



**Sixth Report  
December 2023**

# **INDEPENDENT REPORTING COMMISSION**

## **SIXTH REPORT**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was established in 2017 to report annually on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. This is our Sixth Report. We are mandated by the UK and Irish Governments and the NI parties to report on progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland, and measures to achieve that end. The Fresh Start Agreement identified the need for a broad, comprehensive, innovative approach to address the complexities underlying the continuation of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, rather than viewing it simply as a law and order matter. It is on that basis that we frame our Reports.

2023 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. A core goal of that Agreement was ensuring that the future was based on exclusively peaceful, democratic politics and that paramilitarism would become a thing entirely of the past. We believe that just as risks had to be taken to achieve peace in the 1990s, and dialogue underpinned those endeavours, so today further risks must be taken. By any measure, the situation in regard to paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is significantly better than it was during the height of the Troubles/conflict. But as the need for the Fresh Start Agreement demonstrated, there continues to be a residual problem in respect of paramilitarism. Paramilitarism represents a continuing threat to individuals and society, and must continue to be given sufficient attention and focus.

Policing and criminal justice measures are essential in bringing paramilitarism to an end, but they are not enough in themselves and need to be situated within a wider, more holistic approach that includes tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic issues facing communities where paramilitaries mainly operate.

We characterise 2023 as “mixed” in terms of paramilitarism. The security situation data showed levels broadly in line with the last few years, although the recent increase in shootings is a concern. There is increasing evidence that the work undertaken by the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme (“the Programme”) is bearing real fruit. Nevertheless, there were some shocking incidents during the year involving both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. The attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell was instrumental in the raising of the Threat Level in Northern Ireland-related Terrorism from “substantial” to “severe”. A number of incidents which occurred under the banner of Loyalist paramilitarism, including a high-profile drug gang feud, served to underline how quickly situations can escalate. For these reasons, heightened vigilance continues to be needed. Coercive control continues to be an unacceptable feature of life in many communities where the paramilitaries operate; for example, 194 households were accepted as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation last year. Instability at political level has also not helped. There are no grounds for complacency. Rather, the need for a continued sustained focus on tackling and ending paramilitarism remains essential.

In 2023, the Programme now comprises over 100 projects spread across Northern Ireland. There is an increasing focus on collaborative working of all of the entities involved, with a relatively new structure at the top (the Sponsor Group) chaired by the Head of the NI Civil Service, ensuring strategic leadership on a joined-up basis at a senior level, and there are strong examples of inter-agency collaboration at working level. In Phase Two of the Programme all projects are working towards shared outcomes, and there is an increased focus on monitoring and measuring progress towards those outcomes, as well as fostering greater partnership working. The priority given to data and evidence means there is now much more information available to support the development of the Programme and to shape and inform the development of public policy and practice more broadly. The Programme is implementing a public health approach, which we strongly endorse.

The financial context within which Departments, agencies and community organisations are seeking to deliver this vital work has been particularly constrained this year. This makes the work of delivering meaningful change and progress even more challenging, as people are focusing on core service delivery. It is vital that appropriate funding is provided not only for dedicated work to tackle paramilitarism, but also for transformational work to address the socio-economic context and for core service delivery (which enables targeted work to add value).

In our more recent Reports, we have given prominence to our view that a further dimension is required in addition to the ongoing work to tackle paramilitarism: an agreed formal process of Group Transition, involving direct engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves, in order to bring about disbandment. We have developed this suggestion because in our view, 'you cannot arrest your way out of the problem'. The disbandment of paramilitary organisations has to involve voluntary action by the groups themselves. Undoubtedly, paramilitarism has evolved over the last 25 years, but it also has continuing links to that previous reality. It is our view that a key feature of paramilitarism today is the continuation of its structures and infrastructure in the form of the various groups, both Republican and Loyalist. The existence of the structures means that they can be employed for criminal activity, and the continued existence of the names means that criminal activity can be associated with that 'brand' and in some way provide an additional flag of convenience and/or standing due to historic connotations. We acknowledge the very real harm to individuals and communities caused by this criminal activity. But to see paramilitarism as solely criminal behaviour is an incomplete analysis, in our view. We consider there are those involved in paramilitarism for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage, those on the edges of groups, dormant members, those with no viable means to exit groups, and those who remain involved for political and identity reasons which reach back to the Troubles/conflict, including some who articulate a positive wish to see paramilitarism ended. In design terms, if paramilitarism is to be sustainably ended, it follows that the issue of the groups' organisation and structures must be addressed. We wish to be clear that Group Transition, and the formal process of engagement required to bring it about, are not a substitute for the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. A comprehensive response is required to this complex problem and an effective response to paramilitarism requires all of these dimensions.

We proposed in our Fifth Report an intermediate step in the form of the appointment by the two Governments of an Independent Person, who would scope and prepare the ground for a possible process of engagement, with a view to bringing about Group Transition to disbandment. We appreciate the engagement to date with the two governments to discuss our Recommendation, and we urge them to progress the implementation of this Recommendation as soon as possible. Whilst undoubtedly such a process would carry certain risks, we consider that the greater risk would be in not progressing this important work given the continuing existence of the groups and their structures.

We believe that there are growing indications that the cumulative impact of collective law enforcement effort, including on the part of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, is having an impact on the groups and their leaderships, and this is helping also in making the case to the latter that a different pathway makes sense. We appreciate that the PSNI has had a turbulent year, both organisationally and in terms of pressures on its budget. But we stress again how crucial Neighbourhood Policing is to the tackling of paramilitarism. We welcome the continued commitment of the PSNI to strategic and operational participation in collaborative working with the other key stakeholders in the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. Collaborative, preventative and upstream work, delivered in partnership and underpinned by engagement with local communities, are the kinds of value-added activities that should be seen as core policing activity, and must continue to be adequately resourced and funded. We acknowledge and welcome the commitment of the senior leadership team at the PSNI to this approach.

Good work also continues with individuals and groups to build resilience and strengthen protective factors, including empowering women in communities, supports for young people vulnerable to paramilitary harm, efforts to enhance community resilience, and supports to encourage reintegration of prisoners and ex-prisoners. Furthermore, the Programme is linking in with other wider strategy work across Government.

Going forward we encourage a greater cross-departmental focus on macro issues such as enterprise, investment, job creation, sectarianism, division, addiction, poverty, disadvantage, regeneration and systemic educational change. These sorts of issues are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today. We recommend an ambitious new Programme for Government, which both restates a collective commitment to tackling paramilitarism, and also sets ambitious economic and social policy goals, including for education and poverty, which will help address the socio-economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism.

As Phase Two of the Programme comes to an end (in March 2025), a lot of good work has been delivered and there is much more to be done. We encourage a wide conversation about how we can strengthen and deepen efforts to tackle paramilitarism. We see a critical role for a dedicated team which supports targeted interventions, links in with wider relevant activities, and raises awareness of the issue and the means to address it.

The Chief Justice has expressed regret about delays in problem solving initiatives such as specialist courts, like that being piloted for those with addiction issues. We recommend that the Department of Justice explore what more can be done to avail of the possibilities offered by problem-solving justice and specialist courts. We also encourage the Sponsor Group to consider what support it can give to join-up and innovation in this field, and to seek relevant input to such deliberations. We further recommend that the Government prioritise organised crime legislation and that other opportunities to remove avoidable delay from the criminal justice system are taken.

In Section B, we present various public domain statistics that are useful indicators of the situation in regards to paramilitarism. For example, 13% of those canvassed in the NI Life and Times Survey believed that paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in their area. By contrast, in areas where dedicated Communities in Transition work is being done, that rises to almost 30% and was almost 50% in certain areas. This shows that for those communities where the paramilitaries operate, it is a very different situation. We have also highlighted the key findings from an important piece of work this year around Child Criminal Exploitation. In Section C, we report in detail on implementation of Phase Two of the Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime and the relevant measures of the Executive's Action Plan.

The task of putting an end to paramilitarism requires an ongoing and comprehensive focus, including multi-year financial commitments to reflect the need for sustained investment. To fulfil the Fresh Start ambition of ending paramilitarism once and for all requires commensurate investment of resources. Dedicated and targeted investment is not sufficient alone. Funding for prevention, tackling socio-economic need and transformative change must also be priorities. We reiterate the call we have made in previous Reports that the funding secured for the Fresh Start initiatives tackling paramilitarism should be maintained by both the UK Government and the NI Executive, and be given a high priority in what we acknowledge is a very challenging fiscal climate.

The effect of the cost-of-living crisis is disproportionately felt in those communities already struggling in socio-economic terms. Those are also the communities where the paramilitary influence tends to be at its strongest. We know from experience that when economic difficulties arise, people in these communities are more likely to be exposed to paramilitary influence, thus further deepening the grip of the latter in those communities. We call on the Government to give continued special consideration to the needs of communities where paramilitaries mainly operate in measures addressing the cost-of-living crisis in Northern Ireland.

As 2023 draws to a close, and while nothing is guaranteed, we believe that the opportunity to deliver the promise of a definitive end to paramilitarism exists in a very real way. Achieving the goal of tackling paramilitarism will require political leadership from every quarter. The task now is to ensure that every opportunity to meaningfully tackle paramilitarism is taken to the full.



