



House of Commons
Northern Ireland Affairs
Committee

The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland

Second Report of Session 2023–24

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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Summary

Paramilitarism is an enduring and malignant legacy of the Troubles which continues to cause harm in Northern Ireland today - whether that be physical or psychological harm to victims and survivors of violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups; harm to communities through coercive control; or the perpetuation of societal trauma in Northern Ireland. It is a persistent but complex phenomenon that necessitates a sustained and multi-faceted response from public services across the piece.

Indeed, use of the term ‘paramilitarism’ itself is complex and contested in Northern Ireland. Terms such as organised crime gangs can fail to capture the complex historical and political context which leads to groups remaining embedded in communities. However, the label of ‘paramilitaries’ can risk romanticising the presence of gangs who engage in overt criminality and attempt to exercise coercive control over the communities they seek to prey upon. To counter this risk, and reality, of people glamorising paramilitary groups, it is crucial that public agencies and wider civic society use language rooted in safeguarding and child protection when describing the activities of these criminal gangs which include the abuse and exploitation, often sexual, of children and young people.

Low prosecution rates for those who commit violent crime can act as a barrier to reporting the crimes of paramilitary groups and also serve to perpetuate the impunity with which these groups act. An effective criminal justice system that is able to identify perpetrators of paramilitary violence and bring them to justice is therefore of paramount importance. The Government must work with the Executive to improve prosecution rates for paramilitary-style attacks and introduce a safeguarding approach to paramilitary activity, which includes organised criminal gangs engaged in drug dealing and other illicit activities, to enable its prosecution as coercion, modern slavery and child criminal exploitation. Alongside this, the Government must ensure that policing and security agencies in Northern Ireland are appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity, as it pledged to do so as part of its commitments under New Decade, New Approach agreement. Police numbers are falling and funding is inadequate, and this impacts on efforts to investigate and prevent paramilitary activity. We call on the Government to ensure that NI receives funding in 2024, and on a recurrent basis thereafter, which enables the PSNI to increase its roll to at least 7,500 officers.

As well as improving the policing and criminal justice response to paramilitary activity, it is crucial that the root causes of what was described to us as “a very stubborn, wicked problem” are addressed. The high cost of living has contributed to a ‘cruel storm’ which paramilitary groups are exploiting to target vulnerable individuals. The structure of universal credit, the lack of a childcare strategy, and expense of childcare in Northern Ireland all contribute to the precarious financial situation in which some families find themselves. The Northern Ireland Office must engage in discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions as soon as possible to improve access to universal credit in Northern Ireland, and to develop schemes to better connect people to existing credit services. The Government should also share best practice to support the development of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland.

There is also a correlation between paramilitary activity, deprivation, mental health issues and trauma. The cross-Executive, Tackling Paramilitarism Programme is carrying out vital work to develop strategies to tackle paramilitarism systematically. We endorse the trauma-informed and public health approach the Programme is taking to tackle the systemic problem of paramilitarism within society in Northern Ireland, which treats violence as a disease in order to attempt to address its underlying causes, as well as its worst symptoms.

However, we are concerned that funding for projects and programmes to tackle paramilitarism are often short-term, resulting in a focus on crisis interventions rather than systemic change. The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme requires sustained investment to continue its progress in leading such systemic change. As part of discussions to extend the Programme, we argue the Government must extend the multi-year funding period for Phase Three to five years rather than the three years for which each phase is currently funded. A longer period for Phase Three would provide a more sustainable base for investment in, and development of, projects to tackle paramilitary activity.

Finally, the issue of whether there should be a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at their disbandment was perhaps the most debated topic during our inquiry. In recent years, the Independent Reporting Commission, a body set up by the UK and Irish Governments in 2017 to monitor attempts to eradicate paramilitarism, has argued that a process of 'Group Transition' is needed. We heard evidence for and against such a move. We are concerned that a Group Transition process aimed at the disbandment of paramilitary groups could inadvertently risk reinforcing the status of such groups and fail to displace the coercive control they hold over some communities. We are also aware, however, that a strategy to end paramilitarism which does not engage with existing paramilitary structures ignores the elephant in the room.

For any process to have a chance of success, it must hold the confidence of political parties and receive widespread public support in Northern Ireland. We call on the Government to conduct a scoping exercise to assess public support for such a process, which should include dedicated engagement with people who have experienced violence and harm from paramilitary groups, as part of efforts to eradicate paramilitarism from Northern Ireland.

1 Introduction

Background

1. Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is an enduring and malignant legacy of the Troubles. The NI Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime describes it as “a vast, complex, intergenerational problem”,¹ while the Independent Reporting Commission, a body set up by the UK and Irish Governments in 2017 to monitor attempts to eradicate paramilitarism, observes that the continued existence of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland constitutes a “clear and present danger” for communities where paramilitary groups operate and, indeed, for the whole region.²

2. Defining paramilitarism today is difficult; it is a complex and contested concept which we explore further in this report. Nevertheless, paramilitary activity continues to cause harm in Northern Ireland - whether that be physical or psychological harm to victims and survivors of violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups; harm to communities through coercive control; or the perpetuation of societal trauma in Northern Ireland. The ‘clear and present danger’ that paramilitary and terrorist activity poses to society in Northern Ireland was also starkly evidenced by a number of incidents last year and by the raising of the threat level from substantial to severe for Northern Ireland-related terrorism.³

3. Renewed efforts have been made in recent years to tackle paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. One of the primary aims of the ‘Fresh Start’ Agreement, concluded by the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK and Irish Governments in November 2015, was to “address the legacy and impact of paramilitary activity”. This followed urgent talks convened in autumn 2015 in the wake of two murders in Belfast which according to the text of the agreement “once again raised the spectre of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland and its malign impact on society”. In the agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK and Irish Governments reiterated “the primacy and centrality of peace and the political process to the continued transformation of our society”. A key goal identified in that regard was the ending of paramilitarism “once and for all”.⁴

4. The Fresh Start Agreement contained a provision for the Executive to appoint a three-person panel “with the task of bringing back to the Executive for agreement and action a report before the end of May 2016 with recommendations for a strategy to disband paramilitary groups”.⁵ The Panel suggested a range of measures to assist with the process of disbandment of paramilitary groups and made 43 recommendations in total. Following the Fresh Start Panel’s Report, the ‘Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime’ was published in July 2016. It translated the 43 recommendations of the Independent Panel into a series of commitments: five commitments were to be delivered by the UK and Irish Governments; and the remainder

1 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.9

2 Independent Reporting Commission ([PN0014](#)), p.4

3 Northern Ireland: Security Update, Written statement by Chris Heaton-Harris MP, [HCWS683](#), 28 March 2023

4 [Fresh Start Agreement](#), 17 November 2015, pp 13, 7 and 14

5 [Fresh Start Agreement](#), 17 November 2015, p.17

by the Executive and its partners.⁶ The Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, or Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (TPP) as it is sometimes referred to, was established to deliver those remaining 38 commitments.⁷

5. The Government has worked with the Northern Ireland Executive to support the development of a "framework for a collaborative and mutually reinforcing approach to tackling terrorism, paramilitary activity, and organised crime".⁸ It has committed funding and resources aimed at achieving the transformation of society in Northern Ireland and ending paramilitarism in the region.

Our inquiry

6. Noting the continued existence of paramilitarism and the harm it continues to cause to communities in Northern Ireland, we decided to launch an inquiry in March 2022 to consider the effectiveness of measures under the Fresh Start Agreement in tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland; to analyse whether the approach of the UK Government and NI Executive to tackling paramilitarism is sufficiently sustained, resourced and joined-up; and to examine how paramilitarism can best be eradicated.⁹

7. We received and published written submissions from a range of sources including the Government and Executive departments, the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Independent Reporting Commission, independent public bodies, non-governmental organisations, housing associations, academics and others. From May 2022 to October 2023, we took oral evidence in public over 12 sessions. We heard from a range of stakeholders including the NI Minister of Justice, the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, the PSNI, the NI Prison Service, the NI Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, NGOs and academics. We also held informal discussions with those leading projects funded by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, and with the PSNI, as part of a visit to Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in January 2023.

8. The conclusions and recommendations in this report are founded on the evidence we received. We thank everyone who took the time to provide our inquiry with oral and written contributions.

6 [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An interim review and proposed next steps for delivery of the Executive Action Plan](#), p.11

7 [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An interim review and proposed next steps for delivery of the Executive Action Plan](#), p.8

8 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office (PNI022), p.2

9 See: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, [Impacts of paramilitarism in NI to be investigated by MPs](#), 30 March 2022

2 The concept of paramilitarism

Defining paramilitarism today

9. The concept of ‘paramilitarism’ is complex and contested. The Interim Review of the Executive’s Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme highlights that “there is no single view on what paramilitarism or a paramilitary is in contemporary times”.¹⁰ We heard differing views from contributors about the appropriateness of the continued use of the term. At the outset of our inquiry, it was described to us as a “messy concept”.¹¹ Indeed, the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC), set up to monitor attempts to end paramilitarism, referred in its 2022 report to a “complex landscape” of paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland comprising “different categories of people”.¹² It noted that there are “undoubtedly individuals and groups who use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality (such as extortion, drug dealing, threats, trade in counterfeit goods, money laundering, illegal money lending, sexual exploitation and other illegal activities)”.¹³ Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007, agreed, noting that “paramilitaries seek to control communities through the use of extreme violence up to and including murder and by intimidation”.¹⁴ She described how “the activities of paramilitaries range from minor to serious criminality, drug dealing, extortion, fuel laundering and murder”.¹⁵

10. Some contributors to the inquiry therefore argued that the term ‘paramilitary’ is euphemistic and its use risks romanticising the continued existence of groups that seek to perpetuate such criminality and terror.¹⁶ We heard how within some communities in Northern Ireland there is sometimes social capital to be gained from being affiliated to paramilitary groups and, consequently, the use of the term ‘paramilitaries’ could perpetuate this phenomenon.¹⁷ Indeed, representatives of victims and survivors of the Troubles told us that paramilitary groups originated as terrorist organisations and were regarded as such during the Troubles. They felt that the increased use of the moniker ‘paramilitary’ rather than ‘terrorist’ can perpetuate an acceptance of their existence,¹⁸ accounting for the fact that today’s paramilitary structures are all proscribed terrorist organisations. Ian Jeffers, the then NI Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, commented in evidence to us that “there is this supposed credibility that the paramilitaries carry, and that is a throwover to the Troubles, without a doubt”.¹⁹

11. Some contributors therefore called for the use of terms such as ‘gangs’ or ‘armed groups’ instead of paramilitary groups.²⁰ Prof. Duncan Morrow, Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement at Ulster University, commented that the term

10 [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An interim review and proposed next steps for delivery of the Executive Action Plan](#), p.55

11 [Q2](#)

12 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.12

13 See above reference, p.12

14 [Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#), Fourteenth Report, 1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021, June 2022, p.23

15 See above reference, p.23

16 See for example: Aileen Quinton ([PNI0001](#)), p.3; [Q115](#)

17 [Q287](#)

18 [Q355](#)

19 [Q357](#)

20 For example, see: [Q13](#), [Q115](#)

‘paramilitary’ is used “in different contexts in different ways” and argued for greater use of terms such as ‘armed groups’ and ‘coercive control’ to tackle such groups.²¹ Koulla Yiasouma, the then Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, made the point in evidence to us that the term ‘paramilitarism’ was “romanticising” the issue for young people and called too for a shift in language, noting:

These are armed groups. These are gangs. There is nothing about the ones that young people are involved with that suggests to me that they are doing anything other than criminal activity, so we need to use language that describes it properly. That is not to say that you can compare an armed criminal gang in Northern Ireland in the same way that you can anywhere else. It has to be seen within the context of our situation, and that they have emerged from our conflict.²²

12. Additionally, the then Northern Ireland Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA, told us:

The difficulty of referring to them [paramilitary groups] simply as organised crime gangs is that you simplify what is a complex picture. Although that is their main business, at various stages they take on the mantle of political spokespeople and a whole range of other things in a way that organised crime gangs do not²³.

In written evidence, Dr Jonny Byrne and colleagues argued that, unlike many organised crime gangs, paramilitary groups “are embedded within wider social groups and public activities in Northern Ireland”,²⁴ concluding:

These groups carry some political legitimacy and are visible in events, such as parades, in many parts in Northern Ireland, and they display their existence on murals and flags that are rarely removed. These groups are sewn into the weft and weave of everyday life.²⁵

In addition, John McBurney, one of the Commissioners at the Independent Reporting Commission, described how paramilitarism has changed significantly since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.²⁶ He explained that paramilitary groups were no longer engaged in “fierce warfare” against each other, adding that this then prompts the question:

If they are not engaged in fierce warfare one against the other, why do they still exist and what are they engaged in now? Undoubtedly, there are organised crime groups embedded within the wider groupings, but then

21 [Q13](#)

22 [Q115](#)

23 [Q89](#)

24 Jonny Byrne, Ulster University, Duncan Morrow, Ulster University, Brendan Sturgeon, Queens University, Dominic Bryan, Queens University), Peter Sheridan, Co-operation Ireland, and Lucy Geddes, Co-operation Ireland ([PNI006](#))

25 Jonny Byrne, Ulster University, Duncan Morrow, Ulster University, Brendan Sturgeon, Queens University, Dominic Bryan, Queens University), Peter Sheridan, Co-operation Ireland, and Lucy Geddes, Co-operation Ireland ([PNI006](#))

26 [Q260](#)

there are dormant members who have been members for many years, there are active members who see themselves as community activists, and there are more dangerous elements who are involved in pure criminality.²⁷

Commissioner McBurney therefore said it was too simplistic to “dispense with the term ‘paramilitarism’ and call them child abusers, organised crime gangs or whatever, because the groupings are still constructed in a militaristic fashion”.²⁸ He commented that this creates an additional layer of complexity that differentiates paramilitary groups from organised crime groups in other parts of the UK.²⁹ He explained this differentiation:

If a young person is drawn into one of the loyalist groupings at the present time, for example, it is not necessarily that they want to be tutored and trained to be a drug dealer. They may feel that they want to join that group in order to fight the protocol or to defend against a border poll, or some other action that has a political bent or veneer—call it what you will—to it. It is not about being recruited as an apprentice criminal to know how to counterfeit, extort, human traffic or any of those dimensions, necessarily. That is what creates this added layer of complexity to dealing with the groups. When you then move to the republican side and the dissident groupings, they see that there is still a cause to be pursued to a greater or lesser extent. On the loyalist side, the paramilitary groupings see that there is something yet to defend.³⁰

13. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon. Chris Heaton-Harris MP, agreed that the history of paramilitary groups, and their networking in communities, differentiated them from organised crime groups in Great Britain.³¹ He added, however, that he understood how the term ‘paramilitary’ “might be rewarding them, almost, with military attributes that they simply do not deserve”.³²

14. The term ‘paramilitarism’ is complex and contested in Northern Ireland. We heard how use of the term can risk romanticising the presence of gangs who engage in overt criminality and attempt to exercise coercive control over the communities they seek to prey upon. At the same time, however, terms such as organised crime gangs can fail to capture the complex historical and political context which leads to these groups remaining embedded in communities. Following evidence we heard, we decided to rename our inquiry from ‘the effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland’ to ‘the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland’. We did so to make clear the criminal nature of many of the activities undertaken by paramilitary groups and to take account of evidence we had received outlining the potential social capital that can be conferred on individuals involved in criminality when they are referred to as ‘paramilitaries’.

