighbourhood policing plan and ambition of the PSNI of a few years ago was very welcome. It is very concerning to me to think that, because of budgetary pressures, we are not going to have that level of visibility of our police force on the ground, because people take reassurance from that and there is a fear there.

There is also concern linked to the delay piece. If we have fewer police on the ground and it takes longer for those cases that are reported to go through court, that means we have more people on bail and there could



HOUSE OF COMMONS

be a perceived justice vacuum there. What worries me is that we have certain elements in Northern Ireland that would be quite willing to fill that justice vacuum. That will be hard to undo, so that is a real concern for me.

Chair: We are going to have to move on to the second panel promptly at 10.30 am, because we have Northern Ireland questions in the Chamber at 11.30 am. Try to keep questions and answers concise, if possible.

Q164 **Jim Shannon:** It is nice to see you all. The first question, Geraldine, is in relation to you and victim support. Something that concerns us all and that Claire brought up last week in the Chamber during PMQs is the number of women being murdered in Northern Ireland. We have the second highest rate in the whole of Europe, second only to Romania. That gives us an indication that women do not feel safe on the streets.

I probably know the answer to this question, but how do we improve this, first of all? The moneys, as you quite clearly underlined, are not there for the PPS. Does that mean that we need to do more for ladies to ensure that they can walk the streets, get home safely and not have, as you just mentioned in your introduction, a father worrying about his daughter?

Geraldine Hanna: As you have outlined, Jim, the situation facing Northern Ireland with regard to the safety of women is dire. It is really shocking that Northern Ireland has that reputation as the second least safe place for women in Europe. We, of course, have made great strides to try to improve that with increased legislation. I talked about the domestic abuse legislation from last year. We have had the Gillen review into sexual violence and there are numerous recommendations there.

There has been progress. There has been legislation put through with regards to non-fatal strangulation, which for the first time as of Monday next week becomes illegal in and of itself in Northern Ireland. We have a strategy to end violence against women and girls that is being developed by the Executive Office. There are initiatives underway to try to address the issue but, without the funding, it is mere rhetoric.

What we need to actually give women and girls that security is investment and funding in the services to deliver on that. When we see services like Women's Aid, which campaigns for the ending of violence against women and girls, having their core funding from health removed, it is sending out a contrary message to that of, "We take this issue seriously". That is a big concern.

Again, with the legislative piece, we have introduced new legislation, but without the right training for the police and the prosecution service, it is not going to be effective. We are introducing domestic abuse protection notices and orders. All of that needs money. We already know with domestic abuse that non-molestation orders are effective only if action is taken when they are breached, and that is not always happening. Again, we need the resources in place in order to deliver what we are trying to achieve.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q165 Jim Shannon: I have regular contact with ladies in the office, and non-molestation orders are one of the first things I talk about, whether they have one against an ex-partner or ex-husband. Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not, but that is the issue that the ladies bring up. Is it going to stop the abuse? In theory, it should but, in reality, maybe it does not because of funding.

I will move on to the issue of policing, so this is probably one for you, Pamela and Mark. There is nothing as reassuring as seeing a police car on the road or a policeman on the beat. It reassures the general public; it makes them feel more confident when they know the police are active, are about and can be seen. That visual impression and knowledge of people going about is so important. I am a big believer in neighbourhood policing and always have been. In all my time as a councillor, an MLA and an MP, neighbourhood policing has been at the fore. I have always supported it.

You have hinted at my concern a bit already, but how will the cuts affect neighbourhood policing? If I am reading it right, the Chief Constable and chief superintendents in the areas tell us they want to retain community policing as much as humanly possible, because that contact with the community is really important. What are your thoughts on that? You mentioned, Pamela, that what intelligence and information you can gather might be affected. I would be concerned about that.

Look at paramilitary groups prevalent in every area, whether it be in Nationalist areas or Unionist areas. Those who live off the backs of local people are very active. We know who they are. Police know who they are. I am reminded that in America, as an example, when the police were chasing Al Capone they did not get him because of his murders; they got him because of tax evasion. It does not really matter, does it? Get them in jail. Get them out of the way. Take them away from their drugs empire. Take them away from their protection rackets. Take them away from their money lending. Take them away from their prostitution. Take away their assets and hit them in the pocket.

Is that something that would be affected? I have to say, the police have been very effective in some of those things. I am hoping that they will continue to be as effective. My constituency and my people want to be reassured that those people, who are responsible for the evil and wickedness prevalent across many of the estates in my constituency, and all across Northern Ireland, are hit in the pocket. Hit them hard and take them out of action.

