

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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# Operation Kenova: naming Stakeknife

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Third Report of Session 2024–26

HC 1580

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# Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Northern Ireland Office; administration and expenditure of the Crown Solicitor's Office (but excluding individual cases and advice given by the Crown Solicitor); and other matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (but excluding the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Northern Ireland and the drafting of legislation by the Office of the Legislative Counsel) and its associated public bodies.

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## Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

## Publication

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## Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 3672; the Committee's email address is [northircom@parliament.uk](mailto:northircom@parliament.uk). You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@CommonsNIAC](https://twitter.com/CommonsNIAC).

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# Contents

|          |                                                                         |           |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|          | <b>Introduction</b>                                                     | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>1</b> | <b>Naming Stakeknife</b>                                                | <b>2</b>  |
|          | Background                                                              | 2         |
|          | Evidence received                                                       | 5         |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Outstanding Kenova recommendations</b>                               | <b>8</b>  |
|          | The recommendations                                                     | 8         |
|          | Evidence received                                                       | 9         |
|          | <b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>                                  | <b>11</b> |
|          | <b>Formal minutes</b>                                                   | <b>12</b> |
|          | <b>Witnesses</b>                                                        | <b>13</b> |
|          | <b>List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament</b> | <b>14</b> |

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# Introduction

1. Operation Kenova was an independent investigation into a range of activities surrounding an alleged individual codenamed Stakeknife during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Stakeknife worked as a British Army agent within the IRA in the 1980s and was suspected of direct involvement in numerous murders. Kenova investigated the activities of this agent, as well as those of handlers in the Army and MI5, to determine whether the state was complicit in serious crimes.<sup>2</sup> Successive Governments have not formally identified Stakeknife. When asked to name him or other agents, they have cited the long-standing policy of ‘Neither Confirm Nor Deny’ (NCND). Stakeknife is widely thought, however, to have been Freddie Scappaticci, originally from west Belfast, who died aged 77 in 2023.<sup>3</sup>
2. Operation Kenova published its Final Report in December 2025. On 14 January 2026, we held a one-off evidence session to explore the implications of its publication with Sir Iain Livingstone QPM, Officer in Overall Command (OIOC), and Jon Boutcher QPM, Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and former Kenova OIOC.<sup>4</sup> Our session built on our predecessor Committee’s work in April 2024,<sup>5</sup> when it considered Operation Kenova’s Interim Report. Our hearing was an opportunity to reflect upon the Final Report’s conclusions and recommendations, the process undertaken to conduct the investigation, the obstacles the Kenova team had to overcome to investigate satisfactorily the cases within its remit, and the implications of Kenova for future investigations into the legacy of the Troubles. We were especially interested in the debate about whether the Government should formally name, or allow Kenova to name, Stakeknife. In chapter 1, we therefore consider the merits of diverging from NCND in this one instance. In chapter 2, we consider the outstanding recommendations from Kenova’s Interim and Final Reports, and how to monitor their implementation. We thank Sir Iain and Chief Constable Boutcher for the quality of the evidence they gave us, which has in turn informed our Report.

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1 Operation Kenova, [Homepage](#), accessed 22 January 2026

2 BBC News, [Government urged to officially confirm ‘Stakeknife’ IRA spy as Freddie Scappaticci](#), 9 December 2025

3 BBC News, [Government urged to officially confirm ‘Stakeknife’ IRA spy as Freddie Scappaticci](#), 9 December 2025

4 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, [Operation Kenova: final report - Oral evidence](#), HC 1580

5 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, [Operation Kenova - Oral evidence](#), HC 671

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# 1 Naming Stakeknife

## Background

3. It has been the policy of successive Governments to give a “Neither Confirm Nor Deny” (NCND) response to questions about matters that are sensitive on national security grounds. The policy mainly relates to discussion of the activities of the security and intelligence agencies, and applies where secrecy is necessary in the public interest and to avoid the risks that a confirmation or denial would create.<sup>6</sup>
4. The alleged agent known as Stakeknife is thought to have joined the IRA in the 1970s and, according to media reports, towards the end of the decade was recruited by the Army as an agent. Throughout the 1980s, he operated within the IRA’s internal security unit (ISU), which was known as the ‘nutting squad’. Its purpose was to identify informers who were then kidnapped, tortured and murdered.<sup>7</sup> He maintained his cover in the IRA by interrogating fellow British agents, threatening to string up and skin his victims before offering to let them go free if they confessed.<sup>8</sup> Once they confessed, he would order, or carry out, their execution, afterwards playing taped confessions to the families left behind. He is suspected of involvement in multiple murders.<sup>9</sup> He was finally helped to leave Northern Ireland after his identity was revealed in the media in 2003.
5. Operation Kenova made repeated unsuccessful attempts to persuade the Government to allow the formal naming of Stakeknife:
  - In 2023, Jon Boutcher sought “express written clarification” of the Government’s position during the security checking process for the Interim Report. The Government subsequently said that Kenova “should not expressly or impliedly identify the agent in the Interim

