

**Written evidence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights
Commission [CCI0031]**

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (the NIHRC), pursuant to section 69(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, is required to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights in Northern Ireland (NI). The NIHRC is also required, by section 78A(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to monitor the implementation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework, to ensure there is no diminution of rights protected in the “Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity” chapter of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998 as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.¹ In accordance with these statutory duties, the following submission is made to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry into community cohesion.
- 1.2 The NIHRC also highlights its recently published Annual Statement 2024, which includes additional sections of interest particularly concerning equality and non-discrimination.²

2.0 Rule of Law

Non-State actors

- 2.1 In 2015, the Fresh Start Agreement committed to tackling paramilitary and organised crime.³ In 2016, the NI Executive established the Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime.⁴ Phase One of the programme ran until March 2021, with the majority of actions completed.⁵ In April 2024, Phase Two was extended until the end of March 2025.⁶

¹ The Windsor Framework was formerly known as the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement and all references to the Protocol in this document have been updated to reflect this change. See Decision No 1/2023 of the Joint Committee established by the Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community of 24 March 2023 laying down arrangements relating to the Windsor Framework.

² NI Human Rights, ‘Annual Statement 2024’ (NIHRC, 2024).

³ A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan, 17 November 2015.

⁴ NI Executive, ‘Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime’. Available at: [Executive programme for tackling paramilitary activity and organised crime | Northern Ireland Executive](#)

⁵ Department of Justice, ‘Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: An Interim Review and Proposed Next Steps for Delivery of the Executive Action Plan’ (DoJ, 2020).

⁶ NI Assembly Hansard, ‘Oral Question: Update on the Communities in Transition Project – Connie Egan MLA - AQO 250/22-27’, 24 April 2024; Independent Reporting Commission, ‘Sixth Report’ (IRC, 2023), at 6;

- 2.2 Since 2016, a Paramilitary Crime Task Force has been operating through the Police Service of NI, the National Crime Agency and HM Revenue and Customs, which focuses on tackling paramilitary groups criminality. In 2020, the NI Executive reaffirmed its commitment to “ending paramilitarism”.⁷ There was also a continued commitment by the UK Government to ensure the Police Service of NI is “appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity”.⁸ Furthermore, a commitment that funding will be “available for a range of projects aimed at supporting community and reconciliation initiatives... which could include areas such as additional funding for tackling paramilitarism”.⁹
- 2.3 In 2023/2024, it was reported that paramilitarism continues to affect up to 40 per cent of adults and 45 per cent of young people in NI.¹⁰
- 2.4 In 2023/2024, there was one security related death, the same as 2022/2023.¹¹ There were 25 casualties of paramilitary style assaults, a decrease from 32 in 2022/2023 and the lowest number since 1983/1984.¹² In 2023/2024, there were 25 shooting incidents (a decrease from 37 in 2022/2023), seven bombing incidents (an increase from six in 2022/2023) and 12 casualties from paramilitary style shootings (an increase from 11 in 2022/2023).¹³
- 2.5 In 2024, there were increasing reports of links between paramilitarism and racist or xenophobic incidents and crimes in NI.¹⁴
- 2.6 In 2023/2024, the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime invested £16 million of its ring-fenced funding

Independent Reporting Commission, 'Sixth Report' (IRC, 2023), at 6.

⁷ NI Office, 'New Decade, New Approach' (NIO, 2020).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Organised Crime Task Force, 'Annual Report 2022/23: Threat and Assessment' (OCTF, 2024), at Appendix 2.

¹¹ Police Service of NI, 'Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics - 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024' (PSNI, 2024), at 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lyndsey Telford, 'Who is behind the Belfast race violence?', *BBC News*, 10 August 2024; Andrew Madden and Brett Campbell, 'Fears nurses could flee NI due to paramilitary-linked disorder', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 August 2024; Rebecca Black, 'Paramilitary element suspected in latest disorder in Belfast', *Independent*, 6 August 2024; 'Man's head "stamped on" during racist attack', *BBC News*, 5 August 2024; Sara Girvin, 'Why has there been a spike in racist attacks in south Belfast?', *BBC News*, 17 October 2023; Brett Campbell, "'Racist" anti-immigration posters erected in Newtownards in suspected co-ordinated UDA campaign' *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 December 2023.