Pamela McCreedy: There are possibly three things, so I will try to go through them quickly. We completely concur with your point on visibility. We talk about being an accessible, visible and responsive Police Service. On one front, recently I have had colleagues say to me, "I see police cars everywhere. We see you everywhere." We have made a conscious effort around the visibility of our vehicles over the past couple of years, to have them liveried and be visible to our local communities. That has been important for us at all levels, but ultimately our headcount is reducing quite significantly and quickly, so there will be fewer people.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I concur with you, Jim, on our commitment and our belief in the impact and importance of community and neighbourhood policing, but with the headcount going from 7,000 towards 6,000 it is almost impossible to completely maintain that. We are seeking to have a level of it and not say, "There will not be any." Obviously we still have local response officers in each of the local areas, but there is also the community piece, the community policing you touched on—having that relationship with communities and knowing what is going on. That is the piece about gathering intelligence, not in what we would deem an intelligence service way, but just understanding what is going on in the area.

Touching on an area that is quite close to your constituency area on organised crime and the impact that is having on communities, we absolutely still throw the full weight of the law at that, as you can see. On the one hand, you could say we are moving towards lower neighbourhood policing numbers, but where incidents do occur, you can see that we respond. We have operational support that we deploy to that as well.

Mark McNaughten: We know that is an area of interest for the Committee. Yes, we have additional ringfenced funding, in effect, for the paramilitary crime task force, but that too is coming under pressure. Our costs are going up, the budget is flat and there is no ongoing certainty in relation to that. That has been a very successful programme in tackling some of the criminality that you mention, but again, it is an area where potentially even this year, there will be about 10% less than we really need just to keep going at the same rate that we were. That would mean a lessening of activity and a lessening of the grip around some of those areas. That is something that we would not want to be doing.

Q166 **Jim Shannon:** Pamela, you outlined the situation with officers who are leaving. To me, there is nothing as important as having an experienced officer. I think of one guy in particular in Newtownards. I am not going to mention his name to the Committee, but he was an experienced officer and in the past all the new trainee officers were sent along with him because of his temperament and understanding that the community was important. Is there any effort made to retain those officers who want to leave and to suggest that they might stay for another couple of years? I am not saying that they will, but it is so important to have that experience still on the streets.

Pamela McCreedy: We will always have conversations with officers and staff around the ability to retain that experience so others can learn the ropes. You are absolutely right. Personal interaction and responding to the community is vital. To an extent, given the pace of people leaving compared with our recruitment coming through, there is that brain drain and experience drain.

We did see the leaver rate slightly increase last year. There were tax reasons for that as well. Our officers are people and they have a life to live. That has slightly changed and we can see a little bit of a slowing of that. There are practicalities around why officers choose to retire or not,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but absolutely we would have the conversation. It is challenging on a personal level for a lot of our officers.

Q167 Stephen Farry: Just to follow on from Jim's questions in the first instance, Pamela, could you give the Committee a sense of how policing in Northern Ireland is unique in the context of the UK? How does that exceptionalism have to be acknowledged in terms of funding? We are ever conscious of the ongoing security threat in particular, the attempted murder of John Caldwell earlier this year and the resilience of police officers notwithstanding that.

Obviously the funding comes from the block grant. There is also some security funding coming directly from Whitehall. Could you talk about what the Chief Constable is looking at in that regard? I am conscious that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has tried to slightly diminish Northern Ireland's exceptionalism in that respect.

I have a second question for Geraldine on an entirely different note. Could you talk about the issue of delay in the criminal justice system? I am conscious we have had a Criminal Justice Inspection report recently on that. I am very conscious as well that the Justice Minister has recently been pushing very hard to try to improve the speed in the system. What would you recommend as the way forward, in terms of trying to address those issues? Could you talk about the impact of delay on victims as well?

Pamela McCreedy: You have given me thinking time. Thank you. From working with colleagues who have previously worked in English forces, Northern Ireland is unique, in that we are on our own, effectively. Particularly in instances where we have public disorder, we cannot contact the next neighbouring force and get support. We are on our own. We can avail ourselves of mutual aid, but that takes time to organise and it comes at a cost.

We touched on this earlier. You mentioned that there is still very much a serious dissident threat, and the threat level has gone up again to "severe". That brings with it an infrastructure requirement for intelligence and our response to that. You are right. We have our main grant, from a Northern Ireland perspective, and we secure additional security funding of £31.2 million. That has been flat for a number of years and, equally, has not kept up in real time with pay inflation and so on, that has gone with it.