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6 See Security Service MI5, [Centenary History Policy on Disclosure](#), accessed 27 January 2026; and Operation Kenova/ Cabinet Office, [Guidance note on NCND principle](#), October 2017, p1

7 BBC News, [Government urged to officially confirm ‘Stakeknife’ IRA spy as Freddie Scappaticci](#), 9 December 2025

8 BBC News, [Stakeknife: Spy linked to 18 murders, BBC Panorama finds](#), 11 April 2017; The Guardian, [Britain’s ‘golden egg’: how agent Freddie Scappaticci was helped to the end](#), 9 December 2025

9 Reports of the number of murders Stakeknife was involved in vary, but is thought to be 14–18.

report or any family meeting or report” on the basis of maintaining the NCND principle. In August that year, this was confirmed in a letter from MI5.<sup>10</sup> In September, a further letter from the Cabinet Office stated that the identification of Stakeknife would breach Information Handling Protocols and Memoranda of Understanding between Kenova and the Government. It also implied potential breach of the Official Secrets Act 1989;<sup>11</sup>

- In March 2024, the Kenova Interim Report stated that the security forces and Government had “steadfastly refused to confirm or deny the allegations that Mr Scappaticci was an agent or that he was Stakeknife”; it added that “the truth about the identity of Stakeknife will have to be officially confirmed at some point”.<sup>12</sup> The Interim Report also listed precedents for confirmation or denial that an individual was a security force agent. These examples included the cases of Brian Nelson, William Stobie, Mohammed Othman, and Neil Heywood.<sup>13</sup>
- In December that year, the Operation Kenova Officer in Overall Command (OIOC), Sir Iain Livingstone, wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon. Hilary Benn MP, to seek permission to identify Stakeknife in the Final Report and in other reports on associated investigations, (Operations Mizzenmast, Turma and Denton).<sup>14</sup> Sir Iain’s letter set out the reasons for allowing an exceptional, but not unprecedented, departure from the Government’s NCND policy. These included the arguments that in the case of Stakeknife, blanket application of NCND undermines public confidence and protects no one, while an exception would have no effect on agent recruitment;<sup>15</sup>
- In April 2025, Sir Iain wrote again to the Secretary of State offering to discuss the issue in person,<sup>16</sup> and reiterated that invitation in evidence to us as part of our inquiry into the Government’s new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland.<sup>17</sup>

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10 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 4.13

11 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 4.13

12 Operation Kenova, [Interim Report](#), 8 March 2024, paras 2.4, 2.5

13 Operation Kenova, [Interim Report](#), 8 March 2024, para 48.9

14 The Operation Kenova team took on further historical investigations at the request of PSNI. Operation Mizzenmast is an investigation into the death of Jean Smyth-Campbell in 1972. Operation Turma is an investigation into the murder of three RUC officers at Kinnego Embankment in 1982 and Operation Denton (also known as The Bernard Review) is a review into what has become known as the Glenanne Series.

15 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 4.15

16 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 4.16

17 Oral evidence taken on 23 April 2025, [Q104](#), [Claire Hanna]

6. In August 2025, the Secretary of State replied to Sir Iain’s letters, promising a substantive response to the matter once a judgment had been issued in the Government’s appeal to the Supreme Court to prevent the disclosure of intelligence information relating to the loyalist murder of Paul Thompson in 1994. In his letter, the Secretary of State also said:

The Government’s long-standing policy of neither confirming nor denying (NCND) the existence of agents remains in place at this time in relation to this case.<sup>18</sup>

7. Operation Kenova was unable to confirm Stakeknife’s identity in its Final Report because the Government refused it authorisation to do so. The report concluded:

The refusal to confirm or deny whether Scappaticci was Stakeknife is having a profound and severe impact on victims and families, legitimate public discussion and debate, media freedom, open justice and public confidence in state authorities and the criminal justice system.<sup>19</sup>

8. The report also criticised NCND for “fuelling grievance, conspiracy theories and human suffering” and concluded that confirming the identity of Stakeknife “would not create or increase any risk or cause any damage to the public interest”.<sup>20</sup>

9. On 17 December 2025, shortly after the publication of the Final Report, the Government won its appeal against the disclosure of intelligence information relating to the murder of Paul Thompson.<sup>21</sup> Its lawyers had argued that disclosure would be contrary to the public interest in protecting national security.<sup>22</sup> In a Written Statement, the Secretary of State welcomed the unanimous judgment and said the Government would take time to consider all its implications, including the request made by Operation Kenova for the Government to name Stakeknife. He promised to update the Commons as soon as the Government had come to a view.<sup>23</sup> On that basis, we decided to invite Sir Iain Livingstone and Chief Constable Jon Boutcher to give oral evidence on 14 January 2026.

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18 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 4.17

19 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 9.18

20 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 9.19

21 UK Supreme Court, [In the matter of an application by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for Judicial Review \(Appellant\)](#), 17 December 2025

22 BBC News, [Government wins case to prevent release of secret intelligence](#), 17 December 2025, accessed 19 December 2025; Irish Legal News, [UK Supreme Court ruling on Troubles disclosure a ‘grim day for truth’](#), 17 December 2025

23 House of Commons, [Written Statement HCWS1194](#), 17 December 2025

## Evidence received

10. During oral evidence, we approached the debate about naming Stakeknife with an open mind, and put a range of questions to our witnesses to test their case. Both said that their engagement on the matter with the Government was ongoing,<sup>24</sup> and, as officers of considerable seniority and experience in covert operations, both recognised the principle behind Neither Confirm Nor Deny. Sir Iain said, however, that it had become a “rigid dogma” that flew in the face of reality and was “contrary to public interest”.<sup>25</sup> Chief Constable Boutcher added that

this culture of not revealing information is wired in because of the, I think misplaced, position that it will undermine public confidence.<sup>26</sup>

11. We asked about the effect of the Government’s NCND policy on Kenova’s objective of establishing the truth about Stakeknife, his activities and his relationship with the security services. We were told that naming him would in fact support the principle of NCND. Sir Iain said:

When you have a source, you have to say to them, “There are limits on how you can conduct yourself.” There are conditions, and if there is any sense that there is no limit and you will always be protected and have that cover, it is because that is what happened with Stakeknife.<sup>27</sup>

Sir Iain added:

There are a tiny number of extreme and atypical conditions and circumstances where it is in the public interest and there is a greater good to name that individual. If that does not apply in the case of agent Stakeknife, I do not think it will ever apply.<sup>28</sup>

Referring to the ‘dangers’ of not naming Stakeknife, Sir Iain said that

sources need to know that there are limits on how you can conduct yourself. Grotesque murdering, terrorist torture and criminality certainly go past those limits.<sup>29</sup>

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24 [Q7](#); [Q8](#); [Q12](#)

25 [Q3](#)

26 [Q7](#)

27 [Q3](#)

28 [Q3](#)

29 [Q3](#)

12. When we asked about the ‘value’ of Stakeknife as an agent, and the complication that for him to be of ‘value’, he would continue committing those heinous crimes, Chief Constable Boutcher made a further point in support of the case for naming Stakeknife. He said that

the general public have an assumption that when we apply NCND, we have operated within the rule of law and have conducted ourselves properly. That hasn’t happened here, so that assumption can be put to one side.<sup>30</sup>

Mr Boutcher added:

Arguments have been made to me that the reason we cannot identify agent Stakeknife is that it would lead to an undermining of confidence in our security forces. The approach that has been undertaken all this time has undermined confidence in the security forces [...] overwhelmingly they did a great job, but where we got it wrong, we cannot cover it up; we have to say that we got it wrong.<sup>31</sup>

Mr Boutcher also said that governance, oversight and legal frameworks were now in place to ensure that anyone engaging in similar activities would be dealt with quickly and “taken off the books.”<sup>32</sup> Lessons had been learned, he noted, but he added that in Northern Ireland there was still “significant concern” that they had not been because “everything is still behind this curtain of secrecy”. He concluded that

when we are not making decisions to name this agent, it is seen as a continuance of that position.<sup>33</sup>

