

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Policing and security in Northern Ireland, HC 1341

Wednesday 10 December 2025

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Claire Hanna; Simon Hoare; Mike Kane; Mr Paul Kohler; Katrina Murray; Gavin Robinson; David Smith.

Questions 1 - 54

Witnesses

I: Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, International Peace Education Resources; Dr Jonny Byrne, Independent Reviewer of the Exercised Powers under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 and National Security Arrangements.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Dr Jonny Byrne, Independent Reviewer of the exercised powers under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 and of National Security Arrangements [[PSNI0013](#)]
- Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, International Peace Education Resources [[PSNI0020](#)]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Marie Breen-Smyth and Dr Jonny Byrne.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. This is our first session on policing and security in Northern Ireland. Welcome to Dr Jonny Byrne and Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, and thank you both for joining us. To what extent have the ambitions and recommendations of the Patten reforms on policing been realised, 25 years on from the PSNI's establishment?

Professor Breen-Smyth: Between where we were when Patten was introduced and where we are now, there is a world of difference. We have a largely reformed police service. We have systems of accountability that we did not have before. We also, of course, have a transformed security situation. The whole ethos, the whole situation and the whole circumstances are remarkably different from when Patten was introduced.

In the paper that I sent you, I have mapped out some things that are significant in terms of where we still have to go. The system is wonderful in design and looks great on paper, but the implementation has fallen somewhat short, largely because of the human frailties that we all have, but also in terms of the focus on the purpose of policing, the delivery to communities and, indeed, the engagement between the poorest communities, which are the ones that I am most concerned about, and the police as well as other state agencies. That gap in engagement between state agencies and the poorest communities is something that preoccupies me greatly.

Q2 Chair: Those are the key parts of Patten that, for you, remain outstanding. What are the things that should be revisited?

Professor Breen-Smyth: I would see that in terms of the systems of accountability. In the paper that I sent you, I referred to some of the reviews that there have been of those systems. In his review specifically of the Policing Board, Sweeney points to the dominance of elected political representatives in that process, at the expense of some of the other community representatives.

Also, the dynamics within the Policing Board really detract from the seriousness of purpose of delivery of policing in Northern Ireland, which is to do with the existing political tensions in Northern Ireland, and the tendency for those to leak into other business.

The other thing is police community safety partnerships, which I have looked at extensively. They are very good in design and should work, but they work only where you have political and community representatives who are deeply engaged in their constituencies, bringing the concerns of those constituencies to the PCSP, engaging with the police on those, problem solving at that level, and then going back to their constituencies and reporting back. That is not happening, to be honest.



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People such as me who are volunteering at the community level and are engaged in these communities are constantly faced with people in the community complaining that nobody is listening to them, that they do not have a voice, and that they do not have anybody to represent their views. One of the jobs that I have in my work is to try to connect particularly the police with those communities. It can be done, and the police are more than willing to do it, but there is a job to be done that is not being done currently, particularly in the most marginalised communities.

Q3 Claire Hanna: You said “where they are working”. I do not know whether this is appropriate, but can you point to a PCSP somewhere that is an example of good practice? I am not trying to put you on the spot, because my analysis of them—and I have served on one—is not a million miles away from that. Is there one that is working well?

Professor Breen-Smyth: When I was touring around and looking for one, the best of them was probably Derry City and Strabane. I would say, almost counterintuitively, that it is in the loyalist areas that we have the most difficulty, and that alienation between working-class loyalism and very poor loyalist areas is the thing that concerns me most.

Q4 Gavin Robinson: That is interesting, I agree with your perceptions of PCSPs. In Belfast, we have DPCSPs and, before, we were on DPPs. My experience from the perspective of east Belfast, which, as you know, has loyalist working-class areas, is that we had a separate, distinct and more voluntary organisation called PACT—Police and Communities Together. It was much more effective, and you could have had hundreds of people at those meetings, but nobody at PCSPs. PCSPs have become a stovepipe for funding. People would go if you could get five grand for this, for a rape alarm or a door lock, or to do an initiative, but, as for actual engagement, it does not work. The old CPLCs and the PACTs were much more effective, in my experience, than the over-bureaucratic partnerships that are coming from DOJ.

Dr Byrne: Thank you, Committee, for the opportunity to be here today. If you take the helicopter view and look down from where we were in the late 1990s to where we are now, it is unrecognisable. Policing reform is one of the showpieces of the peace process. It is one of the good news stories in terms of where we were and where we are, and that is really important. Patten was groundbreaking in what it set out to do and tried to achieve in terms of building legitimacy in policing as an institution, in a society where, regardless of your political beliefs, there was a disconnect around the legitimacy of what the police represented, for various reasons and due to various issues.

What Patten and policing reform did was cement the peace process to a certain extent. I do not think that there would have been a peace process without policing reform. As unpalatable as that may have been for some people, it was important for the context of where Northern Ireland was going. Structurally, institutionally, culturally, aesthetically and in its



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tactics, it is fundamentally different from where it was previously to where it is now. In that sense, it has, by and large, lived up to what Patten set out to achieve in terms of building an organisation that could command the confidence of society. It is not perfect. There are geographical areas, which Marie has alluded to, where there are disconnects.

The other bit to think about when we talk about policing reform is policing internationally, policing in the UK and policing in Ireland. We are struggling in terms of what we want the police to do as an institution. If we want the police to be key to preventing crime, our expectations are that that is what the police will do and we will measure them against that accordingly. If we want the police to just find criminals and lock people up, we will measure them against those outcomes.

When we talk about policing reform and what has been achieved in the context of the political process and the peace process, it is unbelievable. It is in a different place. We also have to caveat that with, "What do we want the police to do now, in 2025?", because that is really important. If we do not have a really clear understanding of why we fund the police and what we expect them to do—and that is not just a Northern Ireland question but one for everybody—we will not know how to measure success against that.

I have been involved in police training, on the community side and as an academic. The changes that have taken place are unbelievable in terms of partnership, engagement, accountability and legitimacy. The questions that we are now struggling with in Northern Ireland are around what is next. I do not mean a Patten II; I am in no way advocating that. What I mean is, "What does normalisation look like beyond physical normalisation? What comes next in terms of policing in Northern Ireland?" Those are some of the big questions that we need to start to consider, but, in answer to your question, it is black and white.

Q5 Chair: It is black and white, so how have the community perceptions of and support for policing changed since 2001?

Dr Byrne: Again, it is like putting your finger in the air and taking a straw poll. It depends on who you are and where you are in your experience of policing. The statistics from the Department of Justice and the Policing Board look at around 80% having confidence in policing. If I took those same questions and put them into, say, a staunchly republican area, or a loyalist area where there is a disconnect with the police, those figures would decrease significantly. It depends very much on where you live and what your previous experiences are of policing, which is not unique just to Northern Ireland. Again, that is an issue that lots of communities and societies are dealing with.

The difference in Northern Ireland is the issues around legacy and funding. They are so prominent, and policing is still so political, even though the whole purpose of Patten was to take politics out of policing.



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There is this connection that continues to exist there, which sometimes affects levels of confidence in policing.

If you were to ask me where they are now, more people are reporting crime and engaging with the police. There are more partnerships with the police. There is more of a normality in terms of the police relationships with the public before and after 2001. That is irrefutable. Whether it is consistent across all areas is where you start to get into the bigger question.

Then you get into the question that I want to really consider in my own work, which is around effectiveness. I really want to get to the bottom of how effective policing is as opposed to, "Is policing legitimate? Is policing representative? Is policing dealing with the past?" To me, the key issues are around, "Are the police delivering a service that meets the needs of the population?"

Q6 **Claire Hanna:** Jonny, you said there that you were not suggesting a Patten II and that it is perhaps a catch-all term for a review. Do you see the need for a check-in or a review? You have both rightly indicated that policing has been one of the relative successes when you see where some of the other institutions are. How do we get the political leadership that is needed to pull that back on track if there is not some sort of review?