We have a number of funding pots. That is also problematic. Additional security funding is one—PCTF we have touched on, and there are a couple of others. Out of our headcount at the start of the year, 6,700, we now have 700 of those officer posts connected to these disparate pots of money that, in many ways, are not guaranteed in a recurrent way. To the accountant in me, that does not make sense because people need to be paid month after month. We have no security, no certainty on that, really. That is a challenge for us.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is both that the additional security funding is not keeping real time for us and, equally, that that cocktail of funding mechanisms is not a secure basis for the service model as we go forward.

Geraldine Hanna: If I begin with the impact of delay, absolutely every victim I meet talks about delay being one of their key issues. For every one of them, it has had a detrimental impact on both their physical and mental health. Victims talk about their life being at a standstill. They are in a living hell. They live with heightened anxiety and very often, particularly in some of our more serious offences, the alleged perpetrator is known and on bail. Those who are not on bail are spending a significant amount of time on remand, which is another issue. This all feeds into it. It is an area of deep concern.

The other issue with delay is around the ability of victims to access justice. Over time, memories are not as fresh as they were. The longer people have to wait, the more potential there is for greater inconsistencies in the evidence, particularly with children. That can then impact on the outcome of the case. With regards to what we need to do and the way forward, Criminal Justice Inspection, as you have just outlined, has recently published a report on file quality. That is a significant issue around delay and disclosure.

One of the big issues that Criminal Justice Inspection has highlighted is the lack of a sense of urgency across the agencies. All of our criminal justice agencies are, quite rightly, independent, but they are also very interdependent on each other and they need to be working better. I am not sitting here today saying that the only thing the justice system needs is money. It is not. It does need money; it needs money to sustain, but it also needs money to transform. With that, there is also a culture and behavioural piece that needs to happen across all the agencies. They need to be working together to get things right first time.

Too many cases and files are being passed from police to prosecution that are not of the right quality. We need the appropriate training and supervision, and also accountability, so that we are getting that right first time. We need greater engagement between the police and the prosecution earlier on in the process. The human impact of that for victims is that the case is not getting to court and then being adjourned on the day. Sometimes the victim has been not sleeping for the weeks beforehand and the case gets adjourned because a piece of evidence has not been made available to the court when it should have been. We also need greater engagement with the defence earlier on the process. The cultural, behavioural piece, combined with the money, is really what we need. Again, any new legislation that is brought through needs effective, resourced implementation plans.

Q168 **Stephen Farry:** Just as a follow up, what do you think of the Scottish model of time limits?

Geraldine Hanna: Criminal Justice Inspection recommended introducing statutory time limits many years ago and that has been resisted. We do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

need some incentives. My one concern is the impact that it could have on a victim if a case did not progress because the prosecution did not have their ducks lined up and the case collapsed. Would that victim be denied justice? I am all for incentivising with carrots and sticks, but how we do that and the impact on victims needs to be well considered.

Q169 **Mr Walker:** Can I ask the commissioner designate how she would describe the support victims of crime currently received and how that differs, perhaps, from what she feels they should receive in Northern Ireland? How can provision of victim care be improved?

Geraldine Hanna: There is a range of agencies providing services to victims of crime across Northern Ireland, from the likes of Victim Support NI, which provides support on all types of crime, to Nexus, which provides counselling for sexual violence victims, Women's Aid, and the Men's Advisory Project for male victims of domestic abuse. The services are there, but they are not being adequately funded to deliver the comprehensive support that is needed. Of course, they are then being squeezed by austerity pressures at present.

The two fundamental building blocks, for me, of effective victim support are individual needs assessments and tailored advocacy. The Criminal Justice Inspection report in 2020 into the experiences of victims and witnesses recommended that we had a needs assessment service established within our victim and witness care unit in Northern Ireland, in order to address identified weaknesses there. That recommendation led to the development of a model that was costed at £500,000 a year to run. We have been unable to secure the funding for that. The London victims' commissioner recently went to Quebec to look at a model they have there. They have a victim hub where all victims of all types of crimes get needs assessments and advocacy. That needs assessment service we developed as a proposal is the first step in that in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find the funding to address it.