27 [Q260](#)

28 [Q260](#)

29 [Q260](#)

30 [Q260](#)

31 [Q423](#)

32 [Q423](#)

3 Societal effects of paramilitary activity and organised crime

The perpetuation of harm

15. Throughout our inquiry, we heard distressing evidence of the cruelty and harm that people involved in paramilitary activity and organised crime continue to be responsible for within communities in Northern Ireland. We were told how groups are engaged in drug dealing, housing intimidation, illegal money lending, extortion, human trafficking, sexual exploitation including of children, child abuse and other criminal activities to profit and exercise coercive control over communities.³³ We also heard that, while the harm wreaked by groups in Northern Ireland is widespread and severe, it also affects different communities in different ways. Naomi Long MLA told us that data collected by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme suggested that “between 15% and 30% of people in Northern Ireland live in an area that experiences paramilitary fear and intimidation”,³⁴ although Ms Long explained that some areas experience this more than others.³⁵ Other contributors pointed to the progress made in Northern Ireland in recent decades towards a more peaceful society, but explained to us the reality that many communities in Northern Ireland are still living with intimidation by groups and in fear of retribution if this intimidation is challenged.³⁶

Socio-economic factors

16. Groups involved in paramilitary activity and organised crime seek to exploit vulnerabilities within communities to carry out illicit activities and exert coercive control in areas in which they operate.³⁷ In its 2023 report, the Independent Reporting Commission noted that almost 200 households were made homeless in 2022/23 as a result of coercive control. The Commission said that this was only one manifestation of such intimidation, adding:

Coercive control can take many forms, including intimidation, financial extortion, creating an environment where people are afraid to speak out, sexual exploitation, and stifling alternative voices and leadership. Often the control is insidious and involves communities and individuals adapting their behaviour to avoid the attention of paramilitaries. Physical manifestations of that control include what are sometimes termed “paramilitary style attacks”; assaults causing actual or grievous bodily harm, and shootings.³⁸

33 See: [Q185](#); [PNI007](#); [PNI0003](#); [PNI0014](#); [Q81](#); [Q139](#); [PNI0016](#).

34 [Q87](#)

35 [Q87](#)

36 See: Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland ([PNI0005](#)), p.4 and Women’s Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#)), p.5

37 [Q87](#)

38 Independent Reporting Commission, Sixth Report, 5 December 2023, [HC 285](#)

17. Naomi Long MLA told us that, while the indicators of community vulnerability to paramilitary activity could be complex, it was mainly areas with greater levels of deprivation which were more vulnerable to it.³⁹ Other contributors explained how coercive control exercised by such groups is particularly prevalent in socio-economically deprived areas.⁴⁰

Re-traumatisation of victims and survivors of the Troubles

18. During our inquiry we also heard about the effect of paramilitary activity on victims and survivors of the Troubles. The Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVS) said:

The continuing presence of paramilitary groupings in Northern Ireland almost 25 years after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement represents the most potent threat to the wellbeing of victims and survivors of the Troubles/Conflict.⁴¹

19. In evidence to us on the then Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, Sandra Peake, CEO of the WAVE Trauma Centre, explained that “one of the big fears” of victims and survivors of the conflict “is the continued presence of paramilitaries within our community”.⁴² South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) agreed, noting that “the failure to eradicate terrorists/paramilitaries and their ongoing existence has continued to re-traumatise innocent victims”.⁴³

20. CVS drew our attention to “the need to reflect on the impact of existing memorials including ad hoc community responses that commemorate paramilitaries or members of anti-state armed groups”.⁴⁴ Referring to a 2021 survey of 2,000 respondents, it noted that:

only 26% of the population consider that existing memorials and commemorative artefacts to the Troubles/Conflict are a positive influence on young people.⁴⁵

The 2021 report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) identified how “memorials in the public realm disproportionately focus on combatants when compared to victims”.⁴⁶ The report also noted that acts of remembrance or commemoration relating to the Troubles/Conflict have evolved in a localised and ad hoc manner.⁴⁷ In these instances, CVS cited the potential negative impact on victims, adding:

This is noteworthy when they are utilised for financial gain by both regulated and unregulated tour organisers and operators servicing visitors to Northern Ireland, particularly to the two principal cities.⁴⁸

SEFF also raised this issue with us, commenting that “while murals to terrorist groupings generally and specific members are allowed to remain in situ, facilitating their

39 [Q88](#)

40 Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland ([PNI0005](#)) p.4 and Women’s Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#)), p.5

41 Commission for Victims and Survivors ([PNI0002](#)), p.2

42 [Q431](#)

43 South East Fermanagh Foundation ([PNI0020](#)), p.1

44 Commission for Victims and Survivors ([PNI0002](#)), p.3

45 Commission for Victims and Survivors ([PNI0002](#)), p.3

46 Executive Office, [Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition - Final report](#), December 2021, p.133

47 Executive Office, [Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition - Final report](#), December 2021, p.133

48 Commission for Victims and Survivors ([PNI0002](#)), p.3

glorification, the coercive control exerted through the names of these groups continues to exist”.⁴⁹ It therefore called on the UK and Irish Governments to support the NI Executive “by utilising legislation against the memorialisation of terror and by condemning any activity which memorialises a terror group”.⁵⁰ The then Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, Ian Jeffers, called for a debate about how memorials and murals that “in some ways romanticise and glamorise the past” could be removed.⁵¹ He added that there was a need to think about how the past could be remembered and the history of Northern Ireland told “without effectively retraumatising victims and survivors”.⁵²

21. In a recent report on dealing with hate expression in public space in Northern Ireland, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) was critical of what it terms “practices of non-intervention by some relevant public authorities”.⁵³ Specifically, CAJ criticised “the PSNI position being grounded in a public order lens only rather than giving due weight to the harms of hate expression”.⁵⁴ CAJ argued that this means that:

the PSNI will not remove hate expression if there would then be possible disorder and may even prevent the removal of paramilitary-approved expression as it is those individuals most likely to react with violence if it is removed.⁵⁵

22. The High Court has previously found the PSNI’s decision-making to be lawful, proportionate and sensible. When asked whether the PSNI had political cover to remove materials clearly being used for the purposes of intimidation, Assistant Chief Constable, Mark McEwan said, “Yes,” adding:

When we see something that is purely hate-crime-related ... we will take action ... we have a number of considerations around balancing human rights, the legality of what the symbol might be and a legal obligation to reduce and minimise our recourse to the use of force, bearing in mind public order outcomes that may materialise when it becomes a policing issue. For me, this is about getting a community-based joint solution across the Executive before it becomes a policing issue.⁵⁶

In later evidence, the then NI Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA, questioned whether the PSNI did indeed have the necessary political cover to remove paramilitary flags:

I would have to say no, not in all cases. We have seen situations where police officers, commanders and others have acted in what I would consider to be a proportionate way to remove flags at the behest of the local community, and have then been berated politically for doing so and accused of escalating tensions.⁵⁷

49 South East Fermanagh Foundation ([PNI0020](#)), p.3

50 South East Fermanagh Foundation ([PNI0020](#)), p.3

51 [Q374](#)

52 [Q374](#)

53 Committee on the Administration of Justice ([PNI0007](#)), p.4

54 Committee on the Administration of Justice ([PNI0007](#)), p.5

55 Committee on the Administration of Justice ([PNI0007](#)), p.5

56 [Q63](#)

57 [Q94](#)

23. FICT made proposals “to support positive aspects of cultural identity within communities, while addressing the continued existence of those murals which promote coercive control and undermine a culture of lawfulness”. This included recommending that the NI Executive “devises an appropriate way of supporting communities to address the continued presence of murals that advertise and lend support to proscribed organisations through a process of reimagining that would remove or replace murals”. The Commission also recommended that the Executive “undertakes a review of existing legislation and if necessary, introduces new legislation to empower public sector bodies to take action to remove murals, on public and private buildings, or prevent them being painted where they contravene a set of guidelines”.⁵⁸ James Crawford, Deputy Director of the Security and Protection Group at the Northern Ireland Office, told us that the absence of the Executive was having an impact on the implementation of those proposed reforms and said that they need “to be acted on”.⁵⁹

24. The Committee also received evidence indicating that the re-traumatisation of victims of the Troubles was not only caused by the presence of paramilitary shrines but by the words and deed of some parties and elected representatives. For example, the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) advised that:

mainstream politicians themselves need to be guarded in not using volatile language that suggests that the presence of terrorist/paramilitary groups is almost understandable in difficult political situations, further justifying their existence and acceptance within their community.⁶⁰

The naming of community institutions after convicted terrorists has a corrosive impact on the minds of young people and is a further affront to victims and survivors. The Committee rejects such practices in their totality. However we are clear that dealing with the legacy of paramilitarism also means going further than simply a bricks and mortar approach. There was, and is, always an alternative to violence.

25. Memorials, commemorative artefacts and flags glorifying paramilitary groups serve as a visual signifier of the coercive control that such groups attempt to have over communities and can retraumatise the victims and survivors of paramilitary violence. The PSNI does not always have sufficient political support to remove paramilitary flags. We urge the Executive, when fully restored, to support communities to address the continued presence of paramilitary murals, as per the recommendation in the 2021 Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) Report, whilst cognisant of the need to ensure any fresh obligations placed on the police and public authorities are reasonable.

Cost of living exploitation

26. Groups involved in paramilitary activity and organised crime have exploited not only structural and historical vulnerabilities within communities, but also recent developments

58 Executive Office, [Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition - Final report](#), December 2021, p.136

59 [Q445](#)

60 South East Fermanagh Foundation ([PNI0020](#)), p.2

such as the high cost of living, in order to target at-risk individuals. Reverend Brian Anderson, Superintendent of the East Belfast Mission, described the increase in the cost of living as part of a “cruel storm” in which paramilitary groups are making waves.⁶¹

27. Throughout our inquiry, we heard anecdotal evidence of an increase in illegal money lending by paramilitary groups, during first of all the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, the cost of living crisis, to tighten their grip on communities. Siobhán Harding, Research and Policy Officer, Women’s Support Network, told us of concerns that the high cost of living would increase pressure on those vulnerable to engaging in illegal money borrowing from paramilitary groups.⁶² The Women’s Regional Consortium (WRC) stated that illegal money lending in Northern Ireland is often linked to perceived paramilitary activity but rarely reported.⁶³ The Consortium pointed to the difficulty in gathering statistics or evidence on this area “as it is often a hidden form of borrowing due to the underlying fear and secrecy surrounding this type of credit”⁶⁴. It added:

Women who took part in the Consortium research were aware of the implications of not being able to repay paramilitary debt. Some of the women reported stories of increasing debt, harassment as well as more serious physical harm (however, some disputed that their lender would use violence). There were high levels of secrecy and fear over this type of lending and a general reluctance to discuss the issue leading to significant under-reporting. It had clear implications for borrower’s mental health and wellbeing with worry over repaying these debts given priority over other forms of lending.⁶⁵

The WRC told us that households with low incomes and/or other debts are more vulnerable to exploitation by paramilitary groups and to problem debt because they are often unable to access cheaper forms of borrowing.⁶⁶ Siobhán Harding explained that people borrowed from paramilitary lenders for “the absolute basics”,⁶⁷ adding:

We are talking about food, household items, clothes for children, transport to get kids to school and things like that. It is not about luxuries; it is about the very basics of life.⁶⁸

Ms Harding told us that women were particularly susceptible to lending from paramilitary groups:

We find that the tightening up of social security over the last decade has had a particular impact on women. We always describe them as the shock absorbers of poverty in the house, so they take on that poverty. Then they look about for ways to borrow, to make ends meet and to meet the basics of life. Unfortunately, in some of those communities, that means going to

61 [Q419](#)

62 [Q312](#)

63 Women’s Regional Consortium ([PNI0003](#)), p.3

64 Women’s Regional Consortium ([PNI0003](#)), p.3

65 Women’s Regional Consortium ([PNI0003](#)), p.13

66 Women’s Regional Consortium ([PNI0003](#))

67 [Q312](#)

68 [Q312](#)

a paramilitary lender, because they cannot see anywhere else to go. A lot of these women, because of low incomes or poor credit ratings, are forced this way because there is nowhere else.⁶⁹

28. Ms Harding also said that the structure of universal credit was exacerbating vulnerabilities within communities to paramilitary lending:

We have research by the University of Ulster that has said that “Universal Credit was repeatedly described as a driver for illegal lending”. A driver for illegal lending—particularly around the harm caused by the five-week wait, but also by Government deductions from benefits to repay things like advanced payments or historical tax credit debt ... so there is work that can be done by Westminster on universal credit, particularly looking at the five-week wait, which causes debt and food-bank use and which is driving illegal lending.⁷⁰

29. Elaine Crory, Good Relations Co-Ordinator at the Women’s Resource and Development Agency, described the link between a lack of affordable childcare in Northern Ireland and women borrowing from and being exploited by paramilitary groups.⁷¹ She explained that the high cost of childcare meant that women were often at home all day, and attempting to access universal credit.⁷² She said:

If you think about what happens when something goes wrong—when your universal credit can’t meet a debt, when the fridge, the washing machine or even the kettle breaks—what happens? Where does that spare money come from? They have no savings ... The money has to come from somewhere, or there is nowhere to keep their children’s food cold.⁷³