Dr Byrne: I know that this topic is important to you and your party. Like most things in life, it looks amazing in theory. The architecture and implementation around policing reform and new policing is fantastic. When the rubber hits the road is where we know over time. The board could be better. PCSPs could be better. The DOJ and committees could be better. We do not need an independent, all-singing, all-dancing review or stocktake.

I know that the chief constable has commissioned a cultural audit. If people did their jobs, and if the institutions around accountability had meaningful interactions around addressing effectiveness in terms of building a policing institution that is fit for purpose, it would work. We do not need an independent to come in and redress a stocktake of where we are. It is basically about better using the institutions that we already have and focusing on the effectiveness piece as opposed to the legitimacy piece.

Q7 **Claire Hanna:** For what it is worth, we do not want a whole external thing. We do not want to start again and rebuild, but there is a vacuum of political leadership in terms of people just watching the confidence ebb away and not doing anything about it.

Dr Byrne: In Northern Ireland, it takes a crisis to create a conversation. The big crisis could be around recruitment and Catholic representation 25 years after it. I know that we will probably cover that, but that is the type of issue where, all of a sudden, the balloon goes up and everybody then focuses on the institution.



Q8 **Claire Hanna:** We are moving into failings that are not related to legacy issues, such as gender-based issues.

You rightly use the term “shock absorbers” and spoke about the PSNI having to, essentially, police our way out of political failures. Can you expand a bit on that and how you might bridge the disconnect?

Dr Byrne: It is a good news story. I know that we have had public order issues in the last two years, but nowhere near the levels that we had in the first decade of new policing. The PSNI came into existence on 4 November in the middle of Holy Cross. From Holy Cross, we had significant public order events in east Belfast between Short Strand and Cluan Place. We had Whiterock. We had the flag protests. We have had lots of public order issues and incidents.

What I am getting at is that, in the last 25 years, where we, as a society, have sometimes not been able to address issues around culture, identity and tradition, they have manifested themselves in public order disputes. The police then become, essentially, the meat in the sandwich and have literally held the line in those situations.

I think back to being part of the Cardiff talks, where the police even had to commission talks to bring various people together to try to address issues around public order. We have not seen that in probably the last seven years, which is a good thing in terms of the scales that we would have had prior to that. I am not saying that it is not there, or that the potential is not there, but the use of the term “shock absorbers”, which has been used by others as well, is around the fact that, essentially, they held the line in the absence of any political community agreement on toxic issues relating particularly to culture, identity and tradition.

Q9 **Claire Hanna:** FICT is a big commission to try to address issues around markers of identity such as flags, emblems and murals. Basically, we have left it on a shelf and not implemented it. Something like that, as well as guidance around flag flying and paramilitary emblems, would make the police’s job a lot easier.

Dr Byrne: To an extent, yes. I just want to say one thing. It depends on what you are looking at. I use bonfires as the example. There are lots of issues around bonfires, but, if you look at where we are now compared to where we were 20 years ago, it is different. It has completely transformed. In terms of public order issues around culture and identity, we are in a different place from where we were. I am not saying that it is perfect, and the potential is still there, but we are slowly making progress.

If we could agree these issues politically, if they could be implemented, and if there could be buy-in from the communities around public disorder and managing it through issues around culture, tradition and identity, that would make a significant difference to resources as well as to confidence in policing, because it then means that you are not creating



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environments where the police may use particular tactics, which may then alienate the community.

Q10 **Claire Hanna:** Marie, is there anything that you wanted to add to that, specifically on that concept of shock absorbing and the police having to address political failures?

Professor Breen-Smyth: In the work that I do, the most pressing things that I see facing the police are not so much those things. In fact, I get quite frustrated with the amount of police resources that are going into flags and all that stuff, when we have enormous issues around domestic violence and huge issues facing communities in terms of drug misuse, drug trafficking and organised crime gangs, who are polluting and poisoning the poorest communities. To me, those are the things that seize me most in the communities.

The other thing to say is that we police Northern Ireland as if there is one Northern Ireland, which there is not. One of the things that I have done over the last period of time is that I have taken the database, which is available on the PSNI website, of all paramilitary crime from 1998 right up until 2023. I have distributed that across the geography of Northern Ireland. We discover that it is chalk and cheese. The levels of violence in the postcodes around the Belfast area are two to three times higher than they are in the rest of the country, yet we deal with it as if it is one big entity.

The issues facing poor rural communities are completely different from those facing urban areas. It is almost as if you need two completely distinct approaches to policing. To be honest, I get quite frustrated with people worrying about flags and all that stuff. When people are dying in these communities, people are worrying about flags. To me, it is not on.

Claire Hanna: Yes, that is entirely the point that it makes.

Q11 **Simon Hoare:** Let us set aside finance, and recruitment and retention issues, because colleagues will deal with those directly. I just wondered whether you could summarise, if you had a media microphone stuffed under your noses, what the key challenge facing the PSNI today is.

Dr Byrne: Just one?

Simon Hoare: As it is the Christmas season, I may give you two.

Dr Byrne: If the chief constable was here, he would say money.

Simon Hoare: I want to set aside money and retention, because we will come on to that.

Dr Byrne: I know, and I would maybe disagree as well. The obvious challenge is still the terrorist threat, which starts here but then impacts everything else in terms of recruitment. Money impacts the ability to deliver policing and security. Everything is wrapped up in that. That, to me, is the first thing.



Linked to that, the second thing—and I struggle with this—is national security incidents, paramilitary incidents, shootings and bombings. The incidence of those is on a significantly decreasing trajectory. Recorded crime is decreasing, so where there is a challenge for the police in the years to come is around normalisation and what that looks like. Basically, it comes down to the simple question of where we move from perceived risk to actual risk in terms of how we police.

It is easy for me to say that, because I am not a police officer and I do not have to manage those tensions, but, 25 years on, there is now this challenge for society around moving from perceived to actual. What I mean is normalisation in the sense of, “What does a normal policing service in a society look like?” That is going to be the big challenge for the police. How do you deal with that and then how do you deliver policing in that environment?

Simon Hoare: That is helpful. Thank you.

Professor Breen-Smyth: I would like to say that it is about the use of resources more broadly, by which I mean that there are demands on police resources that are onerous and detract from the job that they ought to be doing. For example, the whole legacy business is a huge drain on police resources, which is unprecedented for other police forces in England and Wales, and, indeed, in Scotland.

The second thing that I would point to is the £11 million per annum that is used in close protection. We talk about people facing the future and normalising, but it is not just the police who need to normalise. Other members of society need to get used to the idea that this is largely a peaceful society, and close protection is associated with past dangers, not present dangers.

The other thing in terms of the use of resources would be about seeing the community as a resource. In the paper that I sent you, I talk about policing with and alongside communities, and involving communities in community safety work at the grassroots level, which is happening in some areas. You have people working as volunteers alongside the police around, for example, city centre safety in Derry city, where people are going out as volunteers and making sure that young women who are drunk are getting home safely, and that defibrillation is available for emergencies in the street.

Those are volunteers who are working closely with the community and with the police. Those are resources that are untapped. We have people in the community who are willing to do that work. There is kudos and status associated with doing that work, yet those are resources that are largely untapped. It is really about relooking at how police resources are used and at the things that, frankly, are draining police resources at the moment.



The other issue that I point to in the paper is that there are certain anomalies within the structure of the PSNI and the way that it is divided into units at the moment, which is also wasteful.

- Q12 **Simon Hoare:** As a quick follow-up on what you have both said, there is clearly considerable merit in ending the psychology of exceptionalism, if you will: "Ah, but it is"; "Oh, but don't forget". Do the authorities, this place, Stormont or other service providers in the policing and security arena have the antennae and, allied to that, the bravery to say, "In the evaluation of a whole series of metrics, we have now arrived at a position whereby the exceptionalism narrative and set-aside can be concluded, and we are just a normal, functioning civil society"?