across its projects.¹⁵ Of this £8 million was ring-fenced funding from the Executive Office's budget and £8 million was provided by the UK Government.¹⁶ In 2024/2025, the funding for extending the programme has been maintained at its current level.¹⁷

2.7 In 2023, the Independent Reporting Commission published its sixth annual report, which concluded that:

in our recent Reports, we have characterised each year as "mixed" in terms of the paramilitarism landscape. That description also applies to 2023. Statistics on the security situation and other data measuring the impact of paramilitarism showed levels broadly in line with the last few years and there is increasing evidence that the combined efforts of the Twin Tracks of tackling the issue are bearing real fruit. But that said, there were some shocking incidents during the year involving both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. The threat level for NI-related Terrorism was increased during the year to "severe". Coercive control continues to be an unacceptable feature of life in many communities where the paramilitaries operate. Instability at political level has also not helped. For those reasons, we say there are no grounds for complacency. Rather, the need for a continued sustained focus on tackling and ending paramilitarism remains essential. There exists an opportunity to advance efforts to tackle paramilitarism, but this requires further risk-taking and additional measures to supplement current valuable efforts.¹⁸

2.8 The Independent Reporting Commission recommended that "funding and commitment to tackling paramilitarism must be long-term, multi-year and sustainable, allowing progress and innovation to bed in and avoiding a stop-start approach that is constrained by short budget cycles and associated pressures".¹⁹ The Independent

¹⁵ Organised Crime Task Force, 'Annual Report 2022/23: Threat and Assessment' (OCTF, 2024), at Appendix 2.

¹⁶ NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Ministerial Statement: Public Expenditure Budget 2024-25 – Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA', 25 April 2024; Independent Reporting Commission, 'Sixth Report' (IRC, 2023), at 136.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Independent Reporting Commission, 'Sixth Report' (IRC, 2023), at para 1.36.

¹⁹ Ibid, at para 1.65.

Reporting Commission encouraged that the UK Government and NI Executive give serious consideration to strengthening and deepening efforts to tackle paramilitarism beyond Phase Two of the Programme, noting that continuation could take many forms, including through a Phase Three or a greater focus on mainstreaming key elements.²⁰

2.9 The NIHRC highlights the NI Affairs Committee’s inquiry report into the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in NI.²¹ It noted the enduring impact of paramilitarism through the physical or psychological harm to victims and survivors of violence, the harm to communities through coercive control and the perpetuation of societal trauma.²² The NIHRC particularly highlights the NI Affairs Committee’s recommendation that the UK Government and NI Executive:

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.²³

2.10 In May 2024, the previous UK Government advised that the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime was being reviewed “in order to shape considerations of the Programme moving beyond the current phase”.²⁴ In late 2024, recommendations were due to be brought to the Programme Sponsor Group and it was anticipated that any proposals for multi-year funding would be considered at that stage.²⁵

2.11 In September 2024, the NI Executive identified “safer communities” as an immediate priority. As part of this, the NI Executive confirmed

²⁰ Ibid, at para 1.66.

²¹ UK Parliament, ‘House of Commons: NI Affairs Committee - The Effect of Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime on Society in NI - Second Report of Session 2023–2024’ (HC, 2024).

²² UK Parliament, ‘House of Commons: NI Affairs Committee - The Effect of Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime on Society in NI - Second Report of Session 2023–2024’ (HC, 2024), at 4; Aisling Swaine, ‘When You Know What They are Capable Of’: Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control’ (Foyle Family Justice Centre and UCD, 2024).

²³ UK Parliament, ‘House of Commons: NI Affairs Committee - The Effect of Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime on Society in NI - Second Report of Session 2023–2024’ (HC, 2024), at para 77.

²⁴ Letter from the Secretary of State for NI, Chris Heaton-Harris, to the House of Commons NI Affairs Committee, 17 May 2024.