13. We also explored the possibility that naming Stakeknife could put active agents or their loved ones at risk of reprisal. In response, Chief Constable Boutcher cited comparable cases, in particular, Brian Nelson, an agent for the Army’s Force Research Unit, who was prosecuted for his actions. Chief Constable Boutcher said that, despite pressure not to prosecute Nelson,

it was in the public interest to prosecute that individual; and the sky did not fall in, we did not start losing agents, agents did not walk away and we did not find that we could not recruit agents.<sup>34</sup>

14. In addition to examples provided in the Interim Report, the Final Report also noted that RUC Special Branch agents Declan Casey, Kenneth Barrett and Gary Haggarty had all been officially identified as agents in the

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30 [Q6](#)

31 [Q6](#)

32 [Q6](#)

33 [Q6](#)

34 [Q10](#)

context of Troubles-related criminality. Equally, it added, there had been official denials of agent status in connection with those wrongly accused or suspected of being agents including Seamus Morgan and Brian McNally.<sup>35</sup>

15. Noting that the Government had placed considerable significance in the Thompson Supreme Court judgment, we also asked our witnesses for their view on its implications for naming Stakeknife. Chief Constable Boutcher said that the case was “not about naming agents”,<sup>36</sup> while Sir Iain added that, “there is nothing there that would stop the Minister giving authority to name Stakeknife”.<sup>37</sup>

16. **CONCLUSION**

It is not normal practice to name agents of the state, but in this one instance it is appropriate, proportionate and strongly in the public interest for the Government to name the agent known as Stakeknife. We have been reassured that naming Stakeknife would not put any active agents at risk, discourage existing agents from continuing their work, or deter the recruitment of new agents. We are strongly of the view that, for this single case, naming Stakeknife would help to build trust and confidence in the agencies of the state among all communities. Our conclusion is reinforced by the understanding that a discrete decision to name in this instance would also indicate to agents guilty of conduct beyond acceptable limits that they will not be protected or shielded from the consequences of their actions.

17. **RECOMMENDATION**

The Government should formally name agent Stakeknife.

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35 Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), 9 December 2025, para 9.14

36 [Q13](#)

37 [Q14](#)

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## 2 Outstanding Kenova recommendations

### The recommendations

18. Operation Kenova's Final Report also provided an update on the progress made in relation to the 10 recommendations in its Interim Report, which we summarise below:
- **Recommendations 1–2, a new statutory framework for legacy:** the 2023 Legacy Act established the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) but the Act was found to be incapable of discharging the state's investigative obligations under articles 2–3 of the ECHR and a number of the Act's key provisions had been declared incompatible with Convention rights and the Windsor Framework; on coming to power, the Labour Government accepted some of the High Court's decisions but appealed other aspects. The UK and Irish Governments published a Joint Framework to address legacy matters in September 2025.
  - **Recommendation 3, transfer of legacy cases to criminal justice system:** in a letter to Sir Iain in January 2025, the Northern Ireland Justice Minister Naomi Long MLA did not undertake to legislate to provide procedural time limits for the handling of cases transferring from ICRIR to the criminal justice system, but did confirm that tackling delays in the justice system in Northern Ireland was one of her priorities.
  - **Recommendations 4 and 8, review and resourcing of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPSNI);** the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland (DPPNI) took issue with recommendations for review and reform of the resourcing and operating practices of PPSNI in connection with Northern Ireland legacy cases; on recommendation 8, relating to engagement with victims and families, the DPPNI pointed out that the PPSNI Code for Prosecutors already states that prosecutors are required to take into account the views of victims and, in appropriate cases, family members in deciding the public interest test. We are aware at the time

of writing the PPS continue to decline independent counsel as part of their review into the PPS decisions on files received from Operation Kenova.