Professor Breen-Smyth: I think nobody in Northern Ireland would concede that we are a normal, functioning society. As somebody who has lived for a great deal of time outside of Northern Ireland and had this groundhog day experience when I came back, the secret is not necessarily to try to persuade people that they are normal—because, let's face it, none of us are—but maybe we need to expose people to the conditions under which other societies struggle with the same issues. There is a great deal of parochialism, not just in Northern Ireland, by the way, but here as well. The experience of comparison, and being able to look into other societies and have that flow of ideas between places, is very useful.

Dr Byrne: Briefly, there is no right or wrong answer, but finances will drive the change. This will come down to money as opposed to an evidence-based, mature thought process. Money will drive change in terms of policy. At some point, we will not be considered a place apart. That is not because we are not, but because finances will drive change. That will then affect how we manage risk, because a lot of this comes down to the management of risk in Northern Ireland, and the finances will dictate where we put our risk.

- Q13 **Simon Hoare:** I just have a very quick challenge on that, if I may. Studies of the national health service would show that it is more innovative and increases productivity when money is scarce. Pumping additional funds into something often just allows the norm to perpetuate, because innovative thinking is off the agenda. Do you have any sympathy with that approach, rather than just, "Pump money in and the money will drive change"?

Dr Byrne: We are turning the money off.

Simon Hoare: Thank you for that clarification.

Dr Byrne: I am saying that, if there is no magic money tree, the lack of money will drive change.

Simon Hoare: That is very helpful. Forgive me. I misunderstood.

Dr Byrne: The lack of money will change how we manage risk.



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Simon Hoare: Thank you very much.

Professor Breen-Smyth: There is another issue here. In many instances, the police are the agency of last resort. For example, there is a lack of emergency mental health first responders in Northern Ireland. There are none. There have been in other societies where I have worked. The police are ending up being the emergency first responders in mental health cases, completely inappropriately, completely untrained and, quite often, doing more damage than good. We have an expectation of the police that they will do this, but there is no expectation on the health service to do this. We have come to that stage, and that is really problematic and needs to be redressed.

Q14 Gavin Robinson: Good morning to you both. I wanted to ask, on the back of some of the Chair's comments around the Patten report, how many of the 175 recommendations have yet to be implemented. Do we know?

Dr Byrne: On the back of the police response, it is about 15 or 16. One of those is the new training college. Some refer to the disarming of police officers, or the de-fortification of police stations. A lot of those are driven by finances and by the security situation.

Q15 Gavin Robinson: One that they never want to refer to is the deletion of the rank of chief superintendent, which was recommended. It never seems to get much traction among policing colleagues. There are two that touch on the question that I am going to ask around challenges to recruitment. We know of, and you very often hear, the figure of 7,500 that was in Patten and replicated in New Decade, New Approach. We know that the figure is sitting at 6,200 at the moment. There was also a recommendation for the enlargement of the part-time reserve to 2,500. Do you have any reflections on the part-time reserve or, indeed, the recommendation that there should be the establishment of a cadet scheme to assist with recruitment?

Professor Breen-Smyth: Of recent times, I have been working in some of the most marginalised loyalist communities and chairing, to begin with, quite fractious meetings between the police on the one hand and the community on the other. Over time, that changes and trust builds up.

My colleague behind me, Delaney Wallace, who is an intern from the University of Chicago, has been working with me on this. I benefit from one of my board members being the director of programmes in the Corrymeela community, so I can use it as a residential facility. We send the cops off with the young people for a weekend, and you can begin to see the young people in these communities seeing police officers as something that they might want to be in the future.

That is transformative. That is not something that we started out with. To begin with, police officers were the enemy. They were people who drove around their areas, did not get out of their squad cars, and drove straight out again.



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There is an issue here about recruitment in terms of the relationship between the police on the one hand and the communities on the other. Let's face it: young middle-class people have all sorts of career opportunities, but we have young people who are really struggling to figure out their path in life. If we can encourage those young people to think more broadly about what they might do and how they might serve their communities through, for example, joining the police, that is all to the benefit. It is almost as if I am tying up police-community relations with the issue of recruitment, because I do think that the two things are completely and inextricably bound up with one another.

- Q16 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you not think that the pendulum has swung the other way? Recruitment to the RUC used to be very much within the working-class community. Now, because of University of Ulster requirements and the admission procedure, it is the preserve of higher levels of social status. Is that right?

Professor Breen-Smyth: That is right, and that has two implications. The first is in terms of recruitment and being able to enter the profession. On the other side, I engage with police officers at different levels, and I will never forget conversations that I had with police officers who were nice middle-class boys doing a really good job. I talked about my experience of working in working-class communities and the kinds of things that I was dealing with, and the horror on their faces was palpable.

These were people who had no experience of this. They did not know working-class communities. They did not speak working-class. When they sent them into working-class communities, they had a limited ability to engage, and that whole business of being able to engage at community level is so crucial. It is the hill that I will die on.

- Q17 **Gavin Robinson:** It is a steep learning curve for some. Jonny, you are smiling at me, but what about cadets as a proposition that was there in Patten and could be a mechanism so that people could be engaged for recruitment? Then I want to move on to the 30%.

Dr Byrne: If I can quickly allude to the requirements, you need four GCSEs to join the PSNI. It is a partnership between the University of Ulster and the PSNI, so it is not necessarily a university guideline. Essentially, you get a full bachelor's degree with the four GCSEs.

Taking your point in terms of the perception of policing, it is very simple. I do not think that the term "cadet scheme" would fly as a title, but what a cadet scheme stands for, in terms of principles around internships, developing young people, breaking down that knowledge and that institutional stigma, cultural issues, and a pathway into joining the police, is something that I absolutely, 100% agree with. It would be something imaginative and innovative, which we could all design and develop together. If it is a way of increasing representation from marginalised communities and communities that did not necessarily aspire to be in the police, it should 100% be on the table.



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Q18 Gavin Robinson: Just to be clear, it is not a slight on the University of Ulster, nor is there anything wrong with trying to professionalise or put academic rigour into training. Nursing is exactly the same. You did not require a degree. Now a degree comes at the end of the process. I suspect that there are very few recruits coming through who have only four GCSEs.

Dr Byrne: I will come back to the Committee on that. I can check.

Gavin Robinson: It is worth checking.

Dr Byrne: Yes, absolutely.

Q19 Gavin Robinson: Because of the nature of the process, you can apply. Getting out the other side is not aided if you have a lower level of education. Let me put it that way.

Dr Byrne: Can I say one thing to you? In terms of recruitment, the cadet scheme is something that, 100%, should be looked at as a pathway. The reality, which is, again, not unique to Northern Ireland, is that the current narrative around policing is not very attractive, given what they are dealing with in terms of pay, resources and overwork, regardless of your background and academic standing. The general perception around policing as a career is something that we need to change.

Q20 Gavin Robinson: Some of the perceptions do cloud people's view as to whether it is an appropriate, safe or exciting prospect as a lifetime career. Some of the commentary around the recent recruitment drive talked about 27% of applicants coming from a Catholic community. Some of the negativity around that was driven by the fact that the focus was on the applicant numbers, not the output or the outcome. We do not know what that outcome figure was. We do not know whether that outcome figure was 50:50, 60:40 or 40:60, but the figure out there was 27%.

What are the main inhibitors now, 25 years on, to people from a Catholic background applying to the PSNI? What steps should be taken to encourage them? There is a lethargy among some of the political representatives around encouraging engagement and applications, and still we have parts of Northern Ireland where recruitment fairs and so on are marred by protests and all the rest. What do you see as the barriers to recruitment?