²⁵ Ibid.

that it remained “committed to tackling paramilitarism and organised crime” and “will continue to support the cross-Executive efforts aimed at addressing them”.²⁶ This includes building “on work to date that has demonstrated the links from vulnerability to paramilitary harm and other types of harm and violence” and seeking to “address the root causes of violence”.²⁷

2.12 The NIHRC recommends that sufficient and sustained long-term resources are allocated to the programme to end paramilitarism, and that consistent monitoring is established to ensure the steps taken to end paramilitarism in NI are reflective of the Independent Reporting Commission’s recommendations.

2.13 The NIHRC recommends that effective steps are taken to address paramilitary links to racist, xenophobic and coercive control incidents and crimes in NI. This includes investigating, prosecuting and punishing such incidents and crimes and ensuring an effective remedy for victims and survivors. It also includes developing specific programmes aimed at challenging and neutralising racist, xenophobic and controlling views, perceptions or disinformation, and building sustainable good relations. It should also involve the Police Service of NI, and other relevant bodies, building enduring relationships and undertaking meaningful engagement with affected individuals and representative organisations.

3.0 Social Housing

Segregation

3.1 Across NI, 90 per cent of NI Housing Executive estates are segregated.²⁸ The NI Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Strategy addresses segregation, with several actions aimed at

²⁶ NI Executive, 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most – Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027' (NIE, 2024), at 45.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Department for Communities, 'Housing Supply Strategy 2022 - 2037: Call for Evidence Summary Report' (DfC, 2021), at 28.

supporting research into segregation and encouraging mixed housing schemes.²⁹ Yet, intimidation continues.³⁰ The NI Housing Executive has acknowledged that “political and sectarian displays are prevalent within housing estates and symbols such as murals, flags, kerb painting, bonfires and paramilitary memorials can create a ‘chill factor’ for visitors”.³¹ It has also been reported that emblems and flags are being erected within new housing estates to demark territory.³² Yet, public authorities have been criticised for not addressing the root of the problem and not having a strategy in place that offers mitigating measures.³³ For example, in 2024, the Cohesion Strategy, which expired in 2020, has not been updated.

3.2 In 2024, there was a rise in intimidation tactics being used against racial and ethnic minorities within housing estates in NI.³⁴ This has included racist and xenophobic posters, graffiti and physical attacks on property and individuals.³⁵ The posters indicate that the purpose of these actions is to ensure “no multiculturalism” and to promote segregation.³⁶ Several families have been intimidated from their homes as a result.³⁷

3.3 A Private Members Bill is being explored that aims to clarify the requirement for public authorities to remove flags, banners and markings placed on public property in support of paramilitary groups, while also “enabling the reasonable and time-bound display of emblems placed for the purposes of legitimate commemoration or celebration”.³⁸

3.4 **The NIHRC recommends that concrete steps are taken to promptly and robustly eradicate paramilitary and sectarian**

²⁹ NI Housing Executive, 'Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020' (NIHE, 2015).

³⁰ NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Answers: Housing Stock - Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA - AQW 2764/22-27', 16 August 2022; Jayne McCormack, 'Paramilitaries: Housing intimidation “rife” in NI', *BBC News*, 23 November 2023.

³¹ Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, 'Final Report' (CFICT, 2021), at para 14.12.

³² Alliance Party, 'Press Release: Bradshaw submits Private Member's Bill to tackle unwanted flags and banners on public property', 26 June 2024.

³³ Brett Campbell, 'Belfast families living in fear on mixed estate where Catholics forced to flee', *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 September 2017; Alliance Party, 'Press Release: Bradshaw submits Private Member's Bill to tackle unwanted flags and banners on public property', 26 June 2024.

³⁴ Ita Dungan, 'Eight families forced from homes by racist attacks', *BBC News*, 4 July 2024; Jessica Rice, 'Man forced out of Belfast home after racist graffiti calls for public's support: “This is a time for action”', *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 July 2024.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Alliance Party, 'Press Release: Bradshaw submits Private Member's Bill to tackle unwanted flags and banners on public property', 26 June 2024.

intimidation that cause families to be forced out of their homes. This requires a collaborative approach with housing providers, Police Service of NI and community representatives.