30. Speaking to us at Stormont, Siobhán Harding said that, as a result of borrowing from paramilitary groups, women were becoming involved in criminal activity to repay their debts.⁷⁴ She also cited examples of people being exploited to repay loans “with prescription medication, and having to hand over their benefit books”.⁷⁵ Ms Harding noted anecdotal evidence, too, that paramilitary groups were “running a prostitution ring” and that involvement in this was presented to women as an option to pay off debts accrued.⁷⁶ She emphasised that “hardship and deprivation in local communities allows these paramilitaries an opening” and that these socio-economic conditions were the basis for much paramilitary activity in regard to illegal money lending.⁷⁷

31. The Secretary of State told us that there was a need to look at ways to strengthen communities so that they “can repel advances from paramilitary groups”.⁷⁸ He admitted there was an issue in Northern Ireland in connecting people to credit services:

69 [Q312](#)
70 [Q316](#)
71 [Q316](#)
72 [Q316](#)
73 [Q316](#)
74 [Q285](#)
75 [Q285](#)
76 [Q285](#)
77 [Q299](#)
78 [Q426](#)

Sometimes there is an element of not wanting to go to the Government to get the right level of benefits [...] There is a bit of an issue in general, in Northern Ireland, in terms of connecting people to the services that already exist and making sure they know that they are there. I know that my DWP colleagues are very aware that it is very important in Northern Ireland—like it is elsewhere, but very important in Northern Ireland—to try to address the gap [...] for universal credit.⁷⁹

32. The high cost of living in Northern Ireland has contributed to a ‘cruel storm’ which paramilitary groups are exploiting to target vulnerable individuals. Single mothers in precarious financial situations are being targeted by paramilitary groups engaging in illegal money lending practices. The structure of universal credit, the lack of a childcare strategy, and expense of childcare in Northern Ireland all contribute to the precarious financial situation in which some families find themselves. *The Northern Ireland Office must engage in discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions as soon as possible to improve access to universal credit in Northern Ireland, as well as developing schemes to better connect people to existing credit services. The Government should also engage with a re-established Executive to share best practice towards the development of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland.*

Exclusion of women from the community and voluntary sector

33. We also took evidence on the issue of gatekeeping of funding by paramilitary organisations within vulnerable communities, an issue we return to in Chapter 6. WPG NI said that paramilitary groups often block support to organisations that challenge paramilitary influence, adding that “these organisations are often highly male-dominated, leading to the silencing of women’s voices within the local community, while reinforcing gender divisions”.⁸⁰

34. Naomi Long MLA noted how women are excluded from communities as part of attempts at coercive control of communities by paramilitary groups:

Since 1998, we have seen women increasingly finding it difficult to maintain their positions in those communities, often as peacebuilders and reconcilers, because they are muscled out by people who want to be able to be gatekeepers instead.⁸¹

Women’s Aid NI and WPG NI corroborated this, with WPG NI arguing in 2022 that the problem of women’s exclusion from the community and voluntary sectors had been “further exacerbated by the UK’s refusal to apply the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 to the Northern Ireland conflict”.⁸² It added that the repercussions of not applying UNSCR 1325 could be seen “in the relative lack of women’s involvement in politics and public life more generally”.⁸³

35. The Government’s Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan details the UK’s implementation of this Resolution. Northern Ireland was not referenced in the 2018–22

79 [Q428](#)

80 Women’s Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#)), p.5

81 [Q90](#)

82 Women’s Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#)), p.5

83 Women’s Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#)), p.5

plan, although it was in annual reports on the plan from 2019 onwards. In its 2023–2027 plan, the Government has referenced Northern Ireland again, noting its commitment to “Co-design a Northern Ireland Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls with stakeholders, in pursuance of a mandate from the NI Executive in 2021.”⁸⁴ During summer 2023 the Executive consulted on its Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and foundational Action Plan and said, “Proposals for the EVAWG Strategic Framework and foundational Action Plan are subject to the views of the Executive who will be responsible for final approval.”⁸⁵

36. We are concerned to hear about the gatekeeping of funding and other activity by paramilitary groups which has increasingly excluded women and the community and voluntary sector since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This has implications for the construction of a post-conflict society in Northern Ireland. We are therefore pleased to note that the Government has included Northern Ireland in its latest action plan to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which recognises women’s perspectives, rights and role in relation to peace and security. However, *the Government must set out how its commitment to co-design a strategy on ending violence against women and girls with stakeholders in NI will receive final approval if the Executive remains, or is once again, suspended.*

A public health response

37. The myriad causes and effects of paramilitary activity require a joined-up response, witnesses told us. Naomi Long highlighted the correlation between paramilitary activity, deprivation, mental health issues and high levels of trauma.⁸⁶ She referenced emerging data gathered by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme pointing towards “significant levels of trauma in communities where paramilitary activity is prevalent”.⁸⁷ Ms Long added that the programme was therefore seeking to adopt a trauma-informed and public health approach to tackling the systemic problem of paramilitarism within society in Northern Ireland in order to attempt to address its underlying causes, as well as its worst symptoms.⁸⁸ She described how the harm from paramilitary activity takes a particular form:

It is a pyramid, with smaller numbers of cases of very serious harm, wider numbers of cases of moderate harm and then a wide base of coercive control and what are still quite harmful impacts of paramilitarism in terms of trauma and mental health, but are perhaps much harder to quantify within communities.⁸⁹

38. The Independent Reporting Commission espoused the merits of a public health approach “which treats violence like a disease, seeks to understand its causes, brings expertise and experience to bear from a wide range of relevant disciplines, develops innovative practice to prevent it, evaluates that practice and rolls out learnings elsewhere”.⁹⁰

84 [UK Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan 2023–2027 \(peacewomen.org\)](https://www.peacewomen.org/), p41

85 [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls | The Executive Office \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/), accessed 10 January 2024

86 [Q95](#)

87 [Q95](#)

88 [Q96](#)

89 [Q95](#)

90 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.8

Other contributors endorsed this approach to violence reduction, commenting that it provides a useful conceptual framework to join and connect services more effectively.⁹¹ The PSNI was one of those explaining that a purely criminal justice response to paramilitary activity would fail to address its underlying causes:

With the crime types that we are talking about here in public space, and the harm that is committed in people's homes, the public health approach has to be the one we take. To try to arrest or police our way out of this simply will not tackle the causation factors. Some of those are deprivation and the mental health issues that we are seeing an increase in, all of which is preyed upon by these groups.⁹²

39. The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme has implemented a 'public health' approach to violence reduction,⁹³ and called for the adoption across all crime types of this approach and a government-wide commitment to trauma-informed practice.⁹⁴ It defines this as giving due consideration "to the impact that trauma has on victims of paramilitarism, as well as those who help and support them".⁹⁵ The Programme told us in August 2022 that emerging data and evidence gathered in 2021–22 "confirmed the findings of other studies that point to significant levels of trauma in communities where paramilitary activity is prevalent, and among those who are receiving or seeking support from the Programme".⁹⁶ The Programme has therefore argued that a system-wide approach to a public health approach to violence reduction would make it "easier to identify gaps and duplication when it comes to interventions and [ensure] a more effective use of public funds".⁹⁷

40. There is a correlation between paramilitary activity, deprivation, mental health issues and trauma. We therefore support the trauma-informed and public health approach of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. *The Government must collaborate with the Executive to introduce forthwith a system-wide and Government-wide commitment to trauma-informed practice.*

91 See for example: [Q14](#), [Q15](#), [Q270](#)

92 [Q51](#)

93 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.5

94 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.5

95 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.5

96 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.5

97 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.5

4 Paramilitary activity as child criminal exploitation and modern slavery

41. Historically, paramilitary activity has been described using language such as ‘punishment beatings’ and “punishment shootings”.⁹⁸ During our inquiry, we heard about the importance, however, of ensuring that discussions on the abuse and exploitation perpetuated by paramilitary groups take place using the language of safeguarding.⁹⁹ The then Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma explained that “the discourse around paramilitary-style attacks should aim to dispel the narrative that children or adults deserve such violence by using clear and consistent language of assault and violence”.¹⁰⁰ StopAttacks Forum told us it was important to avoid using language which implies there is a degree of justice or due process in the violence carried out by paramilitary groups.¹⁰¹

42. The cross-party Political Advisory Group to the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme has also considered the issue of language.¹⁰² Naomi Long MLA, a member of that group, emphasised how the use of safeguarding language could help to shift the lens through which society perceives acts of paramilitary violence:

We know, for example, that when we started talking about under-18-year-olds being attacked as child abuse, the number of those attacks on under-18-year-olds dropped dramatically. There may be a badge of honour for an organised criminal in going to prison as a paramilitary or organised crime gang boss ... There is not as a child abuser.¹⁰³

However, the Democratic Unionist Party’s representatives on the Political Advisory Group expressed reservations about unilaterally moving away from the current language. They cited concerns set out in paragraph 68 of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme Review, which stated:

There are also practical considerations including how to ensure that there are still distinct measures of harm caused by violence linked to paramilitary groups that would be lost if they were grouped in with other forms of violent assault on a person.¹⁰⁴

Koulla Yiasouma also noted the significance of the language used to refer to gangs exploiting children and young people,¹⁰⁵ adding that “if we use the language of safeguarding and child protection, it will flow that these children are victims of exploitative adults”.¹⁰⁶

98 [Q89](#)

99 See for example: [Q15](#), [PNI0016](#), [Q326](#).

100 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People ([PNI0016](#))

101 [Q326](#)

102 [Q89](#)

103 [Q89](#)

104 [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An interim review and proposed next steps for delivery of the Executive Action Plan](#), p.56-57

105 [Q115](#)

106 [Q117](#)

Child Criminal Exploitation

43. In 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child set out concerns that children in Northern Ireland “face violence, including shootings, carried out by non-State actors involved in paramilitary-style attacks, and recruitment by such non-State actors”.¹⁰⁷ The Committee called on the state to take “immediate and effective measures” to protect children from exploitation by paramilitary groups.¹⁰⁸

44. Guidance on safeguarding children in Northern Ireland from the NI Department of Health recognises that Northern Ireland is a post-conflict society, and states that in this context “children may also be abused or exploited by adults who hold power within their communities, where fear is used to coerce the child or young person into compliance”.¹⁰⁹ Serious concerns were raised in August 2021 by the then NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, however, about how well the Northern Ireland framework for safeguarding children and young people was protecting those abused by paramilitary or organised crime gangs.¹¹⁰ In evidence to us, NICCY, the organisation headed by the commissioner, criticised the guidance for placing such threats within [the] existing child protection framework of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect “which does not allow for exploitation by groups and gangs in the context of the legacy of the conflict to be explored”.¹¹¹ It stated that, in its view, a similar limitation is apparent in guidance issued by the Health and Social Care Board and PSNI on Trafficking and Modern Slavery.¹¹²

45. Dr Siobhán McAlister, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast called for public agency responses in Northern Ireland to redefine the experiences that children and young people are subjected to by paramilitary groups.¹¹³ She argued that ‘child criminal exploitation’ should replace the term ‘recruitment’, while paramilitary-style attacks should be framed as child abuse.¹¹⁴ Indeed, NICCY criticised the aforementioned guidance documents on safeguarding children and on Trafficking and Modern Slavery in Northern Ireland for not taking into account Home Office guidance that “the involvement of young people in criminal activities is Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), a form of modern slavery”.¹¹⁵ Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is recognised, and addressed, by Section 3(6) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Therefore, whilst there is clear merit in a joined-up approach across the UK, as well as the need for a statutory definition, it is also the case that powers do currently exist to tackle this scourge. Subsequently, the Committee contends that there should be a sustained focus on better enforcement to ensure child victims who are subjected to force, threats, abduction, coercion, fraud or deception designed to induce them to engage in crime are protected. It is alarming that the most recent inspection of

107 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), July 2016, p.11

108 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), July 2016, p.11

109 NI Department of Health, [Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland](#), 29 August 2017, p.51-52

110 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Press Release, [NI Children Must be Better Protected from Criminal Gang Abuse](#), 12 August 2021

111 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (PNI0016), p.5

112 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (PNI0016), p.5

113 [Q15](#)

114 [Q15](#)

115 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (PNI0016), p.5

the PSNI by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services found that the Service should improve its understanding of CCE as there wrongly remains a perception that the exploitation of children for a criminal purpose isn't a significant issue in Northern Ireland.