## SECTION A: OVERVIEW

### Introduction

- 1.1 This is the Sixth Report of the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC). The IRC was established in 2017 to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. We are governed by an international treaty<sup>1</sup> between the UK and Irish Governments, which reflects the terms of the Fresh Start Agreement<sup>2</sup> concluded by the two Governments and the Northern Ireland (NI) parties in November 2015. The Fresh Start Agreement was the result of intensive discussions in response to continued paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, and through it the Governments and the NI parties reiterated “the primacy and centrality of peace and the political process to the continued transformation of our society”. The Agreement also identified a key goal: the ending of paramilitarism “once and for all”. The IRC was tasked with reporting on progress towards that goal.
- 1.2 The current four Commissioners were appointed in 2017 and reappointed for a further three-year term in March 2022. They are John McBurney and Monica McWilliams (nominated by the Northern Ireland Executive), Tim O’Connor (nominated by the Irish Government) and Mitchell B. Reiss (nominated by the UK Government).
- 1.3 Under the remit we were given by the two Governments and the NI parties, we are required to report annually on progress towards ending paramilitarism<sup>3</sup>. There is, of course, overlap between the content of each Report. The activities we are reporting on each year are building on work initiated and undertaken in previous years, and, therefore, previously reported on by us. A further reason for the overlap is that we seek to construct our Reports as stand-alone documents in each case. We do so on the basis that each Report, while focusing primarily on the year under review, should also represent in its own right a comprehensive, “one-stop-shop” overview of what has been happening in terms of addressing continued paramilitarism in Northern Ireland since the establishment of the Commission. This Sixth Report, therefore, while focusing significantly on activity in 2023, is drafted on the basis of being read as a comprehensive, up-to-date overview of efforts to discharge the goal of the Fresh Start Agreement to bring paramilitarism to an end.
- 1.4 There is, however, one significant factor about 2023 that makes it different to previous years – the fact that it marked the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. A core goal of that Agreement was ensuring that the future was based on

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2022-12/IRC\\_Treaty.pdf](https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2022-12/IRC_Treaty.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/479116/A\\_Fresh\\_Start\\_The\\_Stormont\\_Agreement\\_and\\_Implementation\\_Plan\\_-\\_Final\\_Version\\_20\\_Nov\\_2015\\_for\\_PDF.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/479116/A_Fresh_Start_The_Stormont_Agreement_and_Implementation_Plan_-_Final_Version_20_Nov_2015_for_PDF.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Our [First Report](#) was published in October 2018, our [Second](#) in November 2019, our [Third](#) in November 2020, our [Fourth](#) in December 2021 and our [Fifth](#) in December 2022. They are all available on our website: [www.ircommission.org](http://www.ircommission.org)

exclusively peaceful, democratic politics and that paramilitarism would become a thing entirely of the past. Ending paramilitarism is a crucial element of peace and reconciliation and progress between the two is linked. We believe, therefore, this is a good moment to take wider stock of where matters stand in regard to paramilitarism, and our Sixth Report, while describing the activities and trends of 2023 itself, is partly framed in that broader context also.

- 1.5 In other words, we explore why paramilitarism continues to exist, what progress has been made in tackling it, and what more needs to be done now to ensure it ends once and for all.

### **Our Mandate and Methodology**

- 1.6 The international treaty establishing the IRC sets out our mandate and what we should report on, as follows:

- progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland; and
- implementation of the relevant measures of the Government of Ireland, the Government of the United Kingdom, and the Northern Ireland Executive, including the Executive’s Strategy, to inform the implementation of that Strategy<sup>4</sup>.

In fulfilment of our mandate, we report on the measures being taken in the criminal justice field and to address the wider socio-economic factors linked to paramilitarism and make Recommendations as part of our comprehensive remit.

- 1.7 Our mandate at the IRC was set in the context of a series of documents in 2015/16, as follows:

- the Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015<sup>5</sup>;
- the Report of the Three Person Fresh Start Panel on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in NI of May 2016<sup>6</sup>; and
- based on the Recommendations of the Panel, an Action Plan (the “Executive Action Plan”) adopted by the Executive in July 2016<sup>7</sup>, leading to the establishment of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme (hereafter referred to as “the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme” or “the Programme”)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/fresh-start-panel-report-disbandment-paramilitary-groups-northern-ireland>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/tackling-paramilitary-activity-action-plan.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/executive-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime-0-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime-0>

- 1.8 The Ministerial/Executive Foreword of the then First Minister Arlene Foster, the then deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness and the then Minister of Justice Claire Sugden in launching the Executive Action Plan in July 2016 continues to be deeply relevant in terms of explaining the philosophy underpinning the Fresh Start approach to tackling and ending paramilitarism. It said:

*“We believe that “A Fresh Start” and the Three Person Panel Report, together with our new approach to collective working, as represented in the draft Programme for Government Framework, combine to present us with a unique opportunity to collectively address the difficult issue of tackling paramilitary activity. ... We recognise the need to drive forward with a new and innovative approach to tackling paramilitary activity”.*

The subsequent Introduction goes on to state:

*“...success can only be achieved through an ambitious multi-faceted approach which brings together all the Executive departments and other key stakeholders. Whilst we need a law enforcement response to the criminal acts that are perpetrated, we also require a systematic and collaborative response to the underlying issues which are exploited by those seeking to sustain such activity”<sup>9</sup>.*

- 1.9 It is important to note that we are not an operational body and do not provide detailed security or threat or status assessments of the various paramilitary groupings. That is a matter for the police and security services. This has led to some confusion in the public domain, with some commentators holding the view that we are – or should be – a direct successor body to the Independent Monitoring Commission (2004-2011), whose primary role was to “monitor any continuing activity by paramilitary groups” and “assess whether leaderships of such organisations are directing such incidents”<sup>10</sup>. Quite simply, this is not the mandate we were given. Of course, in carrying out our mandate, it is important that we take account in broad terms of the security situation relating to paramilitarism and so we receive regular briefings from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the UK Security Service and An Garda Síochána. In our reporting, therefore, we provide a general outline of the security situation based on the briefings we receive from police and security services, without going into specific detail on the status of individual paramilitary groupings.
- 1.10 This is the wider context in which the role and makeup of the IRC were designed, and our skills and backgrounds reflect that broader mandate, bringing together Commissioners with a mixture of human rights, legal, policy, community activist, public sector, conflict resolution and other professional backgrounds. The net point, we

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/Executive Action Plan - Tackling Paramilitary Activity.pdf](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/Executive%20Action%20Plan%20-%20Tackling%20Paramilitary%20Activity.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/independent-monitoring-commission>

believe, is clear: it was the express intent of the Fresh Start Agreement, and the Executive Action Plan flowing from it, that endeavours to end paramilitarism should take a broad, comprehensive, innovative approach that addressed all of the complexities underlying the continuation of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, and not simply view it as a law and order matter. The Executive re-affirmed this position at the launch of Phase Two of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme with the First and deputy First Ministers and Justice Minister all recognising the importance of collaboration, joined-up cross-Executive work and that a number of approaches must be taken at once<sup>11</sup>. That is how we have approached our mandate as the reporting body and our Reports are constructed on that basis.

- 1.11 In summary, our mandate at the IRC is as follows: to provide a comprehensive analysis of overall efforts to tackle paramilitarism connected to Northern Ireland; to consult and report on the specific measures currently underway under the Executive Action Plan and the Programme; and, finally, to make Recommendations on further actions needed so that the overall goal of ending paramilitarism can be achieved, in the words of the Fresh Start Agreement, “once and for all”.
- 1.12 We meet on a confidential basis with a wide range of groups and individuals, both those working within the statutory sector and those living in, and working with, communities on the ground. We wish to thank all those who have contributed to our deliberations over the past year and since our inception. We are also grateful to those who wrote to us during the year and invite others to do the same if there are issues that they wish to draw to our attention<sup>12</sup>. In particular, we thank those victims of violence, threats, coercive control and intimidation who shared their experiences with us in writing and in person. We have consistently said in our Reports that they have been the most impacted by paramilitaries, and we will continue to engage with them as we take forward our work. We are acutely conscious that for them paramilitarism is not a distant concept that they hear about in the news and online, but in many cases paramilitaries represent a continuing, living reality in their everyday experiences.
- 1.13 We again express special thanks to those we have termed in previous Reports “critical friends” – individuals and groups working behind the scenes to advance movement on ending paramilitarism. We know that this is difficult, challenging work, including on a personal basis, but we continue to believe that this it is an essential part of the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism. We take the opportunity in this Report to reiterate again our admiration for the people and groups involved and our gratitude to them, both for the work they do and the insights they provide to us on it. We ask that they continue this critical mission.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/ending-harm-inflicted-people-and-communities-by-paramilitaries-and-criminals-executive-priority-says>

<sup>12</sup> Our email address is [enquiries@IRCommission.org](mailto:enquiries@IRCommission.org) and our postal address is PO Box 2352, Belfast BT4 9EL.