Data collection

3.5 In 2015, the Equality Commission for NI found that, despite monitoring guidance for public authorities, there is a lack of robust housing and communities data relating to several equality grounds.³⁹ In 2019, the Equality Commission for NI reiterated its calls for improved data collection to address gaps and for data to be disaggregated, noting that "these shortfalls limit the ability to draw robust conclusions about inequalities, and/or progress in addressing the same, across the full range of equality categories and groups".⁴⁰ These issues remain.

3.6 **The NIHRC recommends that comprehensive equality data on housing in NI is regularly gathered, monitored, evaluated and published. This data should be disaggregated in a way that reflects NI society. In cooperation with housing providers, Police Service of NI and community representatives should take prompt, effective steps to address and eradicate any inequalities that are identified.**

Housing selection scheme

3.7 Social housing in NI is allocated through a points-based system, which uses common criteria to assess the housing needs of all social housing applicants.⁴¹ The housing selection scheme is approved by the Department for Communities and implemented by the NI Housing Executive for all social housing, including housing provided for and managed by housing associations. Under this scheme applicants are assessed and awarded points according to their housing need. The level of points awarded determines the

³⁹ Equality Commission for NI, 'Investigation Report under Schedule 9 of the NI Act 1998: Department for Social Development - Housing Policy Proposals' (ECNI, 2015).

⁴⁰ Equality Commission for NI, 'Equality in Housing and Communities: Policy Recommendations' (ECNI, 2019).

⁴¹ Article 22, Housing (NI) Order 1981.

applicant's position on the social housing waiting list. Applicants may qualify for points under four categories – intimidation, insecurity of tenure, housing conditions and health or social well-being.⁴²

- 3.8 Since 2022, the NIHRC assisted several individuals who have not been awarded intimidation points, despite being victims of intimidation. Intimidation points are awarded to applicants whose home has been destroyed or seriously damaged or they are in serious and imminent risk of being killed or seriously injured as a result of a terrorist, racial or sectarian attack, or because of an attack motivated by hostility because of an individual's disability or sexual orientation or result of an attack due to neighbourhood nuisance or other similar forms of anti-social behaviour.⁴³ Yet, the definition of intimidation for this purpose excludes other common scenarios of intimidation such as domestic violence, coercive control or being intimidated on other grounds, such as nationality, gender, political opinion and other grounds. The effect of this is that no matter how at risk a person is, they will not receive the points. There is no official appeals mechanism, with only an informal complaints procedure available. The NIHRC has found that the complaints procedure is lengthy, the effects of which is exacerbated given the vulnerability of the individuals and households involved, many of whom remain at risk of death or serious injury whilst the complaint is being determined.
- 3.9 Independent research initiated by the NI Housing Executive is ongoing for the purposes of establishing options to reform the housing selection scheme.⁴⁴ The NI Housing Executive intends that a revised scheme is implemented by mid-2026.⁴⁵
- 3.10 In 2024, the NIHRC initiated a judicial review challenging the operation and interpretation of the housing selection scheme on the grounds that, in some circumstances, it breaches Articles 2 (right to life), 3 (freedom from torture), 6 (right to a fair hearing), and 8 (right to respect for private and family life) of the ECHR. In October

⁴² NI Housing Executive, 'Housing Selection Scheme Rules' (NIHE, 2014).

⁴³ Ibid, at Rule 23.

⁴⁴ Email from the NI Housing Executive to the Racial Equality Subgroup, 18 October 2024.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

2024, the leave hearing commenced. The High Court of Justice in NI indicated that several steps should be taken and further evidence provided before a decision on leave is made. The leave hearing was due to continue in February 2025. However, in January 2025, the Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons MLA, announced that intimidation points will be removed from the housing selection scheme and that "all victims of violence, harassment or trauma for any reason - including victims of domestic violence - will be able to access the same categories of points within the Scheme for violence or the threat of violence".⁴⁶

3.11 The NIHRC is concerned about the recent development on removal of intimidation points, and continues to recommend that there is consideration of the housing selection scheme in NI to ensure that it considers properly an applicant's circumstances and protects those facing dangers, reflecting up-to-date challenges faced by individuals and households in NI.

3.12 The NIHRC recommends that an official mechanism to appeal housing selection decisions is in place, which is effectively implemented and monitored.