Professor Breen-Smyth: First, we have come a long way. This is a legacy issue. It is not solvable in one generation. There are things that can be done. I keep going back to this business of the relationship with the community. If I may say a little more about that in terms of policing as a career—as an attractive career—and what that means, it has come to mean that you have a nice job that is associated with a lot of power, a nice salary, and all the rest of it. It is not really taken as a public service role. We really ought to focus on the idea that police officers are public servants, as, indeed, I consider myself to be, and that we serve and stay with the public. Unfortunately, as in all careers, your status in that career is in inverse proportion to your close proximity to poor people.



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Jock McToal in Ballymena strikes me as an absolute genius at working with working-class communities, but, if Jock wants to climb the career ladder, he is going to have to leave that behind. That is all wrong to me. There has to be career advancement for people, such as Jock, who are absolutely expert. That kind of expertise needs to be honoured and celebrated, and we really have got that wrong. The desk job in police headquarters, talking about policy issues to people such as me or Jonny when we go in, is more prestigious than doing the kind of work that is absolutely invaluable in our communities. That all needs to be turned around.

Dr Byrne: In terms of recruitment, nothing has changed. The last piece of research that was done was by Deloitte in 2016, so any recommendation around trying to look at this again would be worth looking at. The obvious one would be the terrorist threat and the targeting of Catholic families and members. The implications, such as having to leave or delete WhatsApp groups or change your lifestyle, are greater in that side of the community, as we have seen in TV programmes. "Blue Lights" covered it as well. It is there and a consistent narrative.

If I could capture it in this way, it is still "the police", not "my police", and that is the challenge for us all. Sometimes the narrative from the senior team around how difficult the job is does not help; nor does the narrative around police pay and conditions. As somebody who comes from that community, it is still whispered. We still whisper, "Do you want to join the police?" Wanting to be a police officer is still whispered about, as opposed to talked about as a career option like being a paramedic. That is sad. We do not have it on the same pedestal as all those other emergency organisations, and that is the challenge that we face.

It is a lot better than it was 10 years ago, and this is the bit that we all struggle with. At what point do you criticise, and at what point do you recognise that we are making progress? That is the difficulty. Stepping back, we are in a better place around recruitment, but the reality is that, as in the police submission, the stats have plateaued at 30%. The difficulty is that we are now seeing that Catholic officers who have met the threshold will be leaving, which means that the numbers will now start to decrease and the composition will start to change over the next five to 10 years in terms of who is leaving and who is coming in. The issue is not going to go away.

- Q21 **Katrina Murray:** I just want to expand a bit on that. We are very clear that we are talking purely about police officers. However, police officers do not make up the whole police workforce. Police staff are just as important as police officers. Looking at the workforce composition statistics, the 30% statistic would be wonderful if it was looking at police staff. Less than a fifth of all police staff identify as being from the Catholic community. What would your views be on the challenges with that, recognising that there is a wide aspect of the non-police officer workforce



within all levels of policing?

Professor Breen-Smyth: I hesitate to say it, but, within any workforce, there is a culture and a history. It would be worth looking at whether there are cultural and historical aspects of the civilian support staff that could bear examination and adjustment. Certainly, as somebody who has moved in and out of those kinds of circles, there are pockets that do not always seem comfortable to people coming into them, and that needs to be examined. It needs fresh eyes. It needs people coming in from the outside. It needs an exposure to the fresh air and daylight, which is sometimes not as easily achieved as it could be. The historical practices about how you end up in these kinds of roles and jobs merit re-examination as well.

Dr Byrne: It is not a surprise. It is like whack-a-mole. The reality is that you have to see policing in its entirety. One of the things that Patten talked about was that policing and civilian relationships would become stronger, and you would draw in expertise, whether it be cyber, young people or whatever, but it still has that historical baggage of the police. The civilian role is just a caricature of that in terms of what it looks like.

If we were to normalise policing, we would see that the civilian element of it would increase, because it would just be another job and another place to work, as opposed to, "It's the police". That is the difficulty and, 25 years later, it is still an issue.

Q22 **Mr Kohler:** Welcome. I would like to turn to the Policing Board, which clearly has an important role in holding the chief constable and the PSNI to account. I have read some really trenchant criticism from both of you, from the Police Federation, from the independent review and from the National Black Police Association. Could you, for the benefit of members of the Committee, summarise the problems that the Policing Board has and, perhaps, its strengths as well?

Professor Breen-Smyth: In my paper to you, I referred to the Sweeney review, which was a very comprehensive review of the Policing Board. As I said earlier, he pointed to some of the problems around the dominance of the elected political representatives, with all the talents and opportunities that they bring, but also the dysfunction that there is between them. That has become a focus of activity at the Policing Board, which, in my view, is not what the Policing Board is supposed to be about.

I completely support the idea of the Policing Board. It is wonderful. It would be great if we could get it to work in the way that Patten intended and that it was designed to work. For me, the job of any representative, whether political or community, is to oversee the police, but also to ground the police in the community, to bring policing issues back to their constituents, and to go back so that there is some kind of participation. To me, that has been lost along the way. People go to these meetings. They get their attendance money. They sign on the dotted line. They get



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the agenda. They read the papers. They participate in the meeting. Then they go away and wait for the next meeting.

There is a whole other piece of work behind that, which is about taking the news about what is going on in policing to the community, and bringing back from the community to the Policing Board what the community expects of them. That whole joined-upness of the function of the systems of accountability in general, but the Policing Board in particular, really needs attention.

How you overcome that, I am not quite sure. I have made some suggestions in the paper in terms of accountability systems, training, and requiring people to make reports from their constituencies. I am not sure how you legislate for that. To some extent, legislating for it is the last thing that we want to do. We want people to get it. We want people to enter into the spirit of that kind of accountability.

Q23 Mr Kohler: On that point, the Police Federation has argued for fewer political members. Would that work or would that affect its legitimacy?

Professor Breen-Smyth: I am not sure that it would affect—I hesitate to say this in a room full of politicians.

Simon Hoare: Go on. Be brave.

Professor Breen-Smyth: I do not think that it would. There are people in the community who represent their communities very well and who are not elected politicians. That would be worth looking at. Talented and wonderful as our political representatives are, they sometimes get caught up in their own agendas. For me, as somebody who chairs another body, the agenda has to be about policing. It cannot be about anything else, and that is sometimes lost.

Q24 Mr Kohler: Just to push you a little further, do you have that conversation with the political parties in Northern Ireland?

Professor Breen-Smyth: Yes.

Q25 Mr Kohler: What is the response?

Professor Breen-Smyth: I talk to political parties from time to time, but I mostly talk to individual politicians. The people I work most frequently with now are independents, not party members. There are now small numbers of people who are leaving political parties. I have never really had a detailed conversation about why they have done that, but I suspect that some of it is due to their frustration with the cut and thrust, shall we say, which, to be honest, for those of us who have been watching this all our lives, is exceptionally boring at this stage.

Dr Byrne: One of the strengths is the fact that it is still here. That it has managed to survive 25 years is a feat in itself. Without repeating what Marie has said, the theory and the architecture is first-class. Having politicians and non-politicians, and an independent chair and vice-chair,



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makes sense. We have seen that even in terms of the police and crime commissioners model not necessarily working, and this idea of what the board can do.

Despite the fact that it is still there and that, on paper, it should deliver, there are problems arising from a couple of things. First, it is not resourced enough to do what it should be able to do in terms of an over-reliance on the set piece and the optics of the 19 members, so the background stuff does not get done.

Secondly, it does not necessarily problem solve or advocate. It is more about accountability. I would love to see more problem solving and more advocacy for policing as opposed to just holding the police to account. Historically, in Northern Ireland, when the Executive was not there, the board became one of the only political platforms for politicians, so it became slightly caught up in broader macro-societal and political issues as opposed to just policing. That is the sense, but it is not to say that it cannot be fixed. It is not to say that it cannot deliver what it should do moving forward. The architecture is there. It is just about getting it to work better.