Again, that is about the Department of Justice and the criminal justice agencies identifying that funding, but they are facing pressures. Only 1% of the justice budget is discretionary spend, and they are starting off this year with a £150 million shortfall on their plans. Finding those moneys is difficult. We all make great pledges around what we want to do for victim care and support across the whole of the UK. That is meaningful only if it actually makes a difference to the lives of victims on the ground.

Q170 **Mr Walker:** I appreciate the difficulties and the challenges. We hear from all different public services about the pressures there, but has anyone looked at pooling resources from health and other areas to look at this? Clearly, there are long-term health implications for victims who do not get the support they need.

Geraldine Hanna: We have failed to fully recognise the responsibility of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland for victims of crime. If we were dealing with some of the issues in health upstream, we would not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

need so much, particularly with regards to mental health and the link with people who perpetrate crime, but also the mental health needs of victims. Unfortunately, given the pressures that have been facing our Department of Health for many years, there is a bit of a closed door there with regard to finding additional funding.

It is important. Certainly, in my term in office, I want to ensure that we increase the responsibility and accountability of all Departments, not just justice, to consider the needs of, and impact of their services on, victims of crime.

Q171 Mr Walker: For the PSNI witnesses, do cuts to police officers mean it will be harder for you to deliver the commitments made in the victim charter and the witness charter—for example, to keep victims and witnesses updated on the progression of cases?

Pamela McCreedy: Yes. As we mentioned, for the legislation coming through for a number of these areas—domestic abuse and other things—no funding was provided. Within our public protection branch in PSNI, we established a number of training mechanisms for our officers and staff to support that, but right across our services we are giving a commitment to ringfence as best we can our emergency elements—the 999 response or response to serious crime. Once we have engaged on that, everything after that will undoubtedly start to slow down, with fewer officers and staff on the ground to respond. We are not just stepping back and saying, “It will all get slower.” We are looking at our operating models within that.

Geraldine touched on the importance of transformation. Even the digital aspect of that, between us and other parts of the justice system, is hugely important. We are looking at our own systems, even things like contact management, to absorb that need without us incurring additional cost. We are seeking to do that but, inevitably, those will take one to two years to deliver. They do not happen in the next six months. In-year, undoubtedly, as officers leave, things will start to be slow.

Mr Walker: On the issue of police officer numbers, clearly the 6,300 you have said you are heading towards is very different from the 7,500 that was agreed in NDNA. I have been looking at the figures in the House of Commons briefing on police officer numbers per head. It was a breakdown for England and Wales, not for Northern Ireland and Scotland, but my calculation is that would leave you on about 350 per 100,000 of the population in Northern Ireland. That compares favourably with most areas in England and Wales, but we all accept that there are different levels of pressure on the police in Northern Ireland. Interestingly, it is a little bit lower than the Met, which is the force in England and Wales with the most counterterrorism responsibilities and other issues. Is that part of the conversation the Department of Justice or the PSNI have been having with the Northern Ireland Office? What level of police numbers per head is reasonable for Northern Ireland and is that a metric you look at?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Pamela McCreedy: It absolutely is. Using HMIC benchmarking, we would benchmark ourselves against most similar forces, as you have referred to, and get a sense of what that means by way of officers and staff per head of population. You are right that there are a number of unique differences that we respond to, and with that in mind around 7,000 to 7,500 is the number we have previously provided as what we feel is needed. It is what is needed to deliver, for instance, the current policing plan.

The discussions with officials at departmental level are very much around the constraint of the budget. "Therefore, this is the impact on the headcount," is different from asking, "What do you need to either deliver the policing plan or ultimately maintain a level whereby we are keeping people safe at the level that we would require?"

Q172 **Sir Robert Buckland:** Thank you for already anticipating another question I wanted to ask you about the precept. We know the concerns that you have about that and the absence of an Executive clearly does not help things along on that front. I wanted to ask you about a proposal made by the Metropolitan Police recently to stop attending emergency mental health incidents in an effort to free up officers. Is the PSNI considering a similar approach?

Mark McNaughten: I will just comment briefly because you mentioned the financial framework. We work in a very different place than England and Wales. You are right, we have consistently been making that case. Pamela has mentioned the variety of funding streams, which is an issue in and of itself. We would prefer something more consolidated. We would also look for a longer term plan. As an emergency service, some ability to flex funding one year to another would obviously assist us, but you are right that without the Executive, there is little chance of us progressing that argument. We will pick up on the mental health stuff separately.