- 1.14 We are grateful to both Governments, to the NI political parties, and to the various Departments and State Agencies who met with us and shared relevant information over the last year, including Departmental project leads, senior officials, those working in the criminal justice system, the PSNI, the Education Authority, local Councils, the Housing Executive and others. Our particular thanks to the Programme Team which coordinates the Programme, its Sponsor Group and One Team officials in the Benefits Realisation Groups (see paragraph 3.4 for explanations of these terms). We also wish to thank the representatives of relevant departments of the Irish Government with whom we met during the year, and An Garda Síochána, recognising the importance of the cross-border element of this work. We are grateful to the various community-based organisations, those delivering good work in communities and others who are committed to work in this domain. We are also most grateful to our colleagues in our Joint Secretariat for their dedication, professionalism and hard work in support of our deliberations.
- 1.15 In this Report we give our updated analysis on where matters stand in regard to all elements of our mandate, with additional Recommendations on how progress can be accelerated.

### **The Format of our Report**

- 1.16 Our Report comprises four Sections:
- Section A (this Section) provides an Overview of our mission and role, and a summary of our key observations and findings based on our work over the last year.
  - Section B sets out data, drawn from open-source police statistics, Department for Communities information and other published research on paramilitarism, including work commissioned by the Programme, which illustrate the level and impact of paramilitary activity over the last year, building on the baselines we set out in our First and Second Reports.
  - Section C, Detailed Consideration of the Programme and other work, contains a detailed report on progress in implementing the Plan and the Programme, including some specific examples of success.
  - In Section D, we report on how the Recommendations we made in our earlier Reports are being addressed, and make further Recommendations for the way forward.
- 1.17 We should add that we have broadly maintained the same structure through each Report, in terms of layout and headings. We have felt that this has helped with clarity and consistency, and in measuring progress from one year to the next.

## **Our Analysis**

- 1.18 As a reporting body, with no operational role, we are acutely conscious that our primary focus has to be on the quality of our analysis. We see this process of analysis as having a number of dimensions. A key part of our work, of course, is reporting on the large number of individual projects and initiatives aimed at tackling paramilitarism and we hope that our Reports encapsulate that comprehensively. We also have a responsibility to take a wider view, and to provide a judgement on the extent to which (a) the work dedicated to tackling paramilitarism is succeeding, and (b) the gaps that continue to exist in the effort. To do that effectively, a key challenge for us is understanding and communicating the true nature of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today and why it continues to exist.
- 1.19 In our own discussions, we often use the analogy of human health. When a health issue arises, the first requirement is good diagnosis. If that diagnosis is wrong or flawed, the prescriptions and treatments that follow will almost certainly not solve the problem.
- 1.20 This is the approach we have brought to our work at the IRC in terms of analysing paramilitarism. As indicated above, what particularly marks out the approach to paramilitarism instituted by the Fresh Start Agreement is its comprehensiveness and also its focus on innovation. Fresh Start, and its resultant initiatives, all make clear that while policing and justice measures are essential in bringing paramilitarism to an end, they are not enough in themselves and need to be situated within a wider, more holistic approach that includes tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic issues facing communities where paramilitaries mainly operate.
- 1.21 In our view, paramilitarism involves a complex landscape comprising different categories of people. At one end of that landscape there are undoubtedly individuals and groups who use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality (such as violence, abuse, extortion, drug dealing, threats, trade in counterfeit goods, money laundering, illegal money lending, child criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation and other illegal activities). Some paramilitary groups – or individuals within them – have links to organised crime; some operate akin to organised crime groups. We can entirely understand that for a lot of people and commentators that is the sum total of paramilitarism today – “they are all gangsters and criminals and should be treated as such” being a common refrain. We are certainly acknowledging that criminality and gangsterism are one dimension of the paramilitarism issue. And we acknowledge the very real harm to individuals and communities caused by this criminal activity. But in our view, to see it as only that is an incomplete analysis.
- 1.22 In addition to the criminal dimension of this complex landscape, we also see a range of other categories of people who maintain an involvement in paramilitarism today. Some do so for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage. In these cases, much of the rationale for their involvement is related to the lack of an alternative pathway, poor educational and employment opportunities, vulnerabilities related to addiction, mental

health, peer pressure and the absence of positive role models. There are also “dormant” members who retain some form of affiliation with a group willingly, while for others there is no means to exit the group. Some pay a membership fee. Whilst not currently active in the organisations they could be asked to play a role in the future. There are also those on the edges of groups, who either are not currently full members or who may not immediately realise that there is a paramilitary dimension to activity.

- 1.23 And then there is in our view a further category of people who remain engaged in paramilitarism for political and identity reasons which reach back to the Troubles/conflict. These individuals, while remaining part of paramilitary structures, regard their primary motivation for continuing involvement as being driven by the needs and perspective of their community and in particular their political ideology, an ideology that in their view has deep and legitimate roots in history. This category also contains people, including at leadership level in some of the groups, who articulate a positive wish to see paramilitarism ended.
- 1.24 If one views the continuation of paramilitarism as simply a matter at this stage of pure criminality and gangsterism, then a whole set of conclusions follows in terms of how it should be tackled. If on the other hand, as we do, one believes there are wider, more complex factors in play – factors which include a continuing connection to the Troubles/conflict, and therefore a dimension of the political – then an additional set of conclusions follows. We acknowledge that this is a contentious view and not universally shared.
- 1.25 To be clear, we reiterate that we totally share the view that paramilitarism has no place in Northern Ireland and should be ended. We abhor the coercive control that paramilitary groups and their members exercise in certain communities in Northern Ireland today. But as we have said in previous Reports, we have an obligation to report what we see and hear faithfully and accurately. In our view, the landscape of paramilitarism is a complex one; it is only by addressing each element of that complexity that the desired outcome can be achieved.
- 1.26 There are those who would argue that paramilitaries should just “go away”. We respectfully respond that wishing something away is not a policy. Whatever one’s personal viewpoint, it is our contention that there is a residual political dimension to the continuation of paramilitarism today, and that too must be taken into account in constructing sustainable actions to end it once and for all, and a law enforcement response alone is not sufficient.
- 1.27 Another dimension of the complex landscape is the fractured nature of politics in Northern Ireland. Regrettably, and for a variety of reasons, much of the period since the inception of the devolved institutions in 1999 has been characterised by turbulence in political life, with a lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly over several periods, including at the time of the writing of this Report. This has had the effect of prolonging instability and mitigating against the kind of sustained, cross-party policy

interventions, strategic decision making and approaches that are needed to address the range of factors involved in continued paramilitarism. We also note that 2022 and 2023 have seen a further chapter in this instability unfold with the absence of an Executive because of difficulties around the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement and the subsequent Windsor Framework. Overall, the political context including the stop-start nature of politics in recent decades, and experienced during the past year, has been a further inhibiting factor in terms of efforts to end paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. Controversy around the issue of Legacy has also been a factor on the political landscape, one that, of course, has an impact on the paramilitarism question.

- 1.28 The financial context within which Departments, agencies and organisations are seeking to deliver this vital work has been particularly constrained this year. This makes the work of delivering meaningful change and progress even more challenging, as people are focusing on core service delivery. As we observe later, it is vital that dedicated work to tackle paramilitarism is appropriately funded, as well as transformational work to enhance the socio-economic context, but to enable this targeted work to add value it is equally important that core service delivery is adequately resourced.
- 1.29 We continue to hold to the belief that the multi-faceted direction of travel signposted by the Fresh Start Agreement, and the initiatives that have flowed from it, is the correct one in terms of tackling and ending paramilitarism and needs to be maintained and driven forward.
- 1.30 We summarise our analysis of Tackling Paramilitarism as a Twin Track Approach. Track One comprises a robust and targeted set of law enforcement measures addressing paramilitarism, coupled with an effective wider criminal justice response. Track Two involves a comprehensive tackling of the deep-rooted socio-economic issues facing communities where the paramilitaries mainly operate. Both Tracks, which are inter-related, are vital in the task of addressing paramilitarism.
- 1.31 In our more recent Reports, we have given prominence to our view that to those two Tracks should be added a further dimension, namely that to end paramilitarism we also need an agreed formal process of Group Transition, involving direct engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves, in order to bring about disbandment. We have developed this suggestion because in our view, to paraphrase from other contexts, “it is not possible to arrest one’s way out of the problem”. The disbandment of paramilitary organisations has to involve voluntary action by the groups themselves.
- 1.32 In acknowledging the complexity of the concept, we proposed in our Fifth Report an intermediate step in the form of the appointment by the two Governments of an Independent Person, who could scope and prepare the ground for a possible process of engagement, with a view to bringing about Group Transition to disbandment. We will elaborate further on this additional dimension later in this Section of our Report.



But for now we simply wish to reiterate that we see Group Transition to disbandment as a core part of our analysis of what is needed to achieve the goal of the Fresh Start Agreement of ending paramilitarism “once and for all”.

- 1.33 As we said above, continued paramilitarism today has a connection back to the Troubles/conflict that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was seeking to end. We feel that the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of that Agreement is a timely moment, therefore, to take stock of the issue in that wider context. We believe that just as risks had to be taken to achieve peace in the 1990s, and dialogue underpinned those endeavours, so today further risks must be taken. Seeing an end to paramilitarism is closely linked to furthering reconciliation. By any measure, the situation in regard to paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is significantly better than it was during the height of the Troubles/conflict. But as the need for Fresh Start demonstrated, it is also self-evident that there continues to be a residual problem in respect of paramilitarism. Paramilitarism represents a continuing threat to individuals and society, and must continue to be given sufficient attention and focus.
- 1.34 But on a more positive note, we also believe that, despite the many challenges that undoubtedly remain, there is a particular opportunity now to achieve the goal of bringing paramilitarism to an end. However, in our view, the taking of that opportunity will require the continued dedicated focus of the two Governments, the NI parties, public services, communities on the ground and indeed society as a whole. We hope that our Report and our analysis can make a contribution to that critical task.
- 1.35 The remainder of this Section of our Report is dedicated to our Observations, Findings and Recommendations.