46. Home Office guidance notes that there is no statutory definition of CCE but states that it:

occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.¹¹⁶

NICCY argued that CCE is perpetuated by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and criticised a lack of due attention to the phenomenon:

While exploitation and slavery are associated with the trafficking of children or adults from other countries or with particular forms of abuse, many of the dynamics of exploitation, the harms to children and the range of activities involved are mirrored in the context of paramilitary or criminal groups operating in communities. For instance, 'County Lines' is recognised as a form of CCE with UK referrals for child victims of modern slavery increasing significantly directly due to such cases in England now following associated referral procedures (through the National Referral Mechanism). The UK Independent AntiSlavery Commissioner has noted the low referral rates for children in NI and has stated that statutory agencies view that this is not a significant issue here. This is not a perspective shared by the Commissioner and others.¹¹⁷

47. NICCY issued advice in 2021 calling on the NI Departments of Health and of Justice to implement a number of recommendations, embedded in safeguarding processes, with the aim of forming a "unified strategic response to protect children from harm".¹¹⁸ Work on this was progressed by the Child Protection Senior Officials Group. However, in February 2023 NICCY criticised the time taken to reform processes in the child protection system.¹¹⁹ Meghan Phair, the Journey to Empowerment Programme Co-ordinator at Invisible Traffick, and a member of the StopAttacks Forum, also called for a strategic plan to tackle, and prosecute, child criminal exploitation by paramilitary groups and for an agreed definition of child criminal exploitation.¹²⁰ A report from Dr Colm Walsh into young people's perceptions and experiences of CCE in Northern Ireland also found that

116 Home Office, [Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance for England and Wales and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland](#), June 2022, p.75

117 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (PNI0016), p.5

118 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Press Release, [Multi-agency approach needed to combat the abuse and exploitation of young people by criminal gangs](#), 23 February 2023; see also: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Press Release, [NI Children Must be Better Protected from Criminal Gang Abuse](#), 12 August 2021

119 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Press Release, [Multi-agency approach needed to combat the abuse and exploitation of young people by criminal gangs](#), 23 February 2023

120 [Q343](#)

the context of CCE was different in NI from other parts of the UK and from Ireland.¹²¹ Dr Walsh’s research highlighted that “unlike organised crime networks in other areas, the potential reach of paramilitary and organised crime structures in Northern Ireland is wider”, as well as “broader in Northern Ireland, with influence extending into social and cultural life”.¹²² Dr Walsh argued that this has implications for how CCE is understood in Northern Ireland and consequently how responses both to reduce young people’s exposure to it and to mitigate its effects are designed.¹²³ Dominic Wilson, Director General at the Northern Ireland Office, agreed that “the harm” caused by some paramilitary activity “is child abuse, and we should call it out for what it is”.¹²⁴ The Senior Officials Group is working on the recommendations in Dr Walsh’s report on developing a system response to CCE.¹²⁵

48. To counter the risk and reality of people romanticising paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that public agencies and wider civic society use language rooted in safeguarding and child protection when describing the activities of these criminal gangs which include the abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation, of children and young people. *The Government, or the Executive when it returns, must undertake an audit of the extent to which the Northern Ireland framework for safeguarding children and young people protects those abused by paramilitary or organised crime gangs. This should include an assessment of the extent to which the PSNI and other crime agencies currently utilise the powers contained in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 with respect to the exploitation of children. The Government must work with the Executive, when it is established, to develop an integrated strategy to protect children and young people from the harm perpetuated by these groups. In particular, the Government must work with the NI Department of Justice as soon as possible to agree a definition for Child Criminal Exploitation which takes account of current Home Office guidance.*

Prosecution Rates

49. Alongside evidence about the significance of developing strategies to better define and tackle child criminal exploitation by paramilitary groups, we also heard how important it was to prosecute those exploiting children, young people and vulnerable individuals.¹²⁶ Contributors to the inquiry said that clearance rates for so-called paramilitary-style attacks and the failure of the criminal justice system to prosecute people carrying out assaults on children and young people for the crime of child abuse was contributing to a societal perception that paramilitarism is too arduous to tackle.¹²⁷ Witnesses explained that prosecutions were important to combat a culture of impunity in which paramilitary

121 [From Contextual to Criminal Harm: Young People’s Perceptions and Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation \(CCE\) in Northern Ireland](#), Dr Colm Walsh, December 2022, p.19

122 [From Contextual to Criminal Harm: Young People’s Perceptions and Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation \(CCE\) in Northern Ireland](#), Dr Colm Walsh, December 2022, p.19

123 [From Contextual to Criminal Harm: Young People’s Perceptions and Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation \(CCE\) in Northern Ireland](#), Dr Colm Walsh, December 2022, p.19

124 [Q435](#)

125 [Independent Reporting Commission Sixth Report, HC 285, December 2023](#), p44

126 See, for example: [Q118](#), [Q135](#), [Q139](#), [Q343](#), [PNI0016](#) and [PNI0017](#)

127 [Q344](#)

groups currently operate. Paul Smyth, Executive Director of Politics in Action, and a member of the Stop Attacks Forum, said that the prosecution of these crimes as child abuse would be a “game changer”.¹²⁸

50. NICCY told us that low prosecution rates and fear act as barriers to reporting paramilitary-style attacks.¹²⁹ The organisation referenced statistics showing that “of 317 reported paramilitary-style attacks between 2013 and 2016, formal charges or court summons were brought in only 3% of cases”.¹³⁰ The then Commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma, told us that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was monitoring this low level of prosecutions, following its report in 2016.¹³¹ She explained that the failure of the PSNI to arrest, and the NI Public Prosecution Service to prosecute, people for crimes against children and young people was complicated by the lack of evidence they receive, noting that people lacked confidence to go to the police, and concluding that the existing measures the PSNI were taking were insufficient.¹³² Paul Smyth echoed these concerns, telling us that police processes for investigating instances of paramilitary-style assaults could be more effective and that responses to gathering intelligence following assaults should be more creative. He noted that people will not speak to the police on their doorstep for fear of reprisal in the local community and suggested that more resources should be invested in frontline voluntary services.¹³³

51. We heard that low prosecution rates for assaults carried out against vulnerable individuals not only lead to disillusionment with law enforcement and criminal justice systems in communities but, paradoxically, have the malicious effect of imbuing paramilitary groups with a veneer of legitimacy. Paul Smyth remarked that “at the community level, people go to the paramilitaries because they see the police—they blame it on them, but it is actually the whole criminal justice system—as being pretty ineffective”.¹³⁴ Indeed, research by Queen’s University Belfast has identified that communities perceive “the criminal justice system to be ineffective or inefficient”.¹³⁵ In 2018, academics found that young people in Northern Ireland felt this could explain the continued presence and support of paramilitary groups.¹³⁶

52. Koulla Yiasouma told us that a safeguarding response to paramilitary activity had to be combined with an effective criminal justice response to disrupt and prosecute perpetrators:

There has to be criminal justice to bring these groomers, these exploiters and these armed groups to book, to pursue them, to prosecute them and to disrupt them—all those things. You cannot do one without the other.¹³⁷

128 [Q338](#)

129 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People ([PNI0016](#)), p.7

130 Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People ([PNI0016](#)), p.7

131 [Q135](#)

132 [Q135](#)

133 [Q344](#)

134 [Q344](#)

135 McAlister, S., Dwyer, C., & Carr, N., [Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland](#), Centre for Children’s Rights Research Findings, October 2018, p.6

136 McAlister, S., Dwyer, C., & Carr, N., [Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland](#), Centre for Children’s Rights Research Findings, October 2018, p.6

137 [Q118](#)

Naomi Long MLA acknowledged that a slow and ineffective criminal justice system could be exploited by paramilitary groups:

There are risks inherent in a slow justice system. The first is that, if the justice system is seen to be unresponsive at the point of contact, people will then seek out vigilante justice. There is a huge risk that the paramilitaries will step into that space and try to justify their continued existence by purporting to be helpful in the community. Good police response, responsive neighbourhood policing and good support for communities is crucial to eliminate that risk.¹³⁸

53. Low prosecution rates for those who commit violent crime can act as a barrier to reporting the crimes of paramilitary groups and serve to perpetuate the impunity with which these groups act. An effective criminal justice system able to identify perpetrators of paramilitary violence and bring them to justice is of paramount importance. *The Government must set out how it plans to support the Executive in 2024 to improve clearance rates for paramilitary-style attacks, and work with the NI Department of Justice to embed a safeguarding approach to paramilitary activity to enable its prosecution as coercion, modern slavery and child criminal exploitation.*

Human Trafficking and the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

54. Exploitation of young people in Northern Ireland can also include human trafficking. We heard disturbing evidence that young people were being exploited to traffic drugs through and into Northern Ireland, mirroring similar ‘county lines’ patterns in Great Britain.¹³⁹ Megan Phair, from the NI charity Invisible Traffick, which educates children and young people on the forms and effects of human trafficking and modern slavery, claimed that in some instances young people were being raped as part of coercive control, referencing experiences of trafficking in Britain:

The same happens within county lines structures in mainland UK with young people being forced to smuggle drugs inside of them. They are being sexually exploited not only through rape, power and control but also through putting drugs inside their body, which is very alarming. That will be happening in Northern Ireland as well.¹⁴⁰

She called for greater utilisation of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) instead of children and young people being processed through the criminal justice system.¹⁴¹ The NRM is a framework that has been developed to identify and refer potential victims of modern slavery and ensure that they receive the appropriate support.¹⁴² Elaborating on its underuse in Northern Ireland, she said:

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

138 [Q100](#)

139 [Q330](#)

140 [Q352](#)

141 [Q351](#)

142 Home Office, [National referral mechanism guidance: adult \(Northern Ireland and Scotland\)](#), 1 July 2023

for that purpose. If we look at the stats compared to England, Wales and Scotland, there are over 5,000 young people in the NRM this past year and 67 of them are based in Northern Ireland, but only one is from Northern Ireland.¹⁴³

55. Megan Phair contended that within social services in Northern Ireland there was a lack of awareness as to what the NRM is and how to process a referral:

We need to have a general awareness around what human trafficking and exploitation are, and to train professionals—our legal system, the prosecution service; all these different professionals—to recognise how to safeguard these young people. How do we see this as a welfare issue and a health and social care issue rather than a criminal justice issue, which a lot of the time it is?¹⁴⁴

We relayed these concerns about the lack of awareness and use of the NRM in Northern Ireland to the Home Office in February 2023.¹⁴⁵ In response, the Home Office stated that it was unable to comment on this issue in relation to Northern Ireland, as support for modern slavery victims is devolved.¹⁴⁶

56. We are concerned about the lack of use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in NI. The NRM is a tool for public agencies to provide a strategic safeguarding response to paramilitary activity. *While we acknowledge that support for modern slavery victims is devolved, we recommend that forthwith the Government share good practice with the Executive on improving awareness and use of the NRM among NI welfare agencies, social services and those in the criminal justice system.*

143 [Q343](#)

144 [Q350](#)

145 [Correspondence to the Minister for Immigration, relating to modern slavery in Northern Ireland](#), 28 February 2023

146 [Correspondence from the Minister for Immigration, relating to modern slavery in Northern Ireland](#), 9 June 2023

5 Coordination to tackle paramilitary and terrorist activity

57. Responsibilities for tackling Northern Ireland-related terrorism and paramilitary activity are divided between the UK Government and the NI Executive. As the PSNI explained, “the overall responsibility for national security and Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) remains with the UK Government and the Police Service of Northern Ireland works collaboratively with the Government, intelligence agencies and other statutory partners”.¹⁴⁷ The response to wider paramilitary activity and organised crime is, in contrast, the responsibility of the devolved Northern Ireland Executive Office.¹⁴⁸ The PSNI added that “both are integral to bringing about an end to the threat and harm posed to local communities, but for the purposes of delivery, separate mechanisms and structures are in place”.¹⁴⁹

58. We took evidence on the links between threats from Northern Ireland-related terrorism and paramilitarism. When he was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis MP explained:

The threat and harm from Northern Ireland related terrorism is inextricably linked to the enduring problem of paramilitarism in a wider context of organised crime. The lines are often blurred between those involved in terrorist activity, and in other forms of paramilitary activity and organised crime.¹⁵⁰

He stressed the need for “a whole of system response” to those engaged in terrorism, paramilitary activity and organised crime, declaring:

None of these threats can be dealt with sustainably in isolation. A whole of system response that ensures each entity plays its part in working with communities and individuals around the single purpose of ensuring safer communities by removing the space for those engaged in terrorism, paramilitary activity, and organised crime to recruit or act in Northern Ireland is required.¹⁵¹

59. He further added that the Government had worked with the Northern Ireland Executive to support the development of a “framework for a collaborative and mutually reinforcing approach to tackling terrorism, paramilitary activity, and organised crime”.¹⁵² Indeed, Action C8 of the ‘Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality And Organised Crime’ states that “the UK Government, the Executive and law enforcement agencies, working with their partners in Ireland, should ensure that tackling organised criminal activity is an integral part of their efforts to deal with Northern Ireland related terrorism”.¹⁵³

147 Police Service of Northern Ireland (PNI0023), p.5

148 Police Service of Northern Ireland (PNI0023), p.5

149 Police Service of Northern Ireland (PNI0023), p.5

150 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office (PNI022), p.1

151 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office (PNI022), p.1

152 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office (PNI022), p.2

153 NI Department of Justice, [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime Action Plan](#), 19 July 2016, p.18

60. Since February 2022, however, Northern Ireland’s political institutions have been suspended. The PSNI highlighted the challenges that the lack of a functioning Executive and political uncertainty create in tackling paramilitarism, describing them as an “impediment”.¹⁵⁴ In late 2022, the current Secretary of State commented that “the lack of a functioning Executive inhibits Northern Ireland Departments from taking a strategic, cross-cutting approach to tackling paramilitarism in partnership with the PSNI and the wider public sector”.¹⁵⁵ The IRC also emphasised how “the fractured nature of politics” in Northern Ireland, and numerous suspensions of the Executive and Assembly, have mitigated “against the kind of sustained, cross-party policy interventions and approaches that are needed to address the range of factors involved in continued paramilitarism”.¹⁵⁶

61. The suspension of the political institutions in Northern Ireland has also created an uncertain funding environment. The PSNI added that “the lack of devolved ministers also creates practical challenges in relation to the advancement of certain projects and initiatives, as well as budgetary certainty”.¹⁵⁷

62. The continued presence of paramilitary groups, 25 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, represents a festering wound on society in Northern Ireland. Given the delineation of responsibilities between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive in tackling terrorist and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, the lack of an Executive impedes attempts to develop a collaborative and mutually reinforcing approach to tackling terrorism, paramilitary activity, and organised crime. The lack of an Executive, and the lack of sustainable funding arrangements for public services, also creates an uncertain environment for organisations providing vital services such as youth and educational services.

Programme for Government

63. The New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement included a proposal that tackling paramilitarism become a dedicated outcome in the Programme for Government of the next Executive.¹⁵⁸ The IRC cited this and called for its implementation.¹⁵⁹ Between the return of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland in January 2020 and their suspension in 2022, a Programme for Government was not agreed. Contributors told us that the inclusion of this commitment in any future Programme for Government would be an important step.¹⁶⁰ The IRC stated:

The challenges facing many of these communities were generations in the making, pre-dating the Troubles. As a consequence, addressing them requires a sustained, joined-up and well-resourced approach with a long-term commitment [...] That is why we think it is essential that tackling paramilitarism becomes a dedicated outcome in the Programme for Government, becomes part of the business as usual of all relevant

154 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#)), p.25

155 [Secretary of State for Northern Ireland’s Written Ministerial Statement](#) on the Fifth Report of the Independent Reporting Commission, 7 December 2022

156 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.3

157 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#)), p.26

158 Annex D: Programme for Government, [New Decade, New Approach](#), p.26

159 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.8

160 See for example: Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office ([PNI022](#)), Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)).

departments and agencies, and that linked socioeconomic issues are progressed through an ambitious Programme for Government at the same time.¹⁶¹

The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme concurred that as “paramilitarism is a vast, complex, intergenerational problem” the work to tackle it “needs to be underpinned by a whole of government, whole of society approach, and as a priority in the Programme for Government”.¹⁶² In turn, the Northern Ireland Office, in written evidence to us, argued that “political leadership in Northern Ireland will be key to ending the scourge of paramilitarism”.¹⁶³ The NIO also emphasised the importance of there being “a strong, stable, effective and accountable Executive that enables a whole-of-government response to paramilitarism through the programme for government”.¹⁶⁴

64. Tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland requires a whole of Government approach. While we are mindful that it is ultimately a matter for any newly formed Executive to decide its priorities for government, we urge the next administration in Northern Ireland to ensure that the commitment set out in New Decade, New Approach to ending the harm done by paramilitarism is a strategic priority in an agreed Programme for Government.