4.0 Travellers' Accommodation

Unauthorised Encampments (NI) Order 2005

4.1 In 2018, use of the Unauthorised Encampments (NI) Order 2005 was considered by the NIHRC as part of its Travellers' accommodation investigation, which confirmed that the 2005 Order "has a disproportionate impact on the Traveller communities and threatens their nomadic culture".⁴⁷

4.2 The Department for Communities accepts that the powers under the 2005 Order have a particular effect on Travellers in NI, but has

⁴⁶ Department for Communities, 'Press Release: Minister Announces Removal of Intimidation Points from Housing Selection Scheme', 28 January 2025.

⁴⁷ NI Human Rights Commission, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Travellers' Accommodation in NI' (NIHRC, 2018), at 288.

stated that annual monitoring of the impact of the 2005 Order “indicates that the provisions of the 2005 Order have been applied sensitively, pragmatically and proportionately and are effective in balancing the rights of the Irish Travellers, landowners and the settled community”.⁴⁸ For example, the NI Housing Executive operates a co-operation policy permitting Travellers to set up an unauthorised encampment on public land, if certain circumstances and safeguards have been met.⁴⁹ The NI Housing Executive emphasises that the policy is intended to act as a way of dealing with a humane requirement.⁵⁰ However, there are reports that there is no evidence of the co-operation policy in practice. In 2024, there were several cases reported where Traveller families were ordered under the 2005 Order to leave property with no alternative location indicated by public authorities.⁵¹ The notable reduction in Travellers sites in NI is also having an effect with no pitches available to accommodate growing Traveller families or nomadic Travellers.⁵²

4.3 The NI Executive has no plans to repeal the 2005 Order.⁵³

4.4 **The NIHRC recommends that the Unauthorised Encampments (NI) Order 2005 is promptly repealed.**

5.0 Education

Integrated education

5.1 The Integrated Education Act 2022 amended the statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage, facilitate and the development of Integrated Education.⁵⁴ It provides a more inclusive definition for integrated education, relating to the education together

⁴⁸ Letter from Permanent Secretary of Department for Communities, Leo O’Reilly, to the NI Human Rights Commission, 18 May 2018.

⁴⁹ NI Housing Executive, ‘Irish Travellers Accommodation Strategy 2021-2026’ (Housing Executive, 2021), at page 43.

⁵⁰ NI Housing Executive, ‘Our Cooperation Policy for Travellers’. Available at: http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/advice/advice_for_travellers/co-operation_policy.htm.

⁵¹ Email correspondence with Craigavon Travellers Support Committee, 25 July 2024; Email correspondence with Craigavon Travellers Support Committee, 1 July 2024; Meeting of the Executive Office Traveller Thematic Subgroup, 26 June 2024.

⁵² Meeting of the Executive Office Traveller Thematic Subgroup, 26 June 2024.

⁵³ Oral evidence provided to the UN CERD Committee by the UK Government, 14 August 2024.

⁵⁴ Section 6, Integrated Education Act 2022.

pupils of different cultures, religions, socio-economic backgrounds and abilities.⁵⁵

- 5.2 In 2023/2024, out of 356,450 pupils attending schools in NI, there were 27,700 (7.8 per cent) pupils enrolled in integrated education.⁵⁶ In 2024, there were 72 grant-aided integrated schools in NI, consisting of two integrated nursery schools, 49 integrated primary schools and 21 integrated post-primary schools.⁵⁷ A survey of over 2,300 respondents indicated that 67 per cent of parents in NI support integrated education or believe it should be the main model.⁵⁸ A further survey indicated that 60 per cent of 16 year olds in NI either agreed or strongly agreed, and only 7 per cent either disagreed or strongly disagreed, that the NI Executive should encourage and support integrated education in NI.⁵⁹
- 5.3 In 2023, the Department of Education published an updated strategy for integrated education in NI, as required by the 2022 Act.⁶⁰ However, the strategy does not set specific and measurable targets for increasing pupil or school numbers in integrated education.⁶¹ In 2024, a further updated strategy for integrated education in NI was awaited.⁶² Following concerns about the complexity of assessing demand for integrated education,⁶³ the Department of Education was also considering new ways to collate and monitor data.⁶⁴
- 5.4 In 2023, the Independent Review of Education recommended a reconfiguration of the network of schools in NI.⁶⁵ The Independent Review specifically recommended an increase in the number of integrated schools in NI.⁶⁶ The Independent Review also

⁵⁵ Section 1(1), Integrated Education Act 2022.