## Observations and Findings regarding 2023

### Broad Picture

- 1.36 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 Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) 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.

### General Commentary

- 1.37 In the following paragraphs we provide some general commentary on a range of developments and events relating to paramilitarism during 2023, together with some observations and recommendations that we feel arise from them.
- 1.38 It is now over eight years since the Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015, one of whose goals was the ending of paramilitarism. While it is unacceptable that eight years on paramilitarism continues to exist, it is also fair to say there is now in place a significant architecture aimed at tackling it, an architecture that is clearly increasingly having an impact. In 2023, the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme now comprises over 100 projects spread across Northern Ireland. There is an increasing focus on joined-up working of all of the entities involved, with a new structure at the top of the Programme, the Sponsor Group, chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, ensuring strategic leadership on a joined-up basis at the highest levels of the Public Service, and strong examples of inter-agency collaboration at working level. The policing and criminal justice efforts are also increasingly having an impact and we highlight some of those impacts later in this Report.
- 1.39 A key message of our Report for 2023, therefore, is that while it has taken time to assemble and evolve, the mechanisms and structures for tackling paramilitarism are now more developed and comprehensive than ever and we believe they are having an increasing effect. One of the particularly important features of the Programme approach is the focus on data and evidence and, in Section B, we will provide some material that is emerging in that regard. As with any public policy area, the focus of investment in terms of budgets and resources must be evidence-based and the priority given to data and evidence means there is now much more information available to

support the development of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme and to shape and inform the development of public policy and practice more broadly. We also strongly endorse the public health approach of the Programme, an approach that ensures that all elements of the issue are addressed across multiple sectors and professions in a rigorous way and solutions are developed and evolved on that continuing basis.

- 1.40 For all of this, significant credit is due to those engaged in the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, beginning with the Programme Team itself. Starting from scratch some six years ago, based on the Report of the Independent Three Person Panel, and the subsequent Executive Action Plan, the Programme has evolved in a progressive and cumulatively impactful way. We are particularly impressed with the dedication of those involved in the various projects, both at Public Sector level and in the communities on the ground. To us, the Programme is developing to be a strong exemplar of the good that comes from combining Top-Down and Bottom-Up approaches. Critics might say it has taken too long to get to this point and we share the impatience in terms of the need for the maximum pace in delivering outcomes. But as against that, setting up an architecture as complex as this, with significant public monies involved, takes time and care and we believe that as the months go by, increasing impact will continue to be felt.
- 1.41 We also welcome the heightened public debate around tackling paramilitarism which was another characteristic of 2023. It was the subject of many features on radio, TV, the print media and on social media, including a new phase of the Ending the Harm campaign. Our own proposal in our Fifth Report around the appointment by the two Governments of an Independent Person to prepare the ground for a possible process of Group Transition by the paramilitary organisations sparked much debate, which we welcome.
- 1.42 We are also grateful for the focus on the issue in the UK and Irish Parliaments. In regard to the former, we welcome the Inquiry on Paramilitarism which has been underway in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the House of Commons. Similarly, we were appreciative of the focus on paramilitarism in the work of the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in the Houses of the Oireachtas in Dublin. These debates help to ensure that a light continues to be shone on the issue of paramilitarism and on the approaches needed to end it.
- 1.43 What these debates also highlight is the wide variation in public views about the nature of paramilitarism and how it is to be addressed. A further complexity is the way paramilitarism has evolved over the last 25 years. The relationship between organised crime and paramilitarism and the increasing impact of online platforms are just two examples of that evolution. So in one sense, paramilitarism is different to what it was 25 years ago, but as we argue in these pages, it has continuing links to that previous reality also.

- 1.44 In terms of the relationship with the communities in which the paramilitaries mainly operate, here too complexities abound. There is no doubting that coercive control remains an unacceptable feature of the relationship. But it is also the case that in many instances the paramilitaries are part of the communities in which they operate – and not “other”. Unacceptable as it is, they play roles at times in terms of the settling of disputes, amongst other things. In respect of the ideological dimension of continuing paramilitarism, they have support in sections of the community as the “carriers of the torch” today and the defenders of a worldview shared by some in that community. In some cases their presence is so normal that it is not questioned; in others, to question that presence is a courageous step to take.
- 1.45 We reiterate that the goal here is to end this phenomenon and ensure the transition to an entirely peaceful society based on the principles set out in successive political agreements and undertakings in the past 30 years. In that regard, we are encouraged by some of the conversations we have had, and observations we have made, in 2023. We should immediately add, however, that nothing is guaranteed in this regard. Moreover, the taking of the opportunity currently available will only be possible in the context of addressing all of the dimensions of tackling paramilitarism we have set out in our analysis – in other words, continuing apace with the Twin Tracks, but also deploying the other dimension we set out, namely a formal process of engagement with the Groups themselves with a view to bringing about disbandment. We will elaborate further on our thinking in this regard later in this Section.
- 1.46 In expressing our admiration for the excellent work undertaken by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme in communities, including in identifying and supporting people (often young people) at risk of being pulled into paramilitarism for a variety of reasons, and strengthening community and individual resilience to resist paramilitary influence, we have also been reflecting during the year as to what else is needed. What we have observed is that the structures that have been put in place in the Programme are very good at supporting individuals, families and local communities at risk, and beginning to address upstream the relevant conditions in communities. The Programme is already working in partnership with other key stakeholders to identify policy and other opportunities to further their goals and to support mutually beneficial work, such as the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy; the review of the People and Place strategy which underpins neighbourhood renewal to support the most deprived areas in NI; test and learn pilots to improve Government’s approach to assessing and meeting local need and enhancing public sector collaboration in particular localities; and engagement with the sub-regional economic growth strategy approach, among others.
- 1.47 Going forward we would encourage a greater cross-departmental focus on macro issues such as enterprise, investment, job creation, sectarianism, division, addiction, poverty, disadvantage, regeneration and systemic educational change. The missions put forward by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to an incoming Executive to consider – people, planet and prosperity, underpinned by a bedrock of peace –

ought to translate into tangible benefits for people living in communities. One of the narratives expressed has been that the “Peace Dividend” has not been universally felt across Northern Ireland and that some communities have been left behind in terms of jobs and opportunities. Quite frequently, these communities are also those where a paramilitary presence is prevalent.

- 1.49 We reiterate the importance of Education and Educational Attainment in tackling paramilitarism and its impact on individuals and communities. Access to good Education and educational supports is a key factor in ensuring that young people avoid falling into the grip of paramilitary organisations, and helps to provide much-needed hope and opportunities in communities. Support for Education throughout the lifecycle is vital, starting with placing value on Education, to supports for parents, families and communities in promoting Education, to the quality of and approach to provision in the School System itself, from Early Years all the way through to Further Education and Life Long Learning. We appreciate that work around this is already underway through *A Fair Start* and we commend the various Authorities involved in this regard – in particular, the Department of Education and the Education Authority – and the various community partners. However, we are concerned that this work may not reach its full potential without appropriate funding. We wish to take the opportunity of this Report to strongly support the work and thinking which is already underway. We welcome the supports that are available through current measures in the Education system and the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (for example through the Wrap project, discussed in more detail in Section C), and we feel that a strategic lens, one that goes beyond the focus on individuals at risk (though that remains vital) and addresses more systemic factors, must continue to be applied.
- 1.50 We are encouraged that the Department for Education is thinking along these lines also and we would strongly support them in that process. Furthermore, we are pleased to see initiatives such as efforts by the Department for Communities to build inclusive communities; *Making Life Better*: a strategic approach to improving health and wellbeing; work by The Executive Office to foster good relations, tackle sectarianism and promote a united community; and regeneration and other efforts to grow NI’s economy. These issues should be tackled for their own sake, but they also read across to tackling paramilitarism. **We recommend an ambitious new Programme for Government, which both restates a collective commitment to tackling paramilitarism, and also sets ambitious economic and social policy goals, including for education and poverty, which will help address the socio-economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism.**
- 1.51 While such considerations provide a basis for some optimism, it is also the case that certain events in 2023 underline vividly that there are no grounds for complacency. The attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell was particularly shocking and was instrumental, as mentioned, in the raising of the Threat Level in Northern Ireland-related Terrorism from “substantial” to “severe”. Under the banner of

Loyalist paramilitarism, a number of incidents, including a high-profile drug gang feud, served to underline how quickly situations can escalate. For these reasons, heightened vigilance continues to be needed. There is an imperative here, both moral and political, to ensure that the opportunity that we believe exists to bring paramilitarism to an end is taken to the full.

- 1.52 In that regard, we were taken by a conversation we had during the year with an international expert on global conflict. In their view, and looking at our situation through the lens of international conflicts more broadly, paramilitarism in Northern Ireland could be seen as being in the “Last Mile” in terms of completion. We fully recognise that this is a difficult last mile, and do not underestimate the scale of challenge involved. We are also mindful that they cautioned, however, that failure to close out work that needed to be done could prove costly in the long-term if paramilitarism experiences a resurgence in the future because it wasn’t fully tackled in the present.
- 1.53 To us those observations by an informed outsider are helpful in framing both the opportunity and the dangers inherent in the current situation and underscore further the need for a re-doubling of efforts now to end paramilitarism.