Q26 Mr Kohler: If it was less parochial and more strategic, how would that improve things practically for the PSNI? How would it change things in Northern Ireland?

Dr Byrne: Let us take a practical example. In 2014-15, the PSNI took a decision to radically reduce neighbourhood policing. That was, essentially, just given as what would happen. I would have liked to see the board push back on that and ask, "The police are making a tactical decision to reduce neighbourhood policing because of budget issues, but why?" Even now, neighbourhood policing is being decimated in Northern Ireland.

To me, there should be more of a pushback around, "Why are you making that conscious decision to take your resources out of there and put them there?" That is where I would like to see the conversation go. I am not saying that the police should not do such things, but I would like to see more of a problem-solving approach—"Your response needs to be increased. You are reducing neighbourhood, but why are you reducing neighbourhood and what is the justification for that?", as opposed to, "We are just cutting neighbourhood policing".

Professor Breen-Smyth: If I might come in there, that decision makes absolutely no sense in terms of what we are finding at community level. Why do political representatives not feel empowered to say, "Hang on a minute. The last thing that you want to do is reduce neighbourhood policing"? Neighbourhood policing is the backbone of our relationship at community level with the people who are policed and who require policing services. The ethos of policing and the idea of policing as a public service cannot sit with just the police. It has to sit with our public representatives as well.



Some of the systems of accountability can be about not, "How did you spend the money and why did you not arrest more people?" but, "How are you serving my community? How are you delivering things on the ground? What are the relationships like between you and this local community and that local community?" Those are the kinds of questions that need to be discussed in a much broader way, rather than the tick-box exercise that accountability has come to mean.

- Q27 David Smith:** Good morning to you both. I want to circle back a bit to the security situation. I have heard what you said about normalisation, the massive strides that have taken place in the last 25 years, and the need to get to a more normalised situation. Happily, 2023 was the first year that there were no deaths in relation to the security situation, but bombings and shootings continued, et cetera, so that is still there in the ether. What impact has that security situation had on officer recruitment and morale? Could you especially take into consideration in your answer the situation of the data breach in 2023, where 9,000 officers had some of their data leaked?

Professor Breen-Smyth: First, the security situation is day and night compared to what it was when I was a young woman working in Belfast in the 1970s. That is the overall picture that I hold in my head, which is not one that is available to many of the younger people in Northern Ireland, and certainly most of the officers in the PSNI currently.

The data breach has huge security implications and all the rest of it, but none of us leads a risk-free life and none of us lives in a society that is entirely 100% safe. Given where I have lived in the world more recently, Northern Ireland is a very safe society in terms of security. I lived in the United States for 20 years, and I worked in policing alongside police officers in the United States. This is a completely different ballgame. There is a sense of expectation that we must be 100% safe, when, really, that is unrealistic.

- Q28 David Smith:** Can I just slightly push back against that? I recognise the description that you are giving. I have lived in Northern Ireland and spend a lot of time there. As Jonny was saying earlier, and as you have said, there has been a massive change, and that absolutely applies to the general population. What I am saying, though, is that it does not apply in quite the same way to police officers or police staff, does it? In the end, they are the ones with targets, potentially, on their back.

Professor Breen-Smyth: It does not, but there is also an issue about fear and the proliferation of it. It is also about being realistic about the risks that are facing us in terms of the numbers of attacks on officers, where they take place and how often they happen, and looking at and positioning yourself in the middle of that. It absolutely is a fearful thing to be a police officer in Northern Ireland, because there is a threat emanating from dissident republicans, but that risk is very localised, is diminishing, and has been successfully policed in many ways, through all sorts of operations that have locked up scores of these people. What I am



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saying is that the risk is there, but we need to keep it in perspective, and I am not sure that that always happens.

Q29 **David Smith:** Thank you. Can I bring Jonny in on the same question?

Dr Byrne: You would not want to, but we could talk all day about this. A wine would probably help in terms of trying to understand the context of it. This is a dilemma that we are all facing. It is about managing risk. It is easy for me to say, because I do not have to check under my car in the morning, yet I have a six-year-old girl and I want to believe that she is going to be brought up in a society that is completely different from the one that I grew up in, in the way we understand risk and threat.

There are a couple of things here. In terms of recruitment, the threat absolutely is an issue, but more so for the parents and siblings of, say, an individual officer. I speak to young people in university about whether they are interested in joining the police, and it is their mummies or their daddies who have said, "You have to be careful", because that is where the memory sits in Northern Ireland. It is not the 18 to 21-year-old, but the mother, father or grandparent who sees the past as the present. Regardless of how residual and suppressed the terrorist threat is, it is still the elephant in the room in terms of those conversations. When you come home and say, "I am going to join the police", their automatic default is Northern Ireland 30 years ago, so that is the first thing that you are dealing with.

Secondly, I was looking at this, and it is schizophrenic in terms of Northern Ireland. This year, the recorded crime statistics are down. They have been going down in the last number of years. The deputy chief constable said that Northern Ireland is one of the safest places to live, work and raise a family, yet, if you read their submission to the Committee, they say, "It will take years of continued progress in driving down the threat and degrading terrorist capabilities before ... the police service is able to make significant changes to how it operates to keep people in Northern Ireland safe".

At this level, you have the Northern Ireland that has been articulated. At this level, you have the suppression of the terrorist threat, the money that is involved in that, and the processes and procedures. That is what makes it really difficult to articulate what Northern Ireland is in security terms. While both narratives are true, when you try to reconcile both narratives, it becomes really complicated and difficult. You then feed that into, "Join the police". If you are going to join the police, which narrative is it? Is it, "The suppression of the terrorist threat for the next number of years will keep us safe" or is it, "Come and live in Northern Ireland. It is the safest place to raise a family"?

Q30 **David Smith:** If I could push back, in the same way that I did with Marie, on that dichotomy, are we not really talking about, on the one hand, how the general population experiences the security situation in Northern Ireland and all the things that you have just said? On the other



hand, there are those people whose job it is to ensure that it is a peaceful society. It is the responsibility of all of us, but, when it comes to security, they, peculiarly, are the targets of that same thing, especially perhaps, within the recruitment situation, Catholic nationalist families, or recruits to the police.

Dr Byrne: Yes, absolutely. There is a dilemma that you face here, and I do not know the answer to this question. Internally, if you start to minimise to the point that there is no threat, and then an incident happens, what happens? How do you manage and deal with that? For me, this comes back to the management of risk and how we start to recalibrate our risk assessment in Northern Ireland, and to look at it particularly from the PSNI perspective and then from the public's perspective.

There is no easy answer to this. Where I get slightly frustrated is where the PSNI will say that there have been no national security incidents this year or last year. The director of MI5 said that this is the longest period in Northern Ireland's history where there have been no national security incidents. You go, "Right, this is great". I can look at my daughter and go, "Do you know what? It is going to be different. The security apparatus is going to be different. How we understand Northern Ireland is going to be different". The counter-narrative to that is that it takes a lot of money and a lot of resources to suppress the threat, and we cannot say when that is going to stop, so we have to keep doing the same thing. It is easy for me to say, but I would love to know when that ends.

Q31 **Katrina Murray:** Building on that, what are the main security threats facing Northern Ireland today? How have they evolved over the lifetime of the PSNI?

Professor Breen-Smyth: It depends on what you mean by "security".

Katrina Murray: That is effectively my question to you.

Professor Breen-Smyth: In the UK, we have typically had a very narrow definition of "security". It has been focused on national security, which, by the way, in Northern Ireland, refers only to dissident republican threats, not to loyalism, unless loyalism becomes involved in the Coveney attack or whatever, and then it becomes a national security threat. In general terms, loyalist paramilitarism, for example, is not a national security threat, so we have a very narrow definition of "security", which is wrong.