- **Recommendation 5, the longest day as a day of reflection for the Troubles:** the Northern Ireland Executive’s Strategy for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles/Conflict 2024–2034 received endorsement in October 2024 and includes a commitment in relation to the annual Day of Reflection on 21 June; the Government has also announced an annual national day to honour all victims and survivors of terrorism will be inaugurated on 21 August 2026, a date that the United Nations has established as International Day of Remembrance for victims of terrorism.
- **Recommendations 6–7, review of NCND and classification of previous reports:** no substantive progress has yet been made on these recommendations, and it is unclear whether and when this may change.
- **Recommendation 9, government apology:** the Northern Ireland Secretary said in August 2025 that the Government “will not consider a state apology while litigation remains ongoing and ahead of a final [Kenova] report”.
- **Recommendation 10, republican leadership apology:** the First Minister of Northern Ireland and Vice President of Sinn Féin, Michelle O’Neill MLA, issued a statement following the publication of the Kenova Interim Report in March 2024; this statement was “generally welcomed” but whether more needed to be said was a question for victims and families as well as wider society.<sup>38</sup>

## Evidence received

19. During our session with Sir Iain Livingstone and Chief Constable Jon Boutcher, we asked for their view about the urgency of implementing these recommendations. The Final Report set out progress at the time of publication in December 2025. Sir Iain voiced concern, however, that with the Troubles Bill still making its way through Parliament and Operation Kenova having come to an end, and with a number of other issues still to resolve, there was “no monitoring group other than this Committee”.<sup>39</sup> Sir Iain added that he did not have any solutions in mind “other than the authority of this Committee, to keep those recommendations under

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38 See Operation Kenova, [Final Report](#), paras 43.1–43.16, for the recommendations and updates in full.

39 [Q38](#)

review”.<sup>40</sup> Chief Constable Boutcher told us that from his perspective at the PSNI, the recommendations “will not disappear from my mindset” and that he will be “lobbying to do what I think is right”.<sup>41</sup>

**20. CONCLUSION**

The implications of Operation Kenova’s investigations, for future legacy inquiries, the policy of Neither Confirm Nor Deny and the Government’s approach to reconciliation, are of considerable continuing interest to us. Through ongoing and bespoke pieces of work, we plan to monitor Government progress on the implementation of Kenova’s conclusions and recommendations.

**21. RECOMMENDATION**

The Government should review, in consultation with MI5 and the PSNI, the application of NCND in all legacy related cases, considering specifically the principles outlined in this Report.

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40 [Q38](#)

41 [Q39](#)

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# Conclusions and recommendations

## Naming Stakeknife

1. It is not normal practice to name agents of the state, but in this one instance it is appropriate, proportionate and strongly in the public interest for the Government to name the agent known as Stakeknife. We have been reassured that naming Stakeknife would not put any active agents at risk, discourage existing agents from continuing their work, or deter the recruitment of new agents. We are strongly of the view that, for this single case, naming Stakeknife would help to build trust and confidence in the agencies of the state among all communities. Our conclusion is reinforced by the understanding that a discrete decision to name in this instance would also indicate to agents guilty of conduct beyond acceptable limits that they will not be protected or shielded from the consequences of their actions. (Conclusion, Paragraph 16)
2. The Government should formally name agent Stakeknife. (Recommendation, Paragraph 17)

## Outstanding Kenova recommendations

3. The implications of Operation Kenova's investigations, for future legacy inquiries, the policy of Neither Confirm Nor Deny and the Government's approach to reconciliation, are of considerable continuing interest to us. Through ongoing and bespoke pieces of work, we plan to monitor Government progress on the implementation of Kenova's conclusions and recommendations. (Conclusion, Paragraph 20)
4. The Government should review, in consultation with MI5 and the PSNI, the application of NCND in all legacy related cases, considering specifically the principles outlined in this Report. (Recommendation, Paragraph 21)

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# Formal minutes

**Wednesday 4 February 2026**

## Members present

Tonia Antoniazzi, in the Chair

Chris Bloore

Claire Hanna

Simon Hoare

Adam Jogee

Katrina Murray

Gavin Robinson

Robin Swann

## Operation Kenova: naming Stakeknife

Draft Report (*Operation Kenova: naming Stakeknife*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 21 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third 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 11 February 2026 at 9.00am

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# Witnesses

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

## Wednesday 14 January 2026

**Sir Iain Livingstone QPM**, Officer in Overall Command, Operation Kenova;  
**Jon Boucher QPM** (Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland, and former Officer in Overall Command, Operation Kenova) [Q1-42](#)

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# 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 2024–26

| Number      | Title                                                                                  | Reference |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 2nd         | The Government's new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland | HC 586    |
| 1st         | Funding and delivery of public services: follow up                                     | HC 477    |
| 2nd Special | Funding and delivery of public services: follow up: Government Response                | HC 1096   |
| 1st Special | The Funding and Delivery of Public Services in Northern Ireland: Government Response   | HC 413    |