### **Developments in 2023 – Phase Two of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, the Twin Tracks and the additional Dimension**

- 1.54 We wish to turn now to a more detailed look at developments in tackling paramilitarism in 2023. We do so through the lens of the Twin Tracks (Track One policing/justice responses and Track Two socio-economic responses), together with the additional dimension we have highlighted – the need for a process of engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves in order to bring about disbandment. We begin with a look at Phase Two of the Programme overall, and the prospects and options in regard to the future.

#### **Phase Two of the Programme**

- 1.54 In 2021, the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme moved to Phase Two of its operation. As we have said above, we are impressed by the progress it has made in this Phase and at how the Programme has continued to evolve. The big difference between Phase One and Phase Two is that the former was focused on individual project outputs and outcomes, whereas in Phase Two all projects are working towards shared outcomes. This new “Benefits Realisation” approach puts an emphasis on actual measurable and sustainable changes (benefits) as distinct from individual project outputs.
- 1.55 We strongly support the methodology underlying this direction of travel, which the Programme defines as a “public health approach”. The key characteristic of this methodology is that it 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, adapts approaches based on learnings, and

rolls out those learnings to create sustainable system change – something which aligns with best practice internationally.

- 1.56 Another key feature of Phase Two has been a strong focus on data and evidence. We also strongly welcome the related enhanced emphasis on commissioning dedicated new research around aspects of the Programme and sharing learning. We said in our Fifth Report that some important new findings had been emerging from this research, and the pace and quality of that research has increased further in 2023. We commend this excellent work and provide some examples in Section B of this Report.
- 1.57 The Programme and partners have proven themselves to be able to respond to emerging situations. This has included flexibly redeploying resources and adapting plans as appropriate to respond to new needs in communities. For example, the PSNI community safety projects operate in different areas depending on need. The youth service and its partners also have a strong presence across Northern Ireland, allowing it to respond to local difficulties as they require it. They have also demonstrated an ability to evaluate what works well and have embedded a public health approach. Reflecting on this important work and the greater levels of information about needs, approaches and community assets, we are of the view that one way to develop it further would be to establish a bespoke, incubator-type structure for the testing of new ideas quickly and robustly, with a particular focus on collaboration and evaluation, and then have them rolled out more widely. This could support innovation around smaller scale interventions, and we encourage a partnership approach to funding, for example looking to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) for a contribution. One of the clear and logical conclusions from the fact that almost 30 years after the 1994 ceasefires paramilitarism persists is that previous strategies (i.e. prior to Fresh Start), to the extent that they existed at all, did not work or work well enough. That is why the focus of Fresh Start, the Three Person Panel Report and the original Executive Action Plan of 2016 was correct on the need for innovative and different approaches in tackling paramilitarism. We believe that that focus is being well delivered by the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme and that our recommendation can contribute further to that positive direction.
- 1.58 Another important feature of Phase Two of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme is a particular focus on trauma-informed practice – designing interventions on a basis that takes account of the negative impact that trauma can have on individuals and communities in ways that are often hidden, and enhancing service delivery to reflect this. Such an approach aligns with best practice internationally and in our view adds further value to the effectiveness of the various activities of the Programme.
- 1.59 An additional key feature of Phase Two is the requirement for joined-up working across all aspects of the Programme. This also aligns with the public health and benefits realisation methodology. We described in our Fifth Report the further evolution of the implementation and governance architecture of the Programme to reflect cross-cutting working at all levels. New coordination structures have been developed at strategic

and local working levels to support change through a focus on outcomes or Benefits Realisation approach and to ensure high quality delivery and benefits, together with robust accountability.

- 1.60 The relatively new arrival into this architecture is the Tackling Paramilitarism Sponsor Group. It was established in 2022 and we were able to make a brief reference to it in our Fifth Report, as its work was just getting off the ground. It is now up and running and meets quarterly at present. Chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, it draws together senior officials from those departments and agencies involved in tackling paramilitarism, including the PSNI, to implement the strategic direction of the Programme, demonstrating the necessary collaborative culture between departments and agencies and making linkages between and beyond this and other initiatives.
- 1.61 We have met a number of times with the Sponsor Group and its constituent members, and are pleased with the commitment it demonstrates to ensuring that there is a leadership focus in each of the member-organisations, both to a sustained implementation of their particular element of the Programme, but also critically to working in the closest collaboration with the other partner organisations. In addition, the group is making linkages between and beyond the Programme and other Executive initiatives. As we have said in previous Reports and reiterate here, the ending of paramilitarism will only be achieved through this kind of dedicated, holistic approach by all the key stakeholders. We commend the work of the Sponsor Group and while realising that there are many issues pressing for the time and resources of each of the entities involved, we urge that it continues to ensure a sustained focus on this critical task.
- 1.62 Such leadership and oversight at Public Service level of the Programme are all the more important in the continued political stalemate at Stormont. It is not for us to comment on matters which are essentially political. But we do have a responsibility to call for a continued focus to be kept on what is a critical public project, to which, of course, all parties in the Assembly have pledged their support. We welcome the fact that the Political Advisory Group continues to participate in the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, and urge that they continue to provide political input into the Programme through that channel and others.
- 1.63 Paramilitarism operates within a shared ecosystem and the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK and Irish Governments all have specific roles in managing and addressing elements thereof. These include national security, policing and justice, social change and the cross-border dimension, and to achieve maximum effect it is vital that there is effective join-up, co-operation and leadership. There are good examples of collaboration in place within this sphere: the Joint Agency Task Force (which involves multi-agency cross-border collaboration to tackle cross-jurisdictional criminality), the Community Safety Network (which brings community safety partners together to facilitate partnership working to put in place a problem-solving approach to emerging



and shared issues), and involvement of the Secretary of State for NI, Northern Ireland Office (NIO) officials, the DOJ and senior PSNI officers in regular Security Interface Meetings to discuss issues of shared and overlapping concern, including paramilitarism. UK and Irish Ministers regularly meet at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and have discussed security co-operation and efforts to tackle paramilitarism and associated criminality. The two Departments of Justice also continue to meet regularly and work together closely.

- 1.64 We have mentioned above that under Phase Two of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, there are now over 100 individual projects underway. More details in regard to these are contained elsewhere in this Overview and also in Section C of this Report. But taking account of those and the significant governance and implementation structures just outlined, it can be seen that tackling paramilitarism is a sizeable, complex and multi-faceted undertaking. We remain convinced that, combined with the additional dimension we have proposed around Group Transition, this is the right direction of travel.
- 1.65 Moreover, we believe that it is critical that the level of focus, time and resources being put into the exercise via the Fresh Start process be maintained and indeed developed further. We appreciate that we are making this call against the backdrop of huge pressures on the public purse. But we argue that seeing out the task of ending paramilitarism is as important as any other issue facing Northern Ireland society and is connected to many others. The continued existence of paramilitarism is a graphic reminder that the work to transform Northern Ireland society and ensure the primacy and centrality of peace and the political process is not yet completed. But we are also saying that much progress has been made in the last eight years since Fresh Start in addressing paramilitarism and this should serve as encouragement to continue with the effort and see it out to closure. 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.
- 1.66 For that reason, we urge everybody involved – the two Governments, the NI parties, those involved in the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, the communities most affected and indeed Northern Ireland society as a whole – to use this moment as an opportunity to take stock of how the exercise can best be accelerated, in order to bring about the goal of Fresh Start to end paramilitarism once and for all. As Phase Two draws towards a close, we know that considerable thought is being given by the Sponsor Group and the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme Team to the next stage of the work and we strongly support that deliberation and encourage wide consultation on it. We acknowledge that a continuation could take a number of forms – whether a Phase Three, or a greater focus on mainstreaming those elements of the Programme best suited to that course, or perhaps a combination of both. What we are certain of is that, despite the pressures from other priorities, this is not a moment to cut back on the effort, but rather one involving a redoubling of determination to see the task

through. We recognise that, in the case of some elements of the Programme, this will require a commitment into the medium and longer-term, precisely because the issues involved are simply not amenable to short-term solutions. In our view, this is the nature of the point that has been reached – a lot of good work delivered but much more to be done. **As Phase Two of the Programmes comes to an end, we encourage a wider conversation, including the two Governments, to give serious consideration to how we can strengthen and deepen efforts to tackle paramilitarism, including the critical role which can be played by a dedicated team which supports targeted interventions, links in with wider relevant activities, and raises awareness of the issue and the means to address it.**

### **The Twin Tracks**

- 1.67 We turn now to a more detailed look at both tracks of what we call the Twin Track Approach to tackling paramilitarism – the policing/justice measures (Track One) and the measures addressing the systemic socio-economic issues facing communities where the paramilitaries operate (Track Two).