Security has to be about the ability for citizens to live safe lives. That includes women and children. That includes all sorts of people in various communities across the board. In terms of the threat to security in Northern Ireland, if you look at the kinds of things that the police are seized of and responding to all the time, they are very ordinary threats at community level. They are the things that I referred to earlier, such as domestic violence, mental health, or drugs.



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All of those things are the meat and potatoes of what constitutes a threat to everyday security in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind that, as Jonny has said, generally, Northern Ireland is a very safe society to live in. Of course, if you are the chief constable arguing for a budget, that may not be the narrative that is going to attract an enhancement on your budget figure if you are simply talking about threats that exist everywhere else. There is a premium and there is a payback for arguing up certain kinds of threats and not others in terms of their ability to attract resources.

That then has implications for the narratives that we have about policing and about the culture that we attribute to it. In the end, that is feeding back into that fear factor that we talked about earlier. If you keep talking about the security threat, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. You create, generate and spread fear. While there is a risk, in the long-term perspective, out of all the risks that face us, these are much diminished from what they were in the past. Other kinds of threats, such as organised crime, drug trafficking, and people losing their lives on a large scale through suicide and all sorts of other things in communities, really are the threats to everyday security for ordinary people.

Dr Byrne: Very briefly, the obvious one is violent dissident republicans in terms of the threats. Marie is right in terms of national security being looked at through a very narrow lens. I have one concern, which is that we do not really talk about national security in Northern Ireland. There is a sense that the Northern Ireland-related terrorism strategy is the only show in town. It should be published. We should have a more open, honest and transparent conversation about what the threats to Northern Ireland are, be they right-wing or Islamic. We are still very much in the narrow lane of Northern Ireland-related terrorism, and we have the potential to create a risk that we take our eye off the ball in terms of where we are moving forward. That is why it is important that we have a broader conversation about this.

Q32 Claire Hanna: You will know that the two Governments recently appointed an independent expert to scope paramilitary group transition to disbandment. I want to ask for your views on this. Are we doing enough within the current criminal justice system? There is the narrative of, "Oh, jeez, nothing else has worked. We will have to pay them again to go away". Have we used the tools at our disposal, such as criminal justice mechanisms, or legislated for additional tools, to tackle these people who have been in existence post the ceasefires for longer than the Troubles lasted?

Is there a genuine willingness from paramilitary groups or individuals to undertake disbandment? Will we finish this process with the groups being gone? What would the process best look like and what are the barriers? I know that they are four big questions, but maybe you could just give us a flavour of your thinking. I am particularly interested in whether we have turned over every stone within our current powers, including within the Assembly.



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Professor Breen-Smyth: I do not think that we have turned over every possibility. This is something that I work on very closely with the PSNI on an ongoing basis. I also work with people close to the armed groups. I work only with those in the armed groups who are interested and have declared themselves willing to transition out of paramilitarism. Over the years that I have been doing it, that has become a more focused work than it was in the past, in so far as there are people who, in the past, have declared themselves interested in transition, but, for reasons to do with my antennae, I concluded were not, in fact, sincere and therefore have disengaged with. I do engage with people who are close to some of the armed groups, and I work with them, alongside the police.

Those people are increasingly engaged with the police directly. The police have, over a period of time, worked closely with me and with communities, to the point where there is a credible possibility of a transition process, whereby there are people in the armed groups who understand what would be required of them to transition and who are more than willing to do that.

That is not to say that that is true for all paramilitary groups. However, we are much further down the line than we were the last time I came to this Committee, when I talked extensively about paramilitary transition and provided an additional paper to the Committee at its request.

We now have a situation where the police have understood what would be required in terms of policing a transition process, which is a new departure, and that the route offered to paramilitaries has to be a Robert Frostian parting of ways. There is the high road, which is the road to transition in which they must submit themselves to certain processes, and then there is the low road, which is where the full force of the law is pointed at them and they are arrested.

The difficulty at the minute, of course, is that we cannot arrest people unless we can find that they have been doing something wrong, assemble evidence, and prosecute them. For many of these people, you cannot do that, so the law is, in many instances, an inadequate mechanism to deal with the current situation in terms of paramilitary transition. It is also an inelegant mechanism in so far as it requires a great deal of effort on the part of law enforcement, and very little on the part of the paramilitaries. If you look at transition as a path that you open up for people, they must put the energy into demonstrating their bona fides and embark on the path in a way that moves us forward.

There is a great deal of willingness on the part of some. The groups are highly fragmented. We have the UVF, for example, but there is not one UVF any more. There are many UVFs. There is not one UVF in terms of Belfast and the rest of the country. As I have said, I have crunched the numbers, which are included in the paper that I sent you, about the distribution of violence across the territory of Northern Ireland. It is a very differentiated picture. As I point out in the paper that I sent, based



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on my work with the police, all policing is local policing. All policing has to be driven at district level.

- Q33 **Claire Hanna:** In summary, there are individuals who might want to have this part of their life written off, but the structures, the organisations and the concepts are not going to disappear.

Professor Breen-Smyth: I am not talking about individuals. I am not talking about an individual process. I am talking about groups and subgroups. The people I am engaged with have a leadership capacity and can bring people with them.

- Q34 **Claire Hanna:** Residue and remnants will be left and will fill the space.

Professor Breen-Smyth: Yes, always. We know this from the past. We know this from the IRA. We have dissident republicans as a result of exactly that process. There is no counsel of perfection here, Claire. Basically, we do the best we can, using the resources available elegantly, and clearing up as much as we can. The residue, which there will be, needs to be dealt with in a different way.

- Q35 **Claire Hanna:** The decision has been made, and I am now trying to engage. If we are doing this, let us do it as well as possible. Jonny, what criminal justice mechanisms are left undelivered by the Northern Ireland Assembly? Again, we probably do not have enough time, or wine, to get into all those issues about the space vacated, but are there lessons that have been learned about the transition and the deficits in the transition of the provisional IRA—i.e. are the Governments going to go after assets, and are they going to let these groups maintain their structures?

Dr Byrne: This is a really exhausting conversation. I am slightly different from Marie. At the end of the day, we have an expert in place. Her report will be published in August or September. That is the best situation we can get to. It is an ecosystem. This is a culture. This is not just something like cancer that you can cut out. My fear is that it becomes like the wild west, where everybody says that they can do transition, and where everybody has an idea of what this means and, all of a sudden, it is a mess.

This is just an area that I am very uncomfortable with in terms of how it is being presented, so I am hoping that this expert produces something that brings clarity for all of us, so that we can either put the conversation away or get excited about generating a conversation about a process. This conversation is not healthy for Northern Ireland, because it has been going on for 10 years now.

On the law and order piece, what did you mean in terms of assets?

- Q36 **Claire Hanna:** Are there mechanisms and tools that we are not deploying or have not legislated for within our current competence?

Dr Byrne: They have reduced their thresholds, so there are ways of moving forward. At the end of the day, it is moving towards organised



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crime. There are a lot of models down south, and a lot of models here, that we could adopt in Northern Ireland, because, ultimately, this has become about organised crime gangs.

Claire Hanna: Thank you. We are going to get the expert in at some point.

- Q37 **Gavin Robinson:** Just on this, one of the frustrations that I have picked up from my conversations with folks who are keenly interested in transition is the lack of impetus and the timescale associated with the work that Mrs Ravensbergen has been given. Do you detect that? I know of a significant group who said that they wanted to go, but they needed the process to assist them in doing that. Their plan was before the summer, and this now has to wait nine or 12 months before they conceptualise what that means. The process of bringing people with them, of challenging detractors and of getting to the end point is now further down the tracks, and there is quite a bit of disappointment.