National security: scope

65. Some contributors to our inquiry told us that, in the context of the continuing presence of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, the current scope of national security should be reviewed. In a report covering August 2020 to July 2021, Prof. Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007, said that the threat level assessment in Northern Ireland was “largely based on the activities of dissident republican (DR) groups who see violence and attacks on the police and state agents and agencies as a legitimate means to achieve their political goals”.¹⁶⁵ She added:

Even though loyalist paramilitaries remain active, until now, they have not targeted state agencies. Therefore they do not currently meet these criteria and their levels of activity do not contribute to the assessment of threat in Northern Ireland.¹⁶⁶

Professor Breen-Smyth outlined her frustrations with the scope of national security, commenting:

Currently, the definition rests on the idea that it is only threats to democracy and to the state that count as national security threats, which means that a lot of the things we have been talking about here today do not constitute national security threats. That means our secret intelligence services are

161 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.8

162 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.9

163 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office ([PNI022](#)), p.5

164 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at Northern Ireland Office ([PNI022](#)), p.5

165 [Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#), Fourteenth Report, 1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021, June 2022, p.23

166 [Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#), Fourteenth Report, 1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021, June 2022, p.23

not pointed at them [...] That means the kind of joint working you see in relation to dissident republicans, who are deemed to be a national security threat, does not happen with quite a lot of the loyalist groups.¹⁶⁷

Embellishing her view on the need to broaden the scope, Professor Breen-Smyth said:

Say you live in a housing estate in Northern Ireland that is polluted by paramilitarism, you have drug dealing going on and your children are scared to go out of the front door. If you are a taxpayer to the Government, you are entitled to expect the Government to secure you and your family's safety [...] We really do need to look at this much more broadly.¹⁶⁸

66. She argued that broadening the scope would facilitate more “joint working” between the PSNI and security and intelligence agencies to tackle paramilitarism.¹⁶⁹ The PSNI has also proposed that there may be scope for more informal joined-up working between agencies working to tackle paramilitary activity and those working within the Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) context, referencing significant areas of overlap, particularly in the prevention, early intervention and resilience building strands of this work.¹⁷⁰

67. In June 2022, in written evidence to us, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland commented on the progress made on reducing terrorist activity in Northern Ireland. He referred to collaboration already taking place between law enforcement and intelligence agencies in this regard, adding:

Ongoing activity to suppress the threat remains essential but a further sustainable reduction in the threat and harm can only be achieved through a wider programme of interventions that reduce vulnerability to involvement in terrorism, address the intent behind terrorist activity, reduce the capability of groups involved in terrorism, and build resilience in communities to reject all forms of paramilitary and criminal activity.¹⁷¹

Other contributors informed us that, based on discussions with law enforcement and intelligence services, they did not currently see a need to broaden the scope. Dominic Wilson, Director General of the Northern Ireland Office, told us that there is “no set definition” of national security, adding that:

the UK Government periodically produce a national security strategy. Every time they do, it differs in scope to some degree. For the purposes of this conversation, though, the current view of national security is that it covers a range of activities, from terrorism through to serious organised crime. There is nothing in the definition space that causes a problem. Individual organisations have both statutory and operational responsibilities. The trick is probably in how they match their resources and work together.¹⁷²

167 [Q211](#)

168 [Q212](#)

169 [Q214](#)

170 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#)), p.11

171 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office ([PNI0022](#)), p.1

172 [Q454](#)

Monica McWilliams, one of the Commissioners at the IRC, agreed, stating that on the basis of meetings the Commission had held with policing and security services, a broadening of the scope of national security was not necessary as law enforcement and security agencies had available all the requisite intelligence tools to tackle paramilitary activity.¹⁷³

68. There is a live debate as to whether the current scope of national security, as it relates to Northern Ireland, should be revised to include threats other than those to democracy and the state, such as paramilitary activity like drug dealing, extortion and murder, to enable greater joint working between law enforcement agencies in Northern Ireland and security and intelligence services where appropriate. Some think it should be expanded; others believe that the current scope is sufficient to enable collaboration. We recommend that the Government undertake an updated analysis of paramilitary activity and organised crime in Northern Ireland when determining the scope of national security for its next national security strategy to ensure that all relevant groups and activities are caught within its ambit.

6 Funding to tackle paramilitarism

69. There are a number of initiatives to tackle paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, with the Department for Justice describing investment in the area as a “congested funding space”.¹⁷⁴ The bulk of UK Government spending arises from its commitments made in the Fresh Start Agreement and resultant initiatives to implement the agreement, as well as to provide support to the PSNI to counter terrorism in Northern Ireland.¹⁷⁵

70. We heard that the Fresh Start Agreement constituted “a conscious acknowledgement that a far-reaching and comprehensive framework was required to address the challenging and intractable issues of paramilitary control in Northern Ireland”.¹⁷⁶ Contributors told us that investment stemming from the agreement had resulted in progress being made in efforts to reduce paramilitary activity and address some of its causes and effects.¹⁷⁷ However, we also heard concerns over the short-term nature of funding provided to schemes which were aimed at addressing paramilitarism, with some contributors arguing that this led to a tendency towards “short-term thinking”.¹⁷⁸ Regardless of their views on current funding arrangements, contributors to our inquiry repeatedly stressed the need for sustained, multi-year funding settlements. Paul Smyth summarised this view, stating that paramilitarism “is a very stubborn, wicked problem that is going to take us a long time to resolve”.¹⁷⁹ The need for the general funding of for example education, training opportunities, youth work, housing and mental health, was also recognised by some contributors as crucial to providing a societal environment to divert young people becoming exploited by paramilitary groups.

The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme

71. The NI’s Executive Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (TPP) was established to undertake the 38 commitments in the Executive Action Plan to be delivered by the Northern Ireland Executive as part of efforts to tackle paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.¹⁸⁰ A comprehensive review of the Programme took place in 2020, leading to a new phase of the Programme (Phase 2) that started in April 2021. The Programme is currently funded until 2024,¹⁸¹ while the UK Government has announced funding of £3 million in 2024–25 to extend the Programme, in addition to the £5 million announced in the 2021 Spending Review.¹⁸² The TPP provides support to people and communities across Northern Ireland who are vulnerable to paramilitary influence. It focuses on stopping current paramilitary activity as well as “putting in place early interventions to ensure future generations are not exploited or traumatised through paramilitary coercion, control and violence”.¹⁸³

174 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#))

175 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office ([PNI0022](#)), p.3

176 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#))

177 [Q264](#)

178 [Q336](#)

179 [Q336](#)

180 [Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An interim review and proposed next steps for delivery of the Executive Action Plan](#), p.8

181 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.2

182 [Correspondence from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, relating to Non-Barnett funding for Northern Ireland in Budget 2023](#), 18 April 2023

183 Northern Ireland Executive, [Executive programme for tackling paramilitary activity and organised crime](#)

72. The Programme invested approximately £11.5m across nearly 80 projects in the financial year 2022–23.¹⁸⁴ Those projects are delivered through a network of seven NI Civil Service (NICS) Departments, 22 statutory agencies, over 50 public sector and 180 community/voluntary sector organisations.¹⁸⁵ The Programme encompasses largely three types of project:

- Primary interventions: projects designed to prevent harm before it occurs.
- Secondary Interventions: projects that deal with harm immediately—as it is happening—and which help to stabilise the situation and prevent it worsening.
- Tertiary Interventions: projects designed to minimise the long-term impact of paramilitarism and organised crime and prevent further victimisation.¹⁸⁶

73. The IRC told us that since the Fresh Start Agreement “a whole new infrastructure has been put in place to tackle paramilitarism, involving a wide range of measures and initiatives which are now beginning to gain real traction”.¹⁸⁷ Professor Breen-Smyth said that “the key programmes are concentrated in a small number of selected geographic areas, based on research indicating areas where criminality linked to paramilitarism is concentrated”.¹⁸⁸ The Communities in Transition (CiT) initiative is one scheme funded by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. It aims to support eight geographic areas where there has been a history of paramilitary activity and coercive control to transition into communities where paramilitary activity will no longer play a role.¹⁸⁹ Professor Breen-Smyth argued for the extension of the scheme into other areas of Northern Ireland:

Although there are initiatives that can be availed of throughout Northern Ireland, in general, these schemes are targeted at priority areas. Other communities that have been blighted by paramilitarism, including some of the areas I visited this year such as parts of North Antrim, have not benefited from this scheme. The extension of this work into other areas of need would be beneficial.¹⁹⁰

She added that the law enforcement response in areas outside of the CiT scheme is not always accompanied by the same support for individual and community transition, commenting:

The importance of clear and visible signposts to an accessible path to transition in all areas where paramilitarism exists cannot be overemphasised. As we

184 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.2

185 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.2

186 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.3

187 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.4

188 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.25

189 The Executive Office, [Communities in Transition – Background](#); These eight areas are: North Down (Kilcooley & Rathgill); West Belfast (Lower Falls, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Upper Springfield, Turf Lodge and Ballymurphy); East Belfast (The Mount and Ballymacarrett); Shankill; Derry/Londonderry (Brandywell and Creggan); Carrickfergus and Larne (Antiville and Kilwaughter in Larne, Northland and Castlemara in Carrickfergus); North Belfast (New Lodge and Ardoyne); and Lurgan (Drumgask and Kilwilkie)

190 [Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#), Fourteenth Report, 1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021, June 2022, p.27

know all too well and to our cost in Northern Ireland, law enforcement alone cannot solve the problem of paramilitarism, indeed it risks further radicalisation and community alienation.¹⁹¹

74. The IRC told us that “financial support for the programmes and initiatives” stemming from the Fresh Start Agreement “should be maintained to the full” and “be given a high priority in the present challenging fiscal climate”.¹⁹² Throughout the inquiry, we heard calls for the long-term funding of services aimed at addressing paramilitarism. During a visit to Northern Ireland, we heard concerns that short-term funding results in a focus on crisis interventions rather than systemic change. The importance of multiannual funding grants was emphasised repeatedly to us. For example, Mark Dennison, Stay Onside Manager and Fresh Start Through Sport Co-ordinator for the Irish Football Association, noted that currently the funding is “short-term funding for long-term solutions”.¹⁹³ He added that multi-year settlements would be helpful in order to improve planning.¹⁹⁴

75. Adele Brown, Director of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, told us that the programme could not be delivered without continued funding from the UK Government.¹⁹⁵ She outlined how:

the programme is making some really good inroads into what is a very complex problem. Without that funding and without the ability to mainstream some of the really good work that we are seeing in the programme, we are at risk of losing some of the progress that we have made.¹⁹⁶

76. In the 2023 Spring Budget, the Government announced additional non-Barnett funding for Northern Ireland, which included £3 million to extend the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme.¹⁹⁷ HM Treasury informed us that this funding is for the year 2024/25 and additional to the £5 million announced by the Government for 2024/25 in the 2021 Spending Review, bringing the total up to its previous levels of funding for 2021–24 of £8million per year.¹⁹⁸ However, funding from the Executive for 2024/25 has yet to be finalised. We heard on our visit to Northern Ireland that it may require Ministers to be in place in a restored Executive to sign off the funding. As part of its commitments in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, the Government said it would continue to “provide funding to ensure the work of the Programme to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime can continue and redouble efforts to address commitments arising from the Fresh Start Panel Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland.”¹⁹⁹

77. We welcome the announcement in the 2023 Budget of an additional £3 million for 2024/25 to extend the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme in Northern Ireland. The Programme is carrying out vital work to develop strategies to tackle paramilitarism

191 [Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#), Fourteenth Report, 1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021, June 2022, p.75

192 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.9

193 [Q143](#)

194 [Q143](#)

195 [Q102](#)

196 [Q102](#)

197 [Hansard, Vol. 729, Col.838, 15 March 2023](#)

198 [Correspondence from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, relating to Non-Barnett funding for Northern Ireland in Budget 2023, 18 April 2023](#)

199 [New Decade, New Approach](#), p.48-49

systematically. Paramilitarism is a long-term problem which requires sustained funding. As part of discussions to extend the Programme, the Government must extend the multi-year funding period for Phase Three to five years rather than the three years for which each phase is currently funded. A longer period for Phase Three would provide a more sustainable base for investment in, and development of, projects to tackle paramilitary activity. Should it not be possible for Executive officials to allocate funding for the 2024–25 financial year, due to limitations on their remit, the Government must ensure that the money allocated to the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme for 2024–25 is at least maintained in real terms at its current level of £8 million from the Government and £8 million from the Executive.

PSNI budget

78. In February 2023, the then Chief Constable of the PSNI, Simon Byrne, set out the “profound impact” of the “challenging budgetary position” that the Service was facing. He noted that “it should not be lost on policy makers that we are an armed service with a substantial terrorist threat to harm or attack our colleagues”.²⁰⁰ In a letter to us, the PSNI summarised the resourcing issues it faced, explaining that:

we envisage an operating shortfall of some £80m in the current financial year, £106m next year and £132m in 2024–25. Financial pressures have increased with higher pay awards than anticipated, increased fuel and utility costs and rising inflation.