### **Track One - Policing**

- 1.68 The PSNI continues to play a crucial role in tackling paramilitarism through its law enforcement activities against paramilitary groups and individuals claiming affiliation to those groups, through the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (the PCTF, a multi-agency task force bringing together the PSNI, National Crime Agency (NCA) and HMRC), the Terrorism Investigation Unit, and collaborative working with the NCA and partnership with other bodies including HMRC (UK Tax Authority). The join-up between the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Office and the various agencies in tackling the “shared ecosystem” of organised crime, paramilitary crime and national security in line with commitments contained within the Fresh Start Agreement continues to good effect. Many PSNI teams are involved in relevant work, including Community Safety, Local District Policing, Crime Department and others, as the problem of paramilitary crime takes many forms and needs to be tackled in many different contexts (rural, urban, localised and regional). Criminality with a backdrop of a paramilitary allegiance (whether sanctioned by groups or not) has a pervasive effect on local communities, and causes harm to individuals, groups and society. We mentioned earlier that there is evidence of greater connections between some paramilitary groups and non-paramilitary organised crime gangs, together with increasing activity online. All of this requires a continued robust policing response. We believe that there are growing indications that the cumulative impact of this collective law enforcement effort, including on the part of the PCTF, is having an impact on the groups and their leaderships, and this is helping also in making the case to the latter that a different pathway makes sense. As with all of this work, collaboration and effective joined-up working are crucial to success, and we urge all those involved to continue to focus on threat, risk and harm caused and how problems can be addressed in partnership.
- 1.69 The Three Person Panel Report in 2016, on which the Executive Action Plan and the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme are based, placed a strong emphasis on the

importance of effective neighbourhood policing in tackling paramilitarism. At the IRC, we have continued to express our support for this approach and we do so again now. We appreciate that the PSNI has had a turbulent year, both organisationally and in terms of pressures on its budget. But we stress again how crucial Neighbourhood Policing is to the tackling of paramilitarism. The latter simply cannot be achieved without the former. In 2022 the PSNI launched a new set of neighbourhood policing “hallmarks”<sup>13</sup> and an engagement strategy, *Here For You*<sup>14</sup>. We reiterate our welcome for this approach and strategy and urge their sustained and continued implementation. The neighbourhood approach – which focuses on understanding and meeting the needs of local communities, including through collaborative local problem solving, dialogue, clarifying expectations and using the model to reduce harm and enhance community safety and trust and confidence in policing – is precisely what is needed in tackling the complexities of the paramilitary presence in communities and we urge its continuation as a matter of priority. The PSNI has continued its efforts to embed a problem-solving approach, training new local champions, recognising successes through an awards ceremony and is making efforts to embed this practice across the force. Operation Conexus – a pilot locally-based approach to preventing the harm and trauma caused by paramilitary activity in local communities – has done significant work to link up police and the local community in Mid & East Antrim, and to ensure strong connections across different PSNI activities.

- 1.70 We also welcome the continued commitment of the PSNI to its strategic and operational participation in collaborative working with the other key stakeholders in the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, both at central level – e.g. on the Sponsor Group – and also at local level for example through the support hubs. Collaborative, preventative and upstream work, delivered in partnership and underpinned by engagement with local communities, are the kinds of value-added activities that should be seen as core policing activity, and must continue to be adequately resourced and funded. We acknowledge and welcome the commitment of the senior leadership team at the PSNI to this approach. They themselves have made clear repeatedly that policing alone – though a vital component – cannot resolve the paramilitarism issue on its own. We appreciate that they have engaged fully in the collaborative working model and encourage them to continue to do so despite competing pressures. We are also grateful for the insights they bring to our work in our regular engagements with them, something we find extremely helpful.
- 1.71 We have already mentioned our understanding of the very challenging financial position that the PSNI finds itself in. The PSNI must be able to recruit the officers it needs, and be able to fund the wide range of essential activities, including intervention and prevention, local problem-solving, locality working and other collaboration.

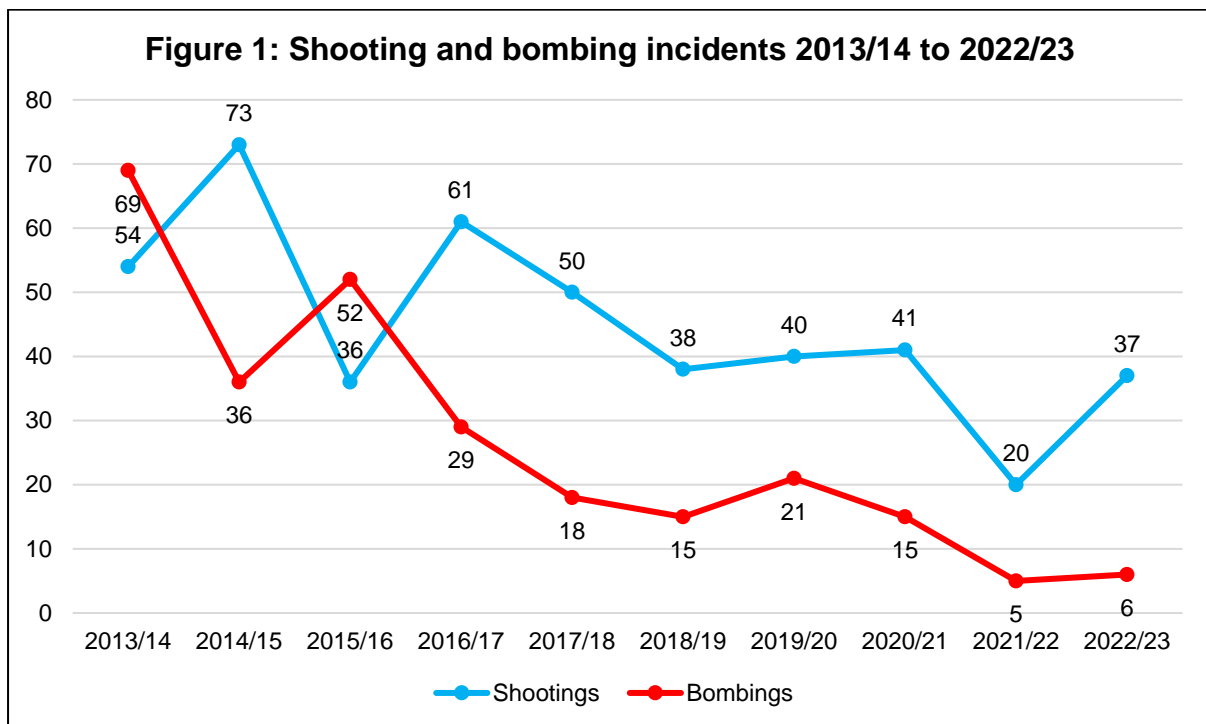
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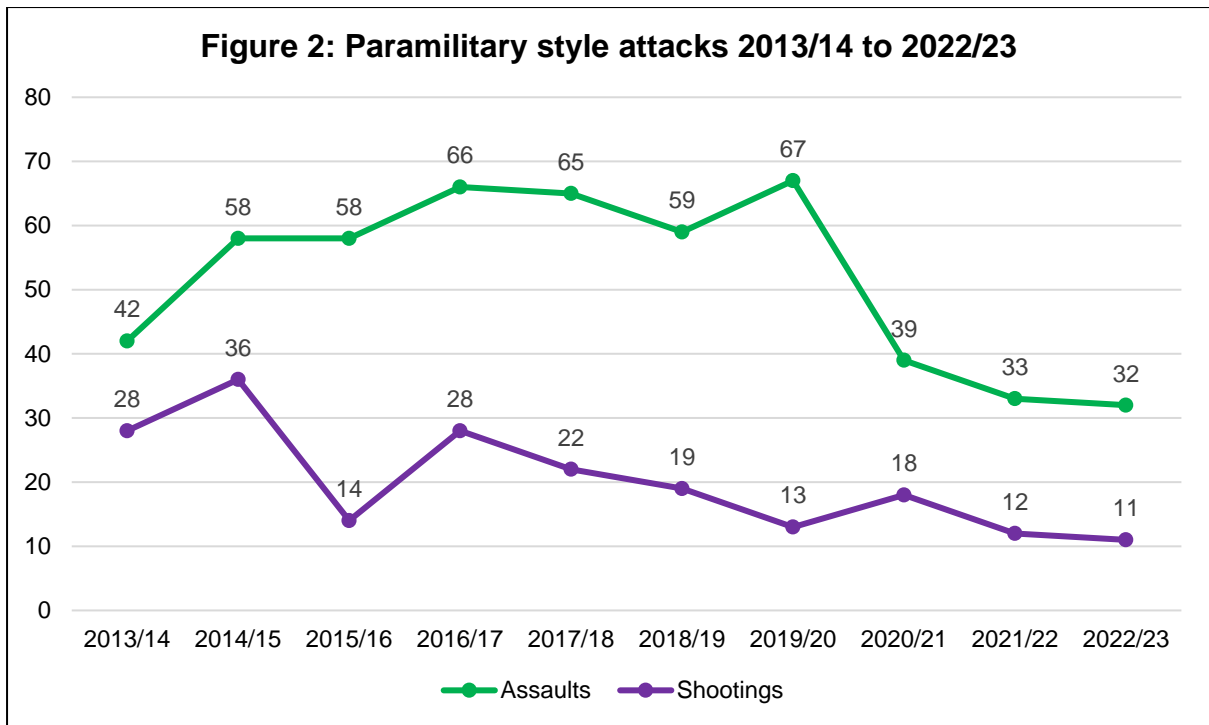
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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Here\\_for\\_You\\_-\\_Public\\_Engagement\\_Vision.pdf](https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Here_for_You_-_Public_Engagement_Vision.pdf)