Professor Breen-Smyth: What I would say is that, while there may be a group who wish to go and are frustrated that they cannot go right away, the difficulty for Government is that we cannot design a process for one group. We have to try to take as many groups as possible with us through one process.

- Q38 **Gavin Robinson:** Does it need to happen in tandem? Why is it that you cannot progress when progression can be made in individual circumstances, as has already happened with other groups?

Professor Breen-Smyth: It depends on what you mean by "transition". It could be, for example, that the group as a whole would move as a piece and bring as many people as they can with them, or that it resolves issues such as legacy, which is an issue for many of the groups. Are their members going to be charged with historic crimes? There are all those issues that we cannot sort out for one group, with all due respect, without sorting them out for everybody. It is like herding cats. There are all sorts of these groups, and they are competitive with one another.

- Q39 **Gavin Robinson:** The best way to herd cats is to pick one at a time and stick them in a sack, rather than trying to keep herding them. We have had transition. You mentioned the republican group. I might disagree with you as to whether it has transitioned successfully. Red Hand is in a much different situation from the UVF, and the UDA is much more disparate than the UVF. There are complexities.

Why is there this desire to say that it all needs to be a job lot and in another year, potentially, we can see whether there is progress? This speaks to veracity, because all of us have engaged with people who will say one thing and, perhaps, do another. If they were saying that they were ready to go, why the lack of willingness on the Government's part to test them?

Professor Breen-Smyth: There are those in Government, of course, who would say, "If they want to go, let them go. Off they go".



Q40 **Gavin Robinson:** That is okay on an individual basis, but it does not work when you are trying to bring folk along with you.

Professor Breen-Smyth: Yes, exactly. That is exactly my point. Given that the groups are competitive with one another, there are, dare I suggest, people in this arena who wish to be seen as the boy in the big picture and to leave everybody else behind. They want the kudos and all the rest of it. That is to be avoided. This is a security problem, not a male ego issue, and we have to deal with it accordingly.

Dr Byrne: We could have a conversation for an hour. We could leave the conversation on this theme and go back to our respective people and talk. Basically, we could think that we have talked about two different things. My fear is that even this conversation here around transition and going is so nebulous, if that is the right word. It is such a fluid thing. What worries me is that there is no consistency across anything here, and that then means that we cannot even get to the point to have the conversation, because we could then think that we have agreed something, when we have agreed to totally different things.

Just very briefly, without meaning to be flippant, if we have been waiting since 1994, I can wait a few more months to find out what this looks like, if this is a legitimate process that Fleur is involved in.

Gavin Robinson: There will be a few more blogs coming out of it too, Jonny.

Dr Byrne: Now, now.

Q41 **Gavin Robinson:** Let me go back to what I was supposed to ask you, which is about national security arrangements. You did touch on, with David Smith there, your concerns as to how national security is assessed, measured and monitored. Do you want to just briefly give the Committee your evidence around what your concerns are?

Dr Byrne: The PSNI may have read my mind, but my concern is that the threat level has gone from substantial to severe. God willing, it will go to moderate at some point next year. There must be an economic impact from that. If the threat level is decreasing, there should be a proportionate link to how much it is costing to do security, in a simplistic sense.

At some point, the public must see some tangible aesthetical difference to how we police and what security looks like if the threat level is following the current trajectory. That is the first thing.

Secondly, I am glad to see that the additional security funding that the PSNI gets is now not focusing just on NIRT but looking at other areas of vulnerability and harm in terms of national security. That can be a good thing.



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What I am saying here in terms of national security is that, given that the NIRT strategy runs to 2030, and given the three years' agreed additional security funding of about £38.7 million per annum, there is an opportunity to have a fresh debate and conversation about what the funding is doing, how we are measuring success in that national security arena, and what upcoming threats and harms are affecting Northern Ireland, and not to focus purely on the NIRT element.

Q42 Gavin Robinson: I am going to ask you to give me a sense of what normalisation from a security perspective looks like for you. I went to the Troubles exhibition in the Imperial War Museum two summers ago. When I walked in, two people came out and said, "Don't worry about that. It is rubbish". I walked in and saw this video, which was narrated by some individuals, one of whom I recognised by their voice as somebody who is about 15 or 20 years younger than I am and has no experience of the Troubles. At the time, in the image, they said, "Look at how awful this is. Society has not changed", and they showed a picture of Portrush police station.

Portrush police station is one of the least fortified police stations in Northern Ireland. There are basketball courts that have stronger wire-mesh fencing around them than Portrush police station. Yet this was the image of somebody who did not live during the time, who was saying, "It is awful. It has not normalised and it has not got any better". What does the normalisation of the security situation look like to you, John?

Dr Byrne: It is very simple. There are two things. First, we did the physical normalisation very quickly after the signing of the Good Friday agreement in terms of the Army, the watchtowers, the barracks and the whole aesthetic piece. We have not done the psychological normalisation thing yet. That is an issue.

It may be controversial, but I would think about single officer patrols. Look at the potential resource implications of single officer patrols as opposed to what we have at the minute. I get the threat. I get all that. I am not being flippant or cavalier with people's lives, but these are the things that I would like to push a wee bit in terms of what that looks like and what the implications are.

Professor Breen-Smyth: Having done Jonny's role prior to Jonny, I think that there is an unhelpful incentive to talk up the national security threat because of the resource implication that it has. That contributes to the cultural issue that Jonny is talking about.

It is not popular, in that context, to say that we live in a safe society and the Northern Ireland terrorism threat is very localised in Northern Ireland. You can draw a ring on a map and show where these people are and how they operate. Okay, they can move across boundaries. We had all those arguments when I was in Jonny's role about whether we need to have additional powers across Northern Ireland. That kind of resource implication is in there.



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It is necessary. It has to be the case, but, when we are talking about national security, we need to be mindful that the perverse incentive to talk it up is damaging the ordinary discourse of safety, which is the normal situation that we are living in.

- Q43 **Mike Kane:** I suppose it is a measure of the progress that has been made that we have talked about policing issues, possibly except for the question of community recruitment, but I come from a city that had a terrorist attack on a synagogue a couple of weeks ago. In 2017, we saw 22 lives lost and 250 injured with the Manchester Arena bomb. We saw the death of DC Stephen Oake in 2003 to an Islamic terrorist. We had two IRA bombs, one huge, in 1992 and 1996.

We are all facing these problems. Austerity took £145 million out of our budget from 2010 to 2015. We lost 2,500 officers. You are facing a lot of similar issues, and you get additional security funding as well. What is that? It is £40 million-odd.

Dr Byrne: It is £38.7 million.

- Q44 **Mike Kane:** Thank you. Is it focused enough? As you said, are the finances driving the change? You have seen community policing completely ripped away in Northern Ireland, as I have in my city, as it happens. I really miss it. Is the additional security funding focused enough?

Dr Byrne: This is a question that you can ask the police. There is probably no answer to it. They will say that the resource goes into suppression. Suppression is evidenced by no attacks. If you stop suppression, there is the potential for attacks to increase, and that is dictated by the money. I do not know the extent to which the suppression must continue to the point where there are no attacks.

What is healthy is that they are now diversifying and looking at broader threats, not simply at Northern Ireland-related terrorism. If I am right, they cannot access Home Office counter-terrorism funding. I do not think that is available in Northern Ireland. The ASF is a supplement to that, in that sense. It is clearly required, given where the trajectory of the statistics is taking us. With the way that government funding is, that is on a three-year cycle. The challenge is whether it will be regenerated for another three years afterwards.

Professor Breen-Smyth: My view on that is driven largely by my experience of working in Ballymena since July of this year. We saw whole-scale street disorder, the like of which we had not seen in relatively recent times in Northern Ireland. That is not a national security threat. That is disorder. It is attacks on people's homes. It has led to the whole-scale arrest of a whole bunch of young men, largely, in Ballymena, who will now acquire criminal records for themselves at the ages of 16, 17, 18 or whatever, along with some older people as well.