⁵⁶ Department of Education, 'Annual Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-school Education in NI 2023-2024' (NISRA, 2024).

⁵⁷ Education Authority, 'Integrated Education'. Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/integrated-education>.

⁵⁸ Integrated Education Fund, 'Press Release: LucidTalk NI Attitudinal Poll 2024'. Available at: <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll-2024/>

⁵⁹ NI Young Life and Times Survey, 'Summary of Results 2024' (ARK, 2024), at Figure 6.

⁶⁰ Department of Education, 'A Strategy for Integrated Education in NI' (DE, 2023).

⁶¹ Robbie Meredith, 'Integrated education expansion plan branded 'action plan with no action'', *BBC News*, 27 April 2023.

⁶² NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Questions: NI Affairs Committee Integrated Education Inquiry – Nick Mathison MLA - AQW 13730/22-27', 8 July 2024.

⁶³ Letter from Chair of NI Affairs Committee, Sir Robert Buckland, to NI Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, 23 May 2024; Erin Early et al, 'Report on Research Methods for Assessing Demand for Integrated Education in NI' (IEF and QUB, 2023), at 53.

⁶⁴ NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Questions: NI Affairs Committee Integrated Education Inquiry – Nick Mathison MLA - AQW 13730/22-27', 8 July 2024.

⁶⁵ Independent Review of Education, 'Investing in a Better Future' (Independent Review of Education, 2023).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

recommended a reconfiguration of jointly managed community schools in NI, “with expanded numbers of learners from different communities attending the same school and learning together”.⁶⁷ The Independent Review underscored the importance of all families having such options “within a realistic travelling distance as soon as possible”.⁶⁸

5.5 The NIHRC highlights the findings of the NI Affairs Committee’s inquiry into integrated education in NI,⁶⁹ which included reiterating the importance of investment in integrated education and highlighting that the Department of Education needs to take a more strategic approach to its development, noting that the Department of Education is yet to bring forward any regulations under the 2022 Act.⁷⁰ In 2024, the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, reaffirmed the Department of Education’s commitment to addressing the issues identified and that work was ongoing to ensure compliance with the 2022 Act.⁷¹ However, in January 2025, the Minister of Education rejected bids for two schools to become integrated.⁷² It was stated that there was not enough evidence that there would be enough Catholic pupils at each school for to provide integrated education.⁷³ The Minister of Education’s decision was contrary to the advice of officials within the Department of Education and the views of the majority of parents with pupils currently attending the schools.⁷⁴

5.6 The NIHRC recommends that the Integrated Education Act 2022 is fully utilised and prompt action is taken to ensure integrated education provision in NI meets demand, including providing the necessary support for schools that self-nominate to transition to an integrated school.

⁶⁷ Independent Review of Education, ‘Investing in a Better Future: Volume 1’ (Independent Review of Education, 2023), at para 8.45.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Letter from Chair of NI Affairs Committee, Sir Robert Buckland, to NI Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, 23 May 2024; Letter from Chair of NI Affairs Committee, Sir Robert Buckland, to Secretary of State for NI, Chris Heaton-Harris, 23 May 2024.

⁷⁰ Letter from Chair of NI Affairs Committee, Sir Robert Buckland, to NI Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, 23 May 2024.

⁷¹ NI Assembly Hansard, ‘Written Questions: NI Affairs Committee Integrated Education Inquiry – Nick Mathison MLA - AQW 13730/22-27’, 8 July 2024.