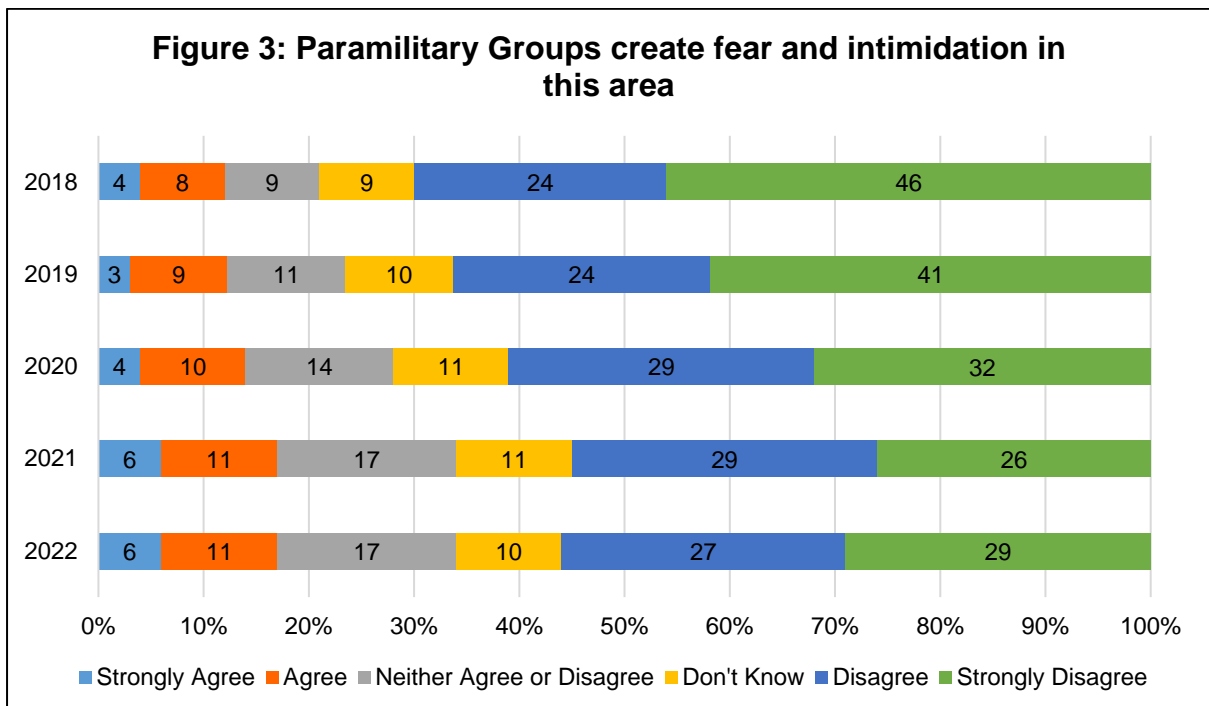
1.72 We again commend the good co-operation on cross-border law enforcement, including through the Joint Agency Task Force (set up to tackle organised and cross-jurisdictional crime), and greatly appreciate that it is working well. Cross-border collaboration between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána continues to provide opportunities to disrupt the activity of organised crime groups across jurisdictions and reduce criminal activity in border areas and this dimension of the work continues to be vital.

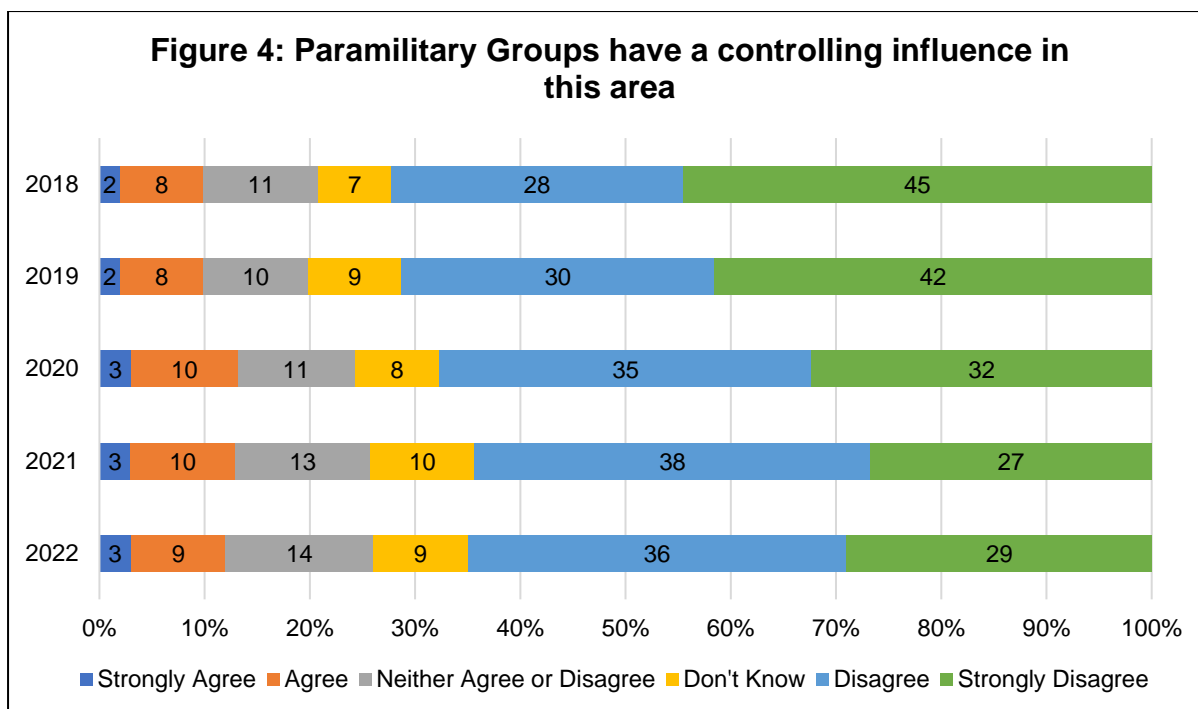
1.73 We mentioned earlier that we receive useful data and statistics from the PSNI on paramilitary activity and while we have fuller material in that regard in Section B of this Report, we conclude this part of the Overview with a snapshot from the PSNI security situation statistics which we feel illustrates well the complexities of the problem over the last number of years, including 2023 (we set out various definitions, caveats and notes about these figures in Section B).





We also explore public perceptions of paramilitarism, using the results of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, which are used by the Programme to measure progress at population level.





**Track One - Criminal Justice Aspects**

- 1.74 In the following paragraphs we take an overview look at some developments in the other part of Track One – the criminal justice system responses to tackling paramilitarism, also a vital component of the overall effort to bring it to an end.
  
- 1.75 The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme continues to support important work to assist young men and women leaving prison as they transition back into the local community. Through the ASPIRE project the Probation Board NI provides targeted support to marginalised young men susceptible to paramilitary/criminal influence. An intensive mentoring programme is provided and complex needs are addressed. This work has been positively evaluated and we welcome the important contribution it makes offering alternatives to those who want to move away from paramilitarism or who are vulnerable to becoming involved with paramilitaries – this is just one excellent example of the breadth of activity across the Programme, interrupting pathways to paramilitarism at different stages of life. The Engage project provides similar support to women and focuses on building resilience and equipping participants with the skills and learning to withstand paramilitary influence when they exit the criminal justice system. Comparable support is also offered to men and women who are not in the formal justice system through community-based interventions. Other work to reduce reoffending and promote reintegration should seek to learn lessons from this approach, where focused mentoring support makes a significant difference.
  
- 1.76 We continue to believe that organised crime legislation like that used in other jurisdictions would be a valuable tool for the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. The Department of Justice has consulted on creating new offences of directing serious organised crime and participating in serious organised crime, as well as making serious organised crime an aggravating factor for the purposes of determining

sentences. Draft legislation is being prepared, but changing the law would require a functioning Government and legislature. We urge the Government to prioritise this legislation, which would add to the range of offences that those involved with paramilitary-linked criminality could face.

- 1.77 The speed of justice – and linked issues such as bail, time spent on remand and in custody, and time served at the point of sentencing – undoubtedly affects public confidence in the criminal justice system. The median time taken for a court case improved overall last year (down from 226 days to 206 days)<sup>15</sup>. However, the progress made in Magistrates' and Youth Magistrates' Courts was not matched by progress in the Crown Court, where cases were taking longer on average, as it continues to recover from the COVID-19 backlog. It is important that human rights obligations are met and that every effort is made to remove avoidable delay from the system, so that justice is done and is seen to be done. The Criminal Justice Board (made up of the leaders of those organisations responsible for criminal justice in Northern Ireland) has had a focus on reducing volumes through the Speeding Up Justice Programme, seeking to reduce demands on the criminal justice system. We understand that this work includes looking further at early engagement, additional potential for out of court/alternative disposals, considering the remit of the magistrate's court and digital opportunities, as well as committal reform. We appreciate the resource constraints on all public sector bodies at the present time. Nevertheless, it is vital that this work is prioritised, and innovation and collaboration in this area are clear focuses for all the relevant agencies to deliver tangible improvements.
- 1.78 We maintain a close interest in committal reform, which is one means of removing some avoidable delay. We welcome the abolition of preliminary investigations and mixed committals from October 2022, removing the potential need for victims to give oral evidence at both committal and then again at trial in new cases after that date. We recognise the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on the courts system, but given the significant benefits of direct committal to the Crown Court (speeding up justice and improving the experience of vulnerable victims and witnesses) we urge that momentum delivering on these reforms be maintained and where possible accelerated. A number of inspection and audit reports this year have pointed to other opportunities to address delay, including improving the quality of the case files from the PSNI and Public Prosecution Service for NI for court cases, and opportunities to improve the justice system such as improvements in prisons, probation, resettlement and the operation of bail and remand. We commend the relevant organisations for their insightful feedback and encourage significant action against these recommendations.
- 1.79 A problem-solving approach to justice continues to be a priority for justice agencies, and indeed beyond. We have previously commended the work of multi-agency

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/case-processing-time-criminal-cases-dealt-courts-ni-2223>

support hubs, which seek to assist the most vulnerable. These form one part of problem solving efforts, and whilst not necessarily dealing with high volumes of paramilitary-linked cases, help address vulnerabilities and issues which can be linked to paramilitaries. We also recognise the problem-solving approach embedded in many aspects of the Programme and the clear focus put on it by the PSNI.