The PSNI also noted the published commitment in New Decade New approach (NDNA) to grow the Police Service of Northern Ireland to 7,500 Police Officers, contrasting this with an expected reduction in numbers to 6,193 by 2024–25, while officer numbers across England and Wales are due to increase by 20,000.²⁰¹

These observations were made before the attack on DCI John Caldwell, who was shot on 22 February 2023 when he returned to his car after coaching a children’s football training session in Omagh. In February, the PSNI told us that as a result of the first round of budgetary cuts, by March reductions would include:

- 75 fewer neighbourhood police officers.
- 96 fewer detectives investigating murder, terrorism, drugs and organised crime.
- 97 fewer officers in our Operational Support Department. This includes Roads Policing and specialist search and public order teams of the Tactical Support Groups (TSGs).
- 115 fewer police staff across a range of roles.²⁰²

The PSNI concluded that the Service “will be smaller, less visible, accessible and responsive ... investigations will slow down, intelligence gathering [will be] reduced and

200 NI Policing Board, [Chief Constable’s Report to the Northern Ireland Policing Board](#), 2 February 2023, p.3

201 [Correspondence from the PSNI relating to the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland inquiry](#), 1 February 2023

202 [Correspondence from the PSNI relating to the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland inquiry](#), 1 February 2023

the neighbourhood function will shrink”.²⁰³ The Service cautioned that the resourcing challenges could result in a need to prioritise core law enforcement initiatives “over other important prevention and early intervention work which is crucial for longer-term sustainable outcomes in this area”.²⁰⁴ We heard that neighbourhood policing was particularly important to embedding systematic responses to paramilitarism, with Commissioner John McBurney of the IRC commenting that “if neighbourhood policing is significantly cut back, it will be very damaging to the entire endeavour”.²⁰⁵

79. Duncan Morrow, Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University, emphasised to us the need to develop good neighbourhood policing responses to paramilitarism, observing that “there is change happening in the PSNI at the moment around neighbourhood policing”.²⁰⁶ But he told us that the development of collaborative models between the community and policing had the potential to evolve.²⁰⁷ PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Mark McEwan stressed that policing alone could not solve the issue of paramilitarism, highlighting the importance of partnerships between policing and communities in Northern Ireland.²⁰⁸ He commented:

When it comes to neighbourhood policing and the community safety element of community policing, of course we have a leading role within that, but we are one seat at the table.²⁰⁹

80. The PSNI notified us in April 2023 that officer numbers are expected to fall to 6,219 by March 2025.²¹⁰ In June 2023 the Service updated us, after receiving its 2023–24 budget allocation from the Department of Justice. Pamela McCreedy, Chief Operating Officer, PSNI told us that the Service’s budget for 2023–24 has decreased by 1.7%, representing a £12 million reduction.²¹¹ She added that, “combined with rising costs and pay inflation, we are now facing a substantial funding gap of around £107 million”.²¹² Even with the Service implementing a range of saving measures, it would still face an unaddressed gap of some £38 million, she said.²¹³

81. Also under NDNA, the Government agreed to “continue to ensure that PSNI and others are appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity”.²¹⁴ Tim O’Connor, one of the Independent Reporting Commissioners, emphasised the importance of continued adequate resourcing for the PSNI:

This issue has proven itself to be resilient. Unfortunately, if you look at it from a balcony view, it is axiomatic that paramilitarism is resilient in its roots, and therefore only the most robust, sustained, comprehensive approach will do. That requires resources.²¹⁵

203 [Correspondence from the PSNI relating to the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland inquiry](#), 1 February 2023

204 [Police Service of Northern Ireland \(PNI0023\)](#), p.25

205 [Q495](#)

206 [Q14](#)

207 [Q14](#)

208 [Q49](#)

209 [Q49](#)

210 [Police Service of Northern Ireland \(FPC0010\)](#), p.4

211 Oral evidence taken on 21 June 2023, HC 1165, [Q152](#)

212 Oral evidence taken on 21 June 2023, HC 1165, [Q152](#)

213 Oral evidence taken on 21 June 2023, HC 1165, [Q152](#)

214 [New Decade, New Approach](#), p.48

215 [Q476](#)

82. The Secretary of State argued that as policing and justice is a devolved matter, it was the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that the PSNI is adequately resourced to deal with paramilitarism.²¹⁶ However, he added:

There are elements of the budget that the British Government have put in place. Arrangements have been in place since 2010 to provide ringfenced, additional security funding for counterterrorism activity in Northern Ireland. The UK contribution for the financial year 2022–23 is £32.1 million. This is the same that was provided for 2021–22 and has been provided each year since 2015. That provision is agreed on the presumption that the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland match funds the money coming from the UK Government.²¹⁷

The Secretary of State argued against the Government intervening to address the budgetary pressures that the PSNI is facing, contending that the Government providing “a short-term fix” could be detrimental to the policing landscape that has developed post the devolution of justice and policing in 2010:

I am very aware of the responsibilities. I talk to the PSNI. I make sure that I am constantly harrowing Treasury Ministers and the like. However, I know that this is a very delicately stitched arrangement behind policing that has evolved over the years to ensure that all the communities in Northern Ireland can have confidence in their policing, and it is working. I am very wary of trying to do anything in the short-term fix area that undermines any of that.²¹⁸

83. The Government’s contribution to additional security funding for counterterrorism has recently stagnated despite the continuing terrorist threat, and the justice budget in Northern Ireland has risen by just 3% compared to respective increases of 70% and 45% for health and education over the last 12 years. We consider this level of funding to be unsustainable and propose that improved funding arrangements are put in place as soon as possible.

Data breach

84. In August 2023, the PSNI published in error detailed information about all of their police officers and staff on the internet.²¹⁹ The data was publicly available online for two-and-a-half hours, by which point the PSNI had become aware of this release and had requested its removal. The published information included the surname and first initial of each employee, their rank or grade, where they are based and the unit they work in, even in respect of sensitive areas such as surveillance and intelligence. The details of members of the organised crime unit, intelligence officers based in ports and airports, and almost 40 PSNI staff working in MI5’s headquarters in Holywood were among those revealed.²²⁰ Organisations that do not properly adhere to data protection principles can

216 [Q440](#)

217 [Q440](#)

218 [Q441](#)

219 BBC News (9 August 2023) [PSNI: How did the police data breach happen?](#)

220 Sky News (14 August 2023) [Leaked PSNI document posted on wall facing Sinn Fein office in attempt to intimidate, party says.](#)

face a maximum fine of £17.5 million. Then Assistant Chief Constable Chris Todd told us that compensation and litigation costs could, in a worst-case scenario, reach £230 million to £240 million.²²¹

85. In December 2023, the Government offered £15 million to support payments relating to the data breach as part of a financial package aimed at restoring the Stormont institutions.

86. **We are concerned at the budgetary shortfall that the PSNI is facing, not least in the context of recent security incidents evidencing starkly the ongoing threat from terrorist and paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The financial liabilities that the Service may now incur as a result of the significant data breach in August 2023 will only serve to make this situation worse. Fewer resources for the PSNI will inevitably lead to a reduction in its ability to tackle paramilitary activity. A slowing of investigations, reduction of intelligence gathering capabilities and smaller neighbour policing presence means a less secure Northern Ireland. One of the Executive’s priorities under the New Decade, New Approach agreement was to increase police numbers to 7,500. This is the same figure recommended by the Patten Report and is, at best, a minimum requirement for contemporary policing given that Northern Ireland’s population has risen by almost 300,000. As part of its commitments under New Decade, New Approach, the Government pledged to ensure that the PSNI and others are appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity. Yet police numbers are falling and funding is inadequate. *We recommend that the Government ensure that NI receives funding in 2024, and on a recurrent basis thereafter, which enables the PSNI to provide fair pay awards to officers and staff and increase, recommence officer recruitment and increase headcount to at least 7,500 officers.***

Oversight of Government funding for community organisations

87. Naomi Long told us how organisations which enter into contracts with the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme for delivery within communities “are required to sign up to certain standards of behaviour and codes of practice ... which is to eschew paramilitarism and not be involved”.²²² She added she would like to see that same requirement introduced for all funders of community organisations, whether they be the Executive, the Government, external funders or the Irish Government.²²³ The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme also argued for “a common approach to engagement and funding” between the UK and Irish Governments and NI Executive, commenting that “without this it can lead to duplication or worse, conflicting approaches”.²²⁴

88. Throughout the course of our inquiry, we heard that, while sustained funding to tackle the resilient issues of paramilitary activity was critical, there was a need to provide greater oversight of funding to ensure that it was not being distributed to community organisations with links to paramilitary groups. In written evidence, the PSNI noted “the successes of a wide-range of community-based projects, many of which include police as delivery partners, and which receive public funding”.²²⁵ However, the PSNI stated that it:

221 Ibid

222 [Q90](#)

223 [Q90](#)

224 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.19

225 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#)), p.20

would welcome further scrutiny and monitoring of funding allocations to ensure they are genuinely contributing to meaningful outcomes. In this respect, the Police Service would urge caution on the use of funded projects as a means to directly or indirectly facilitate the transition of individuals or groups involved in criminality. In our experience, such an approach risks cementing the grip said organisations and individuals have on their local communities.²²⁶

89. The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme has set out to us how cross-Executive governance and scrutiny structures allow oversight from project level through to strategic level (overseen by the Head of the Civil Service) of the Programme.²²⁷ The Programme is also scrutinised externally by the IRC.²²⁸ However, the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme highlight the “congested funding space” that exists as part of efforts to tackle paramilitarism.²²⁹ The Programme identifies a number of areas that would improve collaboration between the NI Executive and UK and Irish Governments in the allocation of funding to tackle paramilitary activity:

- a strategic understanding of how UK and Irish Government funding beyond the Programme is addressing paramilitarism and how this aligns to NI Executive priorities. This is a congested funding space and there is a lack of a single agreed set of behaviours that those in receipt of funding ought to be able to commit to.
- a strategic, joined-up approach to investment to ensure the greatest possible impact. This includes understanding how wider government funding is being provided in local areas, and how the Programme can add value where Government funding is already being provided or planned.
- a wider roll-out of place-based funding, drawing on existing resources and models of best practice across the Executive and beyond.
- there is often an inconsistent approach to engagement across Government, including the UK and Irish Governments, that can undermine the purpose of the programme, namely to undermine any credibility or status that paramilitaries have in the community.²³⁰

90. Women’s Policy Group NI raised the related issue with us of the gatekeeping of funding by paramilitary organisations within vulnerable communities:

Paramilitary-run organisations continue to act as community organisations within vulnerable communities and many are in receipt of public money. These same organisations can act as gatekeepers within their communities, choosing favoured organisations to work alongside and choking off support to groups that may challenge or question paramilitary influence.²³¹

The then NI Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA, also raised this concern in the context of paramilitary organisations’ attempts to coercively control communities. She told us:

226 Police Service of Northern Ireland (PNI0023), p.20

227 Northern Ireland Department for Justice (PNI0024), p.2

228 Northern Ireland Department for Justice (PNI0024), p.2

229 Northern Ireland Department for Justice (PNI0024), p.2

230 Northern Ireland Department for Justice (PNI0024), p.17

231 Women’s Resource and Development Agency (PNI0019), p.5

We also know from experience and observation that where there is flow of resource into communities, whether that is through community organisations or groups, those who wish to maintain coercive control over those communities will muscle into community groups to [...] insert themselves as community and organisational leaders.²³²

91. Dominic Wilson, Director General of the Northern Ireland Office, told us that at times there was “a short-term expediency” in funding decisions which could be problematic:

In order to make a short-term intervention in a particular community, it might have to rely on an individual or a group that does not have the long-term benefit of a community at heart. For example, it might be a gatekeeper of funding that provides quite a convenient way of dealing with an acute problem in a particular circumstance—for example, the housing of a family under threat, where there is a temptation for programmes to be targeted at individuals.²³³

Mr Wilson acknowledged that “there is a lot of money being spent” by the Government in tackling paramilitarism, recognising the risk that not every scheme is embedded in the ecosystem created by initiatives stemming from the Fresh Start Agreement.²³⁴ He informed us that the Government had recently launched work “to try to capture all that funding and ensure that everybody ... has the requisite knowledge to make the right decisions about where the money is going”.²³⁵ He referenced the values document that the TPP has established and told us that for certain other projects, the Government has “a contractual arrangement that enshrines those values in the delivery agreement”.²³⁶

92. **We are concerned to hear claims that paramilitary organisations act as gatekeepers within some communities and masquerade as community organisations to receive public money. The Government must embed a standard code of practice and behaviour that all community-level organisations availing of Government funding have to sign up to as part of efforts to tackle the issue of gatekeeping of funds by paramilitary groups. The Government, Northern Ireland Executive (when it is established), and the Irish Government must agree as soon as possible a common approach to engagement with, and funding of, community organisations that claim to tackle paramilitarism. Any agreement on a set of principles or protocol governing engagement with individuals who are current or former members of paramilitary organisations, or their advocates, must be reflective of the need to maintain contact for a clear and legitimate policing purpose and not indirectly fetter the PSNI in exercising their statutory duty to protect life and property. Moreover, the Committee contends that any due diligence test for those in receipt of public funding must be compliant with equality legislation.**

232 [Q90](#)

233 [Q461](#)

234 [Q462](#)

235 [Q462](#)

236 [Q463](#)

7 Transition

93. The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) defines transition as “the movement from involvement in or connection to paramilitary activity to a life lived entirely based on peaceful, democratic norms”.²³⁷ Support for transition was identified by the Fresh Start Independent Panel as one of four broad objectives aimed at assisting the process of the disbandment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.²³⁸ The IRC has set out three main forms of transition: individual, community and group transition.²³⁹ The concepts of individual and community transition are well defined and well supported, with the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme both focusing on supporting individuals who want to transition and creating capacity within communities to move away from the influence of paramilitarism.²⁴⁰ The Independent Panel ruminated on the possibility of group capacity for transition in its 2016 report, but the Executive Action Plan that formed the basis of Phase 1 of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme did not include any specific actions on ‘group transition’.²⁴¹ The issue of whether there should be a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at their disbandment was perhaps the most divisive topic we considered as part of our inquiry, with views differing on its appropriateness.