Pamela McCreedy: As someone who worked in the health service for 15 years, this is an interesting question for me. About a fifth of people in Northern Ireland have mental health needs and interface in and around mental health services. We are not coming out at the moment and saying that we will not respond. What we are seeking to do is engage with health colleagues around transitional points between ourselves and the health service. This is becoming increasingly difficult, as all budgets are under pressure. You will have heard about the health and education budgets as well.

There will be times when it is absolutely appropriate that police are also there, in a number of these circumstances. However, an example is often given where police are taking people to emergency departments and/or remaining with them in hospital. There are aspects of this that we absolutely have to look at. Personally, from a joined-up Government, I would prefer to work with the health service and work with education as to how we can collaborate and do this properly, but, as everyone's budgets are under constraint, people start to retract, saying "That is not our responsibility."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We have been looking at our core statutory responsibility and we have to protect that first, but we are having the conversations around those pinch points and challenges, particularly our interface with health. Mental health is but one of them. There is a huge number of vulnerable people. Geraldine has touched on it. Health has a key role to play. Police over the last number of years have stepped into other areas, administering Naloxone and things like that. We have to sit back and ask, "Is that something that we can continue doing?"

The correct answer is to work together to get the best outcomes for everyone involved. We are seeking to at least have that conversation over the next number of months, as opposed to just walking away from it at this point. It is a pressure for our officers.

Q173 Mary Kelly Foy: Good morning. You have made quite clear the dire crisis that policing and criminal justice are facing at the minute. To what extent do you think austerity is having an impact on crime in Northern Ireland and what immediate social policies do you see that could alleviate some of that crime?

Pamela McCreedy: Over the past number of years, when there has particularly been an emphasis on austerity within our communities, we have been tracking how crime and types of crime trends are changing and focusing aspects of our attention to that. It is important right across Northern Ireland that we recognise the environment in which we are operating. We have touched on the neighbourhood policing aspect, connecting with our communities and understanding what the likely impacts of that are. Whether it is willingness for certain people to get involved in different aspect of crime, to come under paramilitary influence or whatever it is, we are in tune to the effect of that on people and their lives. It absolutely affects the potential crimes that we will be facing.

Geraldine Hanna: I would probably echo what Pamela has said. It is about ensuring there is that investment in our community development and local community services, so that we are able to ensure that the right support is available for individuals who are considering turning to crime.

Pamela McCreedy: It is the acquisitive crime thing that we are looking at. I touched on it a little earlier. Some of it is in person but actually we are seeing it online, with fraud and things like that. That is where we have seen aspects of that increasing over recent times.

Q174 Chair: Are you holding back on promotions? Obviously, when people get promoted, they get a pay rise. What are your projections in regard to your pension obligations? I know some forces in England have officers go off and work in other forces to progress, but I am guessing you do not have that much flex and movement, so you cannot pass on your senior officers to other people to pay their pensions.

Pamela McCreedy: Officers can move between Northern Ireland and other UK forces, and they do, in both directions. That is great. It brings different understandings and different knowledge. We are limiting promotions and selection processes, really just as of the last month. That



HOUSE OF COMMONS

will slow down the movement throughout the organisation. We are not saying a freeze because there are key, critical statutory roles that we are required to fill. If someone leaves who has been undertaking such a role, we will need to fill it. There needs to be honesty about that.

We have slowed down selections and movements. Within PSNI, in a normal given year—not this year—there could be 2,000 or 3,000 moves around the organisation. When we had 7,000 officers, as promotions happened, those behind them happened, then those behind them, as well as the recruitment coming in. It is a huge change for that to really slow down. You are right that in many ways it is slowing down career progression for individuals. It is an issue that we have to consider. Would more officers start to consider working elsewhere? It is a big step, when you have families that live locally in Northern Ireland, but they will look to other forces. People seeking to progress their career will consider that. It is also a risk for us.

Mark McNaughten: On pensions, we carry the budget and incur the cost for all police pensioners in Northern Ireland. It is interesting. Our level of officers leaving the service has not increased massively, but there is an upward trend. In terms of impacting our total headcount, that is where we are seeing the numbers go down potentially to 6,000 by the end of next year, but it is very much a personal decision in relation to accessing that right.

We are seeing more officers, when they hit the 30-year mark and are maximising their pension, exercising that right to leave the scheme. There are various routes they take after that, but it picks up on a point that Jim mentioned in terms of trying to encourage people to stay and to retain their experience. It is proving very difficult in the current climate.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for that very helpful and somewhat depressing evidence in terms of the budgetary pressures being faced right across the police and criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. We will move on to our second panel.