- 1.80 We also welcome the leadership being provided in this field by Justice leaders including the Chief Justice, as well as the input, commitment and work of other organisations. We are disappointed to note that promising pilots such as the Substance Misuse Court (which places offenders on intensive treatment programmes, under court supervision, to specifically target drug and alcohol linked offending behaviour, with final sentencing reflecting their participation) have not been further rolled out and that other initiatives such as a Mental Health Court did not commence. This at a time when drug and addiction problems are increasing. The NI Audit Office noted in a recent report that “budgetary constraints and prioritisation of Covid recovery have prevented further progress in piloting, assessing, or rolling out these PSJ [problem-solving justice] initiatives, and our review also noted similar problems with several other offender rehabilitation projects. DoJ now finds itself at an impasse, unable to confirm what the future of PSJ looks like, and whether these initiatives will be rolled out further”.<sup>16</sup>
- 1.81 The Chief Justice expressed regret about delays due to resource pressures in her start of term address and observed that “the effort is very much warranted when we see the real opportunity for potential savings, both human and financial, that these initiatives can present”.<sup>17</sup> **We support that view and recommend that the Department of Justice explore what more can be done to avail of the possibilities offered by problem-solving justice and specialist courts. We encourage the Sponsor Group to consider what support it can give to join-up and innovation in this field, and to seek relevant input to such deliberations.**
- 1.82 Linked to public confidence in the criminal justice system is public perception of sentencing and bail. We note that the Chief Justice hopes to pilot broadcasting sentencing remarks to promote open justice, transparency and aid public understanding of complex decision making – we support any initiative that can help to build confidence and understanding like this, and also efforts led by the Department of Justice to explain the “justice journey” for victims and witnesses.
- 1.83 We welcome the Belfast Remote Evidence Centre which supports the special measures already available by enabling vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses to provide their evidence to the court, using live link video technology from a location outside the court building. Engaging with the criminal justice system can be challenging, and confidence levels can be influenced by personal experience, and/or

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/reducing-adult-reoffending-northern-ireland>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/publications/lady-chief-justices-opening-term-address-5-september-2023>



by the experiences and perceptions of friends, family and communities. There continues to be a real fear for witnesses around coming forward and fear of intimidation, and giving evidence can be a life changing experience. This is a complex situation which cannot be addressed by one organisation or initiative alone, but requires a combination of efforts to improve confidence in and understanding of the system; build confidence in supports and protections available; address the threats and structures that continue to cause fear and reluctance to come forward to report crime; sustained political leadership and further strengthening of commitment to the rule of law. We encourage the Programme to look at whether there is additional support that it can offer in this domain to complement wider efforts.

- 1.84 Learning and development in the separated prison regime<sup>18</sup> was not funded by the Programme after March 2023 but the NI Prison Service continues to be committed to its provision. An increase in the prison population and staffing shortages were a particular challenge for the Prison Service in the recent period, as has been widely reported. We commend the work of the Independent Assessment Team, the Prison Service and others who work to manage issues as they develop in the prisons. We understand that as the Prison Service stabilises its staffing complement, a suitable range of learning and development and other constructive activity will continue to be offered to those across its prisons, including those in separation. Efforts to further promote reintegration and reduce reoffending by relevant justice agencies are to be commended, and we welcome efforts to ensure skills training matches employment opportunities and to offer additional services to that end.
- 1.85 Multi-agency review arrangements for the monitoring and supervision of terrorist-risk offenders ahead of and following release from prison have continued to be implemented.
- 1.86 The issue of prisoners connected to paramilitarism has historically been highly sensitive and charged. As efforts to end paramilitarism intensify, this will continue to be the case – hence our reference to this matter in the upcoming section of this Overview dealing with Group Transition.
- 1.87 The total value of proceeds of crime seized in Northern Ireland has increased over the last five years (from £1.8m in 2017/18 to £2.4m in 2022/23), including cash seizures (£1.6m in 2022/23) and seizures from account freezing orders (£0.8m in 2022/23). The value of proceeds of crime recovered in receipts from Forfeiture Orders has also increased in recent years (£1.3m in 2022/23). Confiscation and Restraint Orders continue to be used.<sup>19</sup> Proceeds of crime paid under Confiscation Orders are reinvested into projects aimed at tackling crime and reducing the fear of crime in

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<sup>18</sup> Prisoners who wish to be held in separation make an application and meet the criteria which are set by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/asset-recovery-statistical-bulletin-financial-years-ending-2018-to-2023>

communities through the local Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS),<sup>20</sup> and strengthening law enforcement's capability to disrupt criminal activity through the pursuit of criminal assets through the Assets Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS). We encourage the Department of Justice and the UK Government to progress work so that additional assets recovered in NI are invested directly in communities. The priority focus on paramilitary-linked criminality's finances is a welcome one and we encourage the NCA, HMRC and PSNI to continue with it.

- 1.88 The Organised Crime Task Force (a multi-agency partnership seeking to support law-abiding citizens and enable the legitimate business community to flourish by identifying and mitigating the effects of organised crime) continues to deliver against a three-year strategy, and through its activities and work has an impact on paramilitarism, particularly where there are connections between Organised Crime Groups and paramilitary activity. Other criminal justice work to tackle issues which can sometimes be linked to paramilitarism in different ways, such as anti-social behaviour, hate crime, and domestic abuse, needs to be continued, and opportunities for mutual reinforcement and support seized.
- 1.89 Further progress has been made in developing restorative work. A range of bodies are using restorative methods in their work and seeing the benefits of it, including community-based organisations, accredited restorative justice organisations (currently Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Alternatives NI), housing providers, and the NI Probation Board, in settings ranging from the criminal justice system to mediation to classrooms, amongst others. A major barrier to new groups being accredited for restorative work has been addressed by the revision of the 2007 Protocol governing Restorative Justice and Accreditation, following the work and report of an independent panel and input from many organisations and groups<sup>21</sup>.
- 1.90 We welcome preparatory work being funded through the Programme to support the development of justice elements of a Centre of Restorative Excellence: an interim Protocol lead helping to develop training standards and establish a training framework, to promote restorative justice, to increase capacity and availability of restorative justice, and to monitor progress. We hope that the pace of progress improves. We also welcome the continuing support of restorative practice in Communities in Transition areas through the STARS (Striving Towards A Restorative Society) project and recognise the importance of other work to promote and embed restorative practice in contexts ranging from education and housing to community mediation. The Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and associated action plan is a good way to measure progress against set objectives in this field and we note the range of activity planned

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<sup>20</sup> Recent projects funded by the ARCS: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/ARCS%202022%2023%20-%202023%2024%20-%20funding%20offered%20to%20successful%20applicants.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/review-2007-government-protocol-use-restorative-justice-final-report>

and underway<sup>22</sup>. We note plans to explore additional opportunities to use restorative interventions in diversionary disposals and court ordered community sentences which may help to reduce short prison sentences (building on the success of Enhanced Combination Orders) and will follow this work with interest. NI Prison Service have continued to further embed use of restorative practice in custody, resettlement and reintegration work. We continue to see a need for a dedicated cross-Executive fund to support the growth of restorative work across many fields, through a Centre of Excellence, and regret that it has not yet been established, given the potential for benefit across many departments and agencies as well as the community sector.

### **Track Two – addressing systemic socio-economic issues**

- 1.91 We mentioned above the large range of projects aimed at addressing the socio-economic challenges facing individuals and families in communities where the paramilitaries mainly operate, challenges which make them vulnerable to paramilitary influence and control. We set out in the following paragraphs some examples of the good work being done in Phase Two of the Programme as we feel they give a good flavour of the very wide spread of activity and high-quality interventions that are underway. We are encouraged as well by the evaluations of projects and activities which we see as a critical factor in ensuring effectiveness, value for money and accountability, and sharing learning from the Programme so that it can shape mainstream policy and other practice. We have already mentioned earlier the importance of the dedicated research process which sits alongside these interventions and we reiterate again the importance of that for the continued evolution of the Programme and influencing the wider system. Fuller details on these and other relevant projects are contained in Section C of this Report.

#### *Wrap Project*

- 1.92 This is a wraparound, flexible education service for children and young people facing significant challenges in four specific