⁷² Robbie Meredith, ‘Givan rejects schools’ bids to become integrated’, *BBC News*, 8 January 2025.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Shared education

- 5.7 The Shared Education Act (NI) 2016 places an obligation on the Department of Education to promote shared education, which is educating together children and young people of different religious belief or who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation, and children and young people who are not.⁷⁵ In 2024, it is estimated that approximately 70,000 pupils in the NI education system are able to participate in shared education.⁷⁶ The main drivers of pupil participation have been the PEACE IV Shared Education Programme and the Department of Education's Mainstreaming Shared Education funding stream.⁷⁷
- 5.8 In 2024, 56 per cent of 2,210 respondents stated that they had been involved in shared education, with 58 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they were better able to respect the views of others since taking part.⁷⁸ Furthermore, 36 per cent said they had made close friends with young people from other schools who had a different religious background from their own.⁷⁹
- 5.9 In 2022, an independent evaluation of the effect of the PEACE IV Shared Education Programme reported that there was improved integration and engagement with peers, improved educational outcomes, and enhanced teaching and learning in NI.⁸⁰ In 2023, the PEACE IV programme ended and its successor programme, PEACE PLUS 2021-2027, opened to applications.⁸¹ In 2024, projects under PEACE PLUS 2021-2027 are not yet operational.⁸² The Department of Education continues to engage with the Special European Union Programmes Body and the Government of Ireland to support its delivery.⁸³

⁷⁵ Section 2, Shared Education Act (NI) 2016.

⁷⁶ Department of Education, 'Advancing Shared Education: 4th Report to the NI Assembly' (DE, 2024).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ NI Young Life and Times Survey, 'Summary of Results 2024' (ARK, 2024), at Figure 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Special EU Programmes Body, 'Shared Education Impact Evaluation (Year 5): PEACE IV Programme – Specific Objective 1' (SEUPB, 2022).

⁸¹ Email correspondence from Department of Education to NI Human Rights Commission, 9 August 2023.

⁸² Ibid; NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Questions: Advancing Shared Education – Nick Mathison MLA - AQW 8025/22-27, 15 March 2024.

⁸³ NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Questions: Advancing Shared Education – Daniel McCrossan MLA - AQW 12144/22-27', 23 May 2024; NI Assembly Hansard, 'Written Questions: Advancing Shared Education – Nick Mathison MLA - AQW 8025/22-27, 15 March 2024.

5.10 In 2023, the Independent Review of Education recognised that shared education has been invaluable for promoting social cohesion and that it was positive development.⁸⁴ However, the Independent Review stated that shared education “has to be substantially strengthened and re-imagined to be more ambitious”.⁸⁵ The Independent Review recommended that a new ‘Learning Together’ programme was introduced in NI, which required amalgamations of schools from different sectors and transformation to jointly managed community schools.⁸⁶ The Independent Review also concluded that the Strule Shared Education Campus is unaffordable and that “the benefits do not come close to justifying the cost of the project”.⁸⁷ The Independent Review recommended the immediate ending of the Strule programme and that Fresh Start resources were transferred to other education projects in NI.⁸⁸

5.11 The Department of Education is developing options for the Minister of Education to consider based on the Independent Review’s findings.⁸⁹ The outcome is awaited. However, the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, has advised that the “Strule and other Shared Education Campus capital projects will continue to be progressed in line with confirmation of access to funding and approved business cases”.⁹⁰ In addition, the Department of Education continued to implement the Mainstreaming Shared Education Strategy 2022, with the aim of establishing Shared Education as a core feature of educational provision in NI.⁹¹

5.12 The NIHRC recommends that long-term, secure funding for shared education is guaranteed in NI. This includes ensuring that any potential negative effect on funding of shared education due to the UK leaving the EU will be adequately and appropriately mitigated.

⁸⁴ Independent Review of Education, ‘Investing in a Better Future – Volume 1’ (Independent Review of Education, 2023), at para 8.36.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, at para 8.37.

⁸⁷ Ibid, at para 10.36.

⁸⁸ Ibid, at para 10.38.

⁸⁹ NI Assembly Hansard, ‘Written Question: Independent Review of Education - Kate Nicholl MLA - AQW 12843/22-27’, 10 June 2024.

⁹⁰ NI Assembly Hansard, ‘Written Questions: Advancing Shared Education – Daniel McCrossan MLA - AQW 12144/22-27’, 23 May 2024.

⁹¹ Ibid.

January 2025