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It troubles me a great deal that we have, as I said earlier, a very narrow conception of what a security threat is. In that instance, it seems to me that there is a huge issue with social media. There is also a huge issue with the far right, which we are really not talking about enough. We need to engage with that because the communities that are the most vulnerable and most marginalised are the communities that these people will glom on to and exploit. They will lead them down a path to perdition.

We have a situation in Ballymena that we have worked very hard to retrieve. The police officer I spoke about earlier, Jock McToal, has been absolutely central to doing that. We now have moved some of the protesters away from protesting about immigration to focusing on violence against women and girls. We have a new group of women, which Delaney and I have been working with, who are focused on that. The work can be done.

I work as a volunteer, by the way. There are no resources going from the state into this work. Attempts to get the local council to engage led to a refusal on its part because it thought this was too controversial. We are dealing with a situation where the most dangerous, nasty and damaging events of the last while are being met by police resources but very little other support at community level.

In terms of security and what is going on in the broader security picture, I refer you to that instance in Ballymena, which looks pretty insecure to me, but it does not fall within the rubric of Northern Ireland-related terrorism.

Q45 Mike Kane: When we talk about additional security funding, councils are responsible for community cohesion. We did see wanton violence in Ballymena. You also mentioned the far right, which I suffer from in my white working-class constituency. Social media and domestic violence are issues right across the board in the UK. Is the ASF too spread out? Is it just being used for what is popping up in terms of crime and disorder?

Dr Byrne: You are right. This is why I said to Simon that at some point somebody is going to look over and go, "Why are you getting that?" We are dealing with the exact same thing here. Up until last year, the ASF was for Northern Ireland-related terrorism. They have broadened it now to look at right-wing, Islamic and other national security threats. As I said before, I do not think they can avail of the Home Office funding around counter-terrorism. It is meeting that element of the resource.

Whether or not that is sustainable post the next few years, I do not know. That would be a decision for you.

Q46 Mike Kane: For the record, I am not against the PSNI being well funded.

Dr Byrne: No, I agree.

Mike Kane: If we are going for that normalisation approach, that might be—



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Dr Byrne: It is a question of being held to a higher degree of accountability around what you are doing with the fund. That is match funded by the Executive as well. It works out at about £70 million per annum.

Q47 **Simon Hoare:** Dr Byrne, I wanted to ask you, if I may, about the stop and search powers of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007. The Committee would be interested to hear your main observations regarding the use of stop and search powers.

Dr Byrne: Their use is going down and it has been going down. There was a spike two or three years ago, but in general, since they have been introduced, the trajectory is one of decrease. Again, my next report will show that there has been another 28% decrease. There has been a significant decrease in the use of these powers.

Q48 **Simon Hoare:** Do you assess that decrease as being part of a strategic decision to reduce use or just a reduction in the requirement to use them?

Dr Byrne: There are three things. First, there has been an increase in the use of terrorism legislation stop and search, particularly in north and west Belfast and in Derry/Londonderry. You will find that the powers have increased there. The police are using those powers there.

Secondly, there is a growing awareness around the use of the powers in terms of what powers are most appropriate to use in a particular incident.

Thirdly, in the police there are different units, obviously. There are the district support teams, the LPTs and the specialisms. I find now that they are being used more by specialists such as the district support teams. They are working off a nominal list; they are working off better evidence and information around the use of the power. It is interesting because they are having a debate in England around the powers and the increasing use of the powers. There are lessons for Northern Ireland around this.

Q49 **Simon Hoare:** What issues around the use of those powers do you, if at all, intend to interrogate specifically during your term as reviewer?

Dr Byrne: Could you expand on the question?

Simon Hoare: Are there any police powers under the Act that you particularly intend to interrogate, or is it just the general application?

Dr Byrne: In very simple terms, I want to make sure that they are being used appropriately. That is it. I am gathering more evidence now in the last report and this report particularly around how many times a particular officer uses the powers. I want to make sure that they are not being used in an overzealous way and that they are not being used by particular officers in particular areas. I find nothing in any way to suggest that.



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Are they being used appropriately? Are they having the desired effect? That is essentially it. I am having the same conversation that you are having here. At what point does the environment not lend itself to the use of the powers? It is a difficult one.

Q50 Simon Hoare: Is there a particular group that you or, indeed, others may have identified who have a particular beef against the use of stop and search?

Dr Byrne: Anybody who is themselves stopped does not like it.

Simon Hoare: I was slightly taking that as a given.

Dr Byrne: I could not resist. I am sorry, Simon. The interesting thing is that the legislation does not stipulate, but the given is that they predominantly will be used in nationalist republican areas against the violent dissident republicans in those areas, particularly in west Belfast and in north and west Derry and Strabane.

I spoke to, as Marie said, PCSPs, community workers in various areas and police officers on the ground. There is no public outcry. People are not protesting about the use of the powers.

The interesting thing is that, particularly in some constituencies, the power itself is not as important as the fact that you have been stopped. The challenge is about the impact of the stop as opposed to the power that is being used.

Q51 Simon Hoare: One interesting observation on what we have heard this morning from you and the professor is that there is a less good, if one can use that phrase, relationship between the police and working-class loyalist areas, but a greater use of stop and search in nationalist areas. It is quite interesting. You would almost expect the reverse.

Dr Byrne: It depends where your threat is.

Q52 Simon Hoare: Yes, quite. In terms of the manifestation of the relationship, that is just an interesting counterintuitive correlation.

The human rights adviser to the Policing Board has recommended, as you probably know, that the PSNI and the NIO, in conjunction with you, draft criteria to use to decide when JSA stop and search powers are no longer necessary. Do you have a view as yet on this proposal? If so, are you prepared to share it with the Committee?

Dr Byrne: We are meeting on 13 January at the university. I will be joined by representatives from the NIO and the PSNI. We are having a meeting to discuss that.

Q53 Simon Hoare: In order to help the evolution of our inquiry, would you be able to provide a written statement after that meeting with regards to where your thinking is?



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Dr Byrne: We plan to have two in January. I am more than happy to write to the Committee on the findings or—I do not know how you want to phrase that—response to that recommendation.

Simon Hoare: We would probably find that helpful, Chair.

Chair: It would be very helpful. Thank you, Simon.

Professor Breen-Smyth: When I was doing Jonny's role, the thing that brought people to talk to me individually as the reviewer were the stop and search powers. The people who came to see me were loyalists. While there is a concentration of stop and searches in republican communities, perhaps it is the case that they expect to be stopped and searched, whereas loyalists got very irate about being stopped and searched using the JSA powers.

Indeed, when I first started to review the JSA powers, we were in a very different place from where we are now, in so far as the use of the powers was, shall we say, a lot less targeted and less appropriate than it is nowadays. With full credit to the PSNI, over the period of years that I was working they did accept a lot of the recommendations in the report and became more focused on the appropriate use of the powers. When I was first appointed, I certainly was not convinced that the powers were all being used appropriately. That journey has been progressed down the line.

Q54 **Simon Hoare:** Your summation—I do not want to put words into your mouth—is that it is a useful power for the police to have, but you are encouraged by the fact that it appears to be being used in a more Exocet-like way rather than a grapeshot.

Professor Breen-Smyth: I am a bit worried about your use of the term "useful power" because one of the things that I accused the police of was using it as a handy wee power. It diminished the role of reasonable suspicion. You could kind of use it when you could not use other powers. To me, that was not acceptable. To me, it had to be used appropriately.

It has its place. I hope one day we can remove it entirely from the statute book because we no longer need it. At the minute it is deemed to be necessary, but it must be used appropriately.

Chair: I would like to take this opportunity to thank you both for your time today.