Group Transition

94. In recent reports, the IRC has argued that a formal process of group transition, involving direct engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at their disbandment, is needed to end paramilitarism.²⁴² The Commissioners have set out that, in their view, a policing and criminal justice approach on its own is not sufficient to fully eradicate paramilitarism:

It is not feasible to arrest everyone suspected of involvement in paramilitarism ... Consequently, the disbandment of paramilitary organisations has to involve voluntary action by the Groups and therefore their co-operation. There is also the reality that continued paramilitarism is connected to the wider context of the Troubles, and therefore just as a process of political engagement—ultimately leading to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement—was needed to bring the Troubles to an end, a similar process is now necessary to definitively end paramilitarism.²⁴³

Professor Breen-Smyth told us that she agreed with the IRC’s call for a process of group transition, arguing that “a strategy to end paramilitarism that does not engage with the continued existence of armed paramilitary structures is one that ignores the elephant in the room”.²⁴⁴ Likewise, the PSNI, while acknowledging that previous attempts “to engage

237 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.30

238 [The Fresh Start Panel Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland](#), May 2016, p.19

239 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.30

240 See: Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.15-16; Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.30

241 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.15

242 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.11

243 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)) p.11

244 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.3

organisations in a process of transition have not come to fruition and the factors that would contribute to a successful process are complex and fluid”, told us that a renewed focus on the issue of transition, led by The Executive Office, was critical to further progress.²⁴⁵

95. However, we also heard counter arguments that a process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at their disbandment could risk inadvertently legitimising the status of such groups.²⁴⁶ The then NI Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA, told us that she would not support a process of group transition as suggested by the IRC, because:

we know from experience that transitioned organisations, depending on how effective the transition is, can still wield a degree of coercive control over communities. The idea, for example, that if you had an organised crime gang in your constituency and they said, “We would like to convert into a community group,” that would have some form of legitimacy is something that you would question, as would I as an elected representative.²⁴⁷

The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme also warned of the risk that a process of group transition could undermine its efforts to address the coercive control exercised by paramilitary groups in some communities, noting that:

it is essential that, in giving consideration to the IRC’s recommendations, nothing is done that would compromise or undermine the Programme by, for example, inadvertently reinforcing the status of people or groups who seek to exercise coercive control over communities, or lead to the creation of legacy structures or organisations which, even if not engaged in illegal activity, would continue to be able to bring undue influence to bear on communities.²⁴⁸

96. In May 2022, the then Secretary of State, the Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis MP, outlined challenges with group transition, including:

the absence of a clear definition of what successful transition looks like either within groups themselves or the wider community. Within the wider community, many have expressed scepticism about the willingness of groups to transition and point to previous statements of intent by paramilitary organisations around transition that have failed to deliver. Some have expressed concerns about the motivations underpinning expressions of intent to transition, with some viewing them as an attempt to secure greater legitimacy and credibility for some individuals/groups to enable them to secure resources and retain self-interested influence within communities over the longer term.²⁴⁹

97. The IRC has nevertheless proposed a set of milestones that paramilitary groups would commit to in any process of engagement. These are:

- Ending recruitment to paramilitary groups;

245 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#)), p.28

246 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.16

247 [Q103](#)

248 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#)), p.16

249 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office ([PNI0022](#)), p.6

- Giving up paramilitary structures and activity;
- Ceasing mobilisation of members;
- Ceasing to exercise coercive power and control in communities;
- Ending of all paramilitary style attacks and all other forms of violence, threat of violence or intimidation;
- Disposal of any remaining weaponry and material;
- Allowing people to exit from paramilitarism without cost or consequence;
- Publicly supporting the PSNI and criminal justice system in tackling criminality and committing to democracy and the rule of law; and
- Engaging with Legacy Bodies.²⁵⁰

98. The Commission has stated that the primary goal of the process should be “disbandment of the Groups rather than their continuation in any form, but we recognise that this is one of the issues for consideration”.²⁵¹ In its 2022 report, it sought to clarify what it means by the term ‘Group Transition’, noting:

One key question in this debate about definition is whether Group Transition is an event or a process. In our considered view, it is the latter—although of course the end point (disbandment) could indeed be an event.²⁵²

99. The Commissioners have also argued that, since the Troubles, some form of Group Transition has been underway but that this process has “stalled or not been completed”.²⁵³ They add that “a major obstacle to completion is the absence of a formal process of engagement with the authorities to ensure group transition is accelerated and completed”.²⁵⁴ The IRC said that it understands the risks, complexities and sensitivities relating to its proposal for a group transition process, but added that “if something along these lines is not attempted, there is little or no chance of achieving the Fresh Start goal of ending paramilitarism”.²⁵⁵ The Commissioners concluded that “not undertaking an initiative of this kind carries risks of the problem of paramilitarism being perpetuated”.²⁵⁶

100. The IRC has set out that a process of Group Transition should be owned by “the two Governments and the Executive, acting on a co-ordinated, collective basis, as happened for the Fresh Start Agreement”.²⁵⁷ The Commissioners add that they envision that the overall process would be overseen by a formal body established for that purpose by the two Governments, in consultation with the Executive.²⁵⁸ In their 2022 report, the Commissioners developed this proposal, suggesting there would be merit in “preparing the ground for a formal process”.²⁵⁹ They proposed that the Governments, with the

250 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.12-13

251 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.13

252 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.30

253 See reference above, p.30

254 See reference above, p.30

255 See reference above, p.30

256 See reference above, p.30

257 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.12

258 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#)), p.12

259 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.33

support of the Executive, could appoint “an Independent Person who would be authorised to speak to the various interested parties, including the Paramilitary Groups themselves, to gather their views and thereby help ensure that any resulting process that emerged had the highest chance of success”.²⁶⁰ Tim O’Connor, IRC Commissioner, elaborated on this recommendation:

We are open as to precisely what that mechanism is, but the idea would be that somebody would prepare the ground and, as you just suggested, talk to all the key stakeholders, probably the groups themselves and certainly the victims as well, with a view to seeing how a process could be designed and constructed that would have the best chance of success.²⁶¹

John McBurney, IRC Commissioner, described the possibility of appointing an independent person to conduct a scoping exercise on the process of group transition as a useful intermediate step, because:

[they] would have the opportunity to produce a report reversing back from a full-blown group transition process if it was considered not to be a worthwhile endeavour or it was considered that significant groupings would not engage and that there were obstacles or barriers to taking it further forward ... If there are paramilitary leaderships—and we believe there are—indicating that they are willing to engage in the process, then I would put the question to all of us: what is to be lost by the attempt, and what is to be lost by having an independent person come in for a limited period of time to explore that?²⁶²

101. The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon. Chris Heaton-Harris MP, said that the Government had been thinking “very seriously” about the proposal to appoint an independent person.²⁶³ He told us:

Maybe there is someone who could be a halfway house in the communication process to guide people who want to go on this journey and help them through it. It would be very difficult to go to someone in Government or the policing service and ask this, but someone independent could help point people to the right expertise. There is value in it. I am seriously looking at that recommendation.²⁶⁴

102. We have heard evidence both for and against the establishment of formal process of Group Transition. On the one hand, we are concerned that a Group Transition process aimed at the disbandment of paramilitary groups could inadvertently risk reinforcing the status of such groups and fail to displace the coercive control they hold over some communities. On the other hand, we have heard that a strategy to end paramilitarism that does not engage with the continued existence of paramilitary structures ignores the elephant in the room. For any process to have a chance of success, it must hold the confidence of political parties and receive widespread public support in Northern

260 Independent Reporting Commission, [Fifth Report](#), HC 893, 7 December 2022, p.33

261 [Q481](#)

262 [Q482](#)

263 [Q467](#)

264 [Q467](#)

Ireland. *The Government should conduct a scoping exercise to assess public support for such a process which should include dedicated engagement with those who have suffered violence and harm from paramilitary groups.*

Sub-group transition

103. Contributors to our inquiry stressed to us that paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland “cannot feasibly be regarded as homogenous and unified organisational entities” and that the context within which a paramilitary group operates in can vary by locale.²⁶⁵ Professor Breen-Smyth therefore advocated for engagement with sub-groups of paramilitary organisations that are amenable to transitioning:

Paramilitary group transition has, until now, been conceived of as involving the entirety of a paramilitary organisation. Given the fragmentation of loyalist groups in particular, set ... and characterised by the lack of central command, lack of clarity of purpose and diffuse reasons for membership, I argue for supporting those sub-groups who are no longer involved in illegal paramilitarism but who operate within wider organisations, to advance along a path to transition in their own right as sub-groups.²⁶⁶

104. Professor Breen-Smyth told us that whilst she viewed group transition as “the ideal”, the path to whole group transition is blocked by the persistent involvement of elements or sub-groups of paramilitary organisations involved in violence, intimidation and a wide range of criminality.²⁶⁷ She called for a process of sub-group transition to overcome these barriers:

These obstacles can be circumnavigated by engaging with sub-groups to permit progress to be made, whilst isolating those parts of the organisation who continue to practice criminality, thus avoiding the danger of allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the possible. Advancing sub-groups along the path to transition could well also cause a domino effect and serve to sort out those who are committed to peaceful means from those who are unwilling to relinquish violence and criminality.²⁶⁸

Professor Breen-Smyth argued that there is a geographical dimension to this differentiation, whereby “the prospects for a formal process of transition for sub-groups located in more rural areas is impeded by the activities of “associates”, largely in urban areas, from whom, in some cases, those in rural locations are estranged, albeit nominally belonging to the same paramilitary grouping”.²⁶⁹ She therefore argued “that group transition should move forward based on engagement with those sub-groups who are ready for such a process

265 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (PNI0025), p.2; see also: Jonny Byrne, Ulster University, Duncan Morrow, Ulster University, Brendan Sturgeon, Queens University, Dominic Bryan, Queens University), Peter Sheridan, Co-operation Ireland, and Lucy Geddes, Co-operation Ireland (PNI006), p.2

266 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (PNI0025), p.5

267 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (PNI0025), p.6

268 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (PNI0025), p.6

269 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (PNI0025), p.14

and with organisations who can ‘shed’ sub-groups who are engaged in criminality, even if they claim allegiance with the parent organisation”.²⁷⁰ Drawing on the work of the IRC, Jamie Bryson, Director for Northern Ireland Policy at the Centre for the Union think tank, referred to three groups: young people involved for socioeconomic reasons; a central group, involved for political reasons only; and those who have joined organisations to use them as “badges of convenience” for criminal activity. In terms of transitioning each group, he said:

For the socioeconomic group of people, there need to be pathways in terms of education and job opportunities to provide upward social mobility. For the central group [...] there has to be an appropriate political context [...] For the criminal group, it is a policing issue and the PSNI needs to deal with that.²⁷¹

105. He also stressed the importance of developing a process that enables that central group “to bring the bulk—the critical mass—of the membership, inclusive of the legacy and the name, with them into the stage of civilianisation”.²⁷² John McBurney was cautious of sub-group transition, describing it as “a lesser step [that] has within it significant risks and dangers”.²⁷³ He gave an example of the potential risks of a sub-group transition process:

If you are engaging with a smaller group within a paramilitary structure, are those who are not part of that process going to see it as a divide-and-conquer attempt, and is that going to create unnecessary turbulence? If a large proportion of the wider grouping is already saying, “We will engage,” why would you progress forward and engage with a smaller cell or compartment of that wider organisation when you are being given the opportunity to engage with the vast majority of the group?²⁷⁴

Monica McWilliams, Commissioner, IRC also acknowledged the risk that it may lead to one group deciding to try to profiteer if another sub-group engages in a process of transition.²⁷⁵

106. Indeed, Professor Breen-Smyth raised the phenomenon of ‘satelliting’ in evidence to us.²⁷⁶ She described this as a process by which sub-groups within paramilitary groups control areas outside their original territorial boundary, which can be seen as an indicator of an expansion in criminal activity by these sub-groups.²⁷⁷ Professor Breen-Smyth raises the potential risk that a process of sub-group transition could lead to other non-transitioning sub-groups viewing it as an “opportunity for increased satelliting and criminal empire building”.²⁷⁸

270 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.14

271 [Q517](#)

272 [Q550](#)

273 [Q490](#)

274 [Q490](#)

275 [Q487](#)

276 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.12

277 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.12-13

278 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#)), p.33

107. In written evidence to us, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland outlined a challenge around “a lack of coherence/cohesion within some organisations where fractures or factionalism could significantly limit the ability of those who wish to transition/disband to bring others along with them”.²⁷⁹ He added:

Within some groups there are those who have cited reasons to resist disbanding entirely, including concerns that those within their organisations who are involved in criminality would seek to extend their influence by claiming ownership of the legacy of their organisations, or who fear personal reprisals if they are no longer part of a wider organisation.²⁸⁰

108. Paramilitary groups do not resemble cohesive units, rather they are composed of sub-groups that vary in location, strength of affiliation and level of criminal activity. We have heard that some sub-groups are readying themselves for transition, whilst others show little appetite to transition away from criminality. We see some merit in the argument that a process facilitating those willing to transition away from paramilitarism would then allow for the better training of law enforcement resources on those sub-groups that remain determined to cause harm. However, the concept of sub-group transition requires fuller development before its risks and opportunities can properly be considered by the Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland.

279 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office ([PNI0022](#)), p.6

280 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office ([PNI0022](#)), p.6-7

Conclusions and recommendations

The concept of paramilitarism

1. The term ‘paramilitarism’ is complex and contested in Northern Ireland. We heard how use of the term can risk romanticising the presence of gangs who engage in overt criminality and attempt to exercise coercive control over the communities they seek to prey upon. At the same time, however, terms such as organised crime gangs can fail to capture the complex historical and political context which leads to these groups remaining embedded in communities. Following evidence we heard, we decided to rename our inquiry from ‘the effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland’ to ‘the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland’. We did so to make clear the criminal nature of many of the activities undertaken by paramilitary groups and to take account of evidence we had received outlining the potential social capital that can be conferred on individuals involved in criminality when they are referred to as ‘paramilitaries’. (Paragraph 14)

Societal effects of paramilitary activity and organised crime

2. Memorials, commemorative artefacts and flags glorifying paramilitary groups serve as a visual signifier of the coercive control that such groups attempt to have over communities and can retraumatise the victims and survivors of paramilitary violence. The PSNI does not always have sufficient political support to remove paramilitary flags. *We urge the Executive, when fully restored, to support communities to address the continued presence of paramilitary murals, as per the recommendation in the 2021 Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) Report, whilst cognisant of the need to ensure any fresh obligations placed on the police and public authorities are reasonable.* (Paragraph 25)
3. The high cost of living in Northern Ireland has contributed to a ‘cruel storm’ which paramilitary groups are exploiting to target vulnerable individuals. Single mothers in precarious financial situations are being targeted by paramilitary groups engaging in illegal money lending practices. The structure of universal credit, the lack of a childcare strategy, and expense of childcare in Northern Ireland all contribute to the precarious financial situation in which some families find themselves. *The Northern Ireland Office must engage in discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions as soon as possible to improve access to universal credit in Northern Ireland, as well as developing schemes to better connect people to existing credit services. The Government should also engage with a re-established Executive to share best practice towards the development of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland.* (Paragraph 32)
4. We are concerned to hear about the gatekeeping of funding and other activity by paramilitary groups which has increasingly excluded women and the community and voluntary sector since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This has implications for the construction of a post-conflict society in Northern Ireland. We are therefore pleased to note that the Government has included Northern Ireland in its latest action plan to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution

(UNSCR) 1325, which recognises women’s perspectives, rights and role in relation to peace and security. *However, the Government must set out how its commitment to co-design a strategy on ending violence against women and girls with stakeholders in NI will receive final approval if the Executive remains, or is once again, suspended.* (Paragraph 36)

5. There is a correlation between paramilitary activity, deprivation, mental health issues and trauma. We therefore support the trauma-informed and public health approach of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. *The Government must collaborate with the Executive to introduce forthwith a system-wide and Government-wide commitment to trauma-informed practice.* (Paragraph 40)

Paramilitary activity as child criminal exploitation and modern slavery

6. To counter the risk and reality of people romanticising paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that public agencies and wider civic society use language rooted in safeguarding and child protection when describing the activities of these criminal gangs which include the abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation, of children and young people. *The Government, or the Executive when it returns, must undertake an audit of the extent to which the Northern Ireland framework for safeguarding children and young people protects those abused by paramilitary or organised crime gangs. This should include an assessment of the extent to which the PSNI and other crime agencies currently utilise the powers contained in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 with respect to the exploitation of children. The Government must work with the Executive, when it is established, to develop an integrated strategy to protect children and young people from the harm perpetuated by these groups. In particular, the Government must work with the NI Department of Justice as soon as possible to agree a definition for Child Criminal Exploitation which takes account of current Home Office guidance.* (Paragraph 48)
7. Low prosecution rates for those who commit violent crime can act as a barrier to reporting the crimes of paramilitary groups and serve to perpetuate the impunity with which these groups act. An effective criminal justice system able to identify perpetrators of paramilitary violence and bring them to justice is of paramount importance. *The Government must set out how it plans to support the Executive in 2024 to improve clearance rates for paramilitary-style attacks, and work with the NI Department of Justice to embed a safeguarding approach to paramilitary activity to enable its prosecution as coercion, modern slavery and child criminal exploitation.* (Paragraph 53)
8. We are concerned about the lack of use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in NI. The NRM is a tool for public agencies to provide a strategic safeguarding response to paramilitary activity. *While we acknowledge that support for modern slavery victims is devolved, we recommend that forthwith the Government share good practice with the Executive on improving awareness and use of the NRM among NI welfare agencies, social services and those in the criminal justice system.* (Paragraph 56)

Coordination to tackle paramilitary and terrorist activity

9. The continued presence of paramilitary groups, 25 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, represents a festering wound on society in Northern Ireland. Given the delineation of responsibilities between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive in tackling terrorist and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, the lack of an Executive impedes attempts to develop a collaborative and mutually reinforcing approach to tackling terrorism, paramilitary activity, and organised crime. The lack of an Executive, and the lack of sustainable funding arrangements for public services, also creates an uncertain environment for organisations providing vital services such as youth and educational services. (Paragraph 62)
10. Tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland requires a whole of Government approach. *While we are mindful that it is ultimately a matter for any newly formed Executive to decide its priorities for government, we urge the next administration in Northern Ireland to ensure that the commitment set out in New Decade, New Approach to ending the harm done by paramilitarism is a strategic priority in an agreed Programme for Government.* (Paragraph 64)
11. There is a live debate as to whether the current scope of national security, as it relates to Northern Ireland, should be revised to include threats other than those to democracy and the state, such as paramilitary activity like drug dealing, extortion and murder, to enable greater joint working between law enforcement agencies in Northern Ireland and security and intelligence services where appropriate. Some think it should be expanded; others believe that the current scope is sufficient to enable collaboration. *We recommend that the Government undertake an updated analysis of paramilitary activity and organised crime in Northern Ireland when determining the scope of national security for its next national security strategy to ensure that all relevant groups and activities are caught within its ambit.* (Paragraph 68)

Funding to tackle paramilitarism

12. We welcome the announcement in the 2023 Budget of an additional £3 million for 2024/25 to extend the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme in Northern Ireland. The Programme is carrying out vital work to develop strategies to tackle paramilitarism systematically. Paramilitarism is a long-term problem which requires sustained funding. *As part of discussions to extend the Programme, the Government must extend the multi-year funding period for Phase Three to five years rather than the three years for which each phase is currently funded. A longer period for Phase Three would provide a more sustainable base for investment in, and development of, projects to tackle paramilitary activity. Should it not be possible for Executive officials to allocate funding for the 2024–25 financial year, due to limitations on their remit, the Government must ensure that the money allocated to the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme for 2024–25 is at least maintained in real terms at its current level of £8 million from the Government and £8 million from the Executive.* (Paragraph 77)
13. The Government's contribution to additional security funding for counter-terrorism has recently stagnated despite the continuing terrorist threat, and the justice budget in Northern Ireland has risen by just 3% compared to respective increases of 70%

and 45% for health and education over the last 12 years. *We consider this level of funding to be unsustainable and propose that improved funding arrangements are put in place as soon as possible.* (Paragraph 83)

14. We are concerned at the budgetary shortfall that the PSNI is facing, not least in the context of recent security incidents evidencing starkly the ongoing threat from terrorist and paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The financial liabilities that the Service may now incur as a result of the significant data breach in August 2023 will only serve to make this situation worse. Fewer resources for the PSNI will inevitably lead to a reduction in its ability to tackle paramilitary activity. A slowing of investigations, reduction of intelligence gathering capabilities and smaller neighbour policing presence means a less secure Northern Ireland. One of the Executive's priorities under the New Decade, New Approach agreement was to increase police numbers to 7,500. This is the same figure recommended by the Patten Report and is, at best, a minimum requirement for contemporary policing given that Northern Ireland's population has risen by almost 300,000. As part of its commitments under New Decade, New Approach, the Government pledged to ensure that the PSNI and others are appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity. Yet police numbers are falling and funding is inadequate. *We recommend that the Government ensure that NI receives funding in 2024, and on a recurrent basis thereafter, which enables the PSNI to provide fair pay awards to officers and staff and increase, recommence officer recruitment and increase headcount to at least 7,500 officers.* (Paragraph 86)
15. We are concerned to hear claims that paramilitary organisations act as gatekeepers within some communities and masquerade as community organisations to receive public money. *The Government must embed a standard code of practice and behaviour that all community-level organisations availing of Government funding have to sign up to as part of efforts to tackle the issue of gatekeeping of funds by paramilitary groups. The Government, Northern Ireland Executive (when it is established), and the Irish Government must agree as soon as possible a common approach to engagement with, and funding of, community organisations that claim to tackle paramilitarism. Any agreement on a set of principles or protocol governing engagement with individuals who are current or former members of paramilitary organisations, or their advocates, must be reflective of the need to maintain contact for a clear and legitimate policing purpose and not indirectly fetter the PSNI in exercising their statutory duty to protect life and property. Moreover, the Committee contends that any due diligence test for those in receipt of public funding must be compliant with equality legislation.* (Paragraph 92)

Transition

16. We have heard evidence both for and against the establishment of formal process of Group Transition. On the one hand, we are concerned that a Group Transition process aimed at the disbandment of paramilitary groups could inadvertently risk reinforcing the status of such groups and fail to displace the coercive control they hold over some communities. On the other hand, we have heard that a strategy to end paramilitarism that does not engage with the continued existence of paramilitary structures ignores the elephant in the room. For any process to have a chance of

success, it must hold the confidence of political parties and receive widespread public support in Northern Ireland. *The Government should conduct a scoping exercise to assess public support for such a process which should include dedicated engagement with those who have suffered violence and harm from paramilitary groups.* (Paragraph 102)

17. Paramilitary groups do not resemble cohesive units, rather they are composed of sub-groups that vary in location, strength of affiliation and level of criminal activity. We have heard that some sub-groups are readying themselves for transition, whilst others show little appetite to transition away from criminality. We see some merit in the argument that a process facilitating those willing to transition away from paramilitarism would then allow for the better training of law enforcement resources on those sub-groups that remain determined to cause harm. However, the concept of sub-group transition requires fuller development before its risks and opportunities can properly be considered by the Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland. (Paragraph 108)

Formal minutes

Wednesday 24 January

Members present

Sir Robert Buckland, in the Chair

Stephen Farry

Mary Kelly Foy

Sir Robert Goodwill

Claire Hanna

Carla Lockhart

Jim Shannon

Bob Stewart

Draft Report (*The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 108 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

[Adjourned till Wednesday 31 January at 9am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 18 May 2022

Dr Colm Walsh, Research Fellow, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast; **Dr Siobhán McAlister**, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast; **Prof Duncan Morrow**, Professor in Politics and Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University

[Q1–43](#)

Wednesday 26 October 2022

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

[Q44–86](#)

Naomi Long MLA, Minister of Justice, Northern Ireland Department of Justice; **Richard Pengelly**, Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Department of Justice; **Adele Brown**, Programme Director, The Northern Ireland Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime

[Q87–104](#)

Wednesday 09 November 2022

Ms Koulla Yiasouma, Commissioner, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; **Mairead McCafferty**, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

[Q105–140](#)

Dr Conor Murray, Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, Ulster University; **Dr Brendan Coyle**, Lecturer in Criminology, Ulster University; **Mark Dennison**, Stay Onside Manager & Fresh Start Through Sport Co Ordinator at Irish Football Association, Irish Football Association

[Q141–174](#)

Wednesday 23 November 2022

Professor Marie Breen-Smyth the Independent Reviewer of the exercised powers under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007

[Q175–230](#)

Daniel Holder, Deputy Director, Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ); **Una Boyd**, Immigration Project Solicitor and Coordinator, Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)

[Q231–254](#)

Monday 12 December 2022

John McBurney, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Monica McWilliams**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Tim O'Connor**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Mitchell Reiss**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission

[Q255–279](#)

Wednesday 18 January 2023

Ms Elaine Crory, Good Relations Co-Ordinator, Women's Resource and Development Agency; **Sonya McMullan**, Regional Services Manager, Women's Aid Federation NI; **Mrs Siobhán Harding**, Research and Policy Officer, Women's Support Network

[Q280–324](#)

Wednesday 01 February 2023

Paul Smyth, Executive Director of Politics in Action and Member, The Stop Attacks Forum; **Megan Phair**, Co-ordinator, Journey to Empowerment Programme with Invisible Traffick and Member, The Stop Attacks Forum

[Q325–354](#)

Ian Jeffers, Commissioner, Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland; **Sandra Peake**, Chief Executive Officer, Wave Trauma Centre; **Mr Peter Murtagh**, Advocacy Support Manager, South East Fermanagh Foundation

[Q355–379](#)

Wednesday 22 February 2023

Ronnie Armour, Director General, Northern Ireland Prison Service; **Steven McCourt**, Director of Rehabilitation, Northern Ireland Prison Service

[Q380–404](#)

Brian Anderson, Mission Superintendent, East Belfast Mission; **Alison Flanagan**, National Leader, Northern Ireland, Christians Against Poverty (CAP)

[Q405–420](#)

Wednesday 08 March 2023

Chris Heaton-Harris MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office; **Dominic Wilson**, Director General, Northern Ireland Office; **James Crawford**, Deputy Director of the Security and Protection Group, Northern Ireland Office

[Q421–473](#)

Wednesday 26 April 2023

John McBurney, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Monica McWilliams**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Tim O'Connor**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission; **Mitchell Reiss**, Commissioner, Independent Reporting Commission

[Q474–495](#)

Tuesday 17 October 2023

Jamie Bryson, Director of NI Policy, Centre for the Union

[Q496–557](#)

Wednesday 18 October 2023

Dr Aaron Edwards, Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs, The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst; **Dr Seán Brennan**, Independent Researcher

[Q558–603](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

PNI numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Byrne, Jonny (Senior Lecturer , Ulster University); Morrow, Duncan (Professor, Ulster University); Sturgeon, Brendan (Research Fellow, Queens University); Bryan, Dominic (Professor, Queens University); Sheridan , Peter (Chief Executive , Co-operation Ireland); and Geddes, Lucy (CIT Project Manager, Co-operation Ireland) ([PNI0006](#))
- 2 Clanmil HA ([PNI0018](#))
- 3 Commission for Victims and Survivors ([PNI0002](#))
- 4 Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) ([PNI0007](#))
- 5 Edwards, Dr Aaron (Senior Lecturer, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst); Brennan, Dr Sean ; and Bloomer, Dr Stephen ([PNI0015](#))
- 6 HM Revenue & Customs Fraud Investigation Service (FIS) ([PNI0009](#))
- 7 Independent Reporting Commission ([PNI0014](#))
- 8 McAuley, Professor James W. (Professor of Political Sociology and Irish Studies, University of Huddersfield); Braniff, Dr. Mairé (Senior Lecturer, Ulster University); Spencer, Professor Graham (Professor of Political Communication, Portsmouth University); Bell, Dr. John (Lecturer, Ulster University); and McCready, Dr. Philip (Lecturer, Ulster University) ([PNI0013](#))
- 9 NICCY ([PNI0016](#))
- 10 Northern Ireland Department for Justice ([PNI0024](#))
- 11 Police Service of Northern Ireland ([PNI0023](#))
- 12 Professor Marie Breen-Smyth the Independent Reviewer of the exercised powers under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 ([PNI0025](#))
- 13 Quinton, Aileen ([PNI0001](#))
- 14 Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP (then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office) ([PNI0022](#))
- 15 South East Fermanagh Foundation ([PNI0020](#))
- 16 The Stop Attacks Forum ([PNI0017](#))
- 17 Ulster University; and Irish Football Association ([PNI0021](#))
- 18 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland ([PNI0005](#))
- 19 Women's Regional Consortium, Northern Ireland ([PNI0003](#))
- 20 Women's Resource and Development Agency ([PNI0019](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2023–24

Number	Title	Reference
1st	The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement	HC 45

Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Investment in Northern Ireland	HC 85
1st Special	Investment in Northern Ireland: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session	HC 1109

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Citizenship and passport processes relating to Northern Ireland	HC 158
2nd	The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland	HC 159
1st Special	Cross-border co-operation on policing, security and criminal justice after Brexit Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 508
2nd Special	Citizenship and passport processes relating to Northern Ireland: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2021–22	HC 787

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Unfettered Access: Customs Arrangements in Northern Ireland after Brexit	HC 161
2nd	New Decade, New Approach Agreement	HC 160
3rd	Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past: the Government's New Proposals (Interim Report)	HC 329
4th	Cross-border co-operation on policing, security and criminal justice after Brexit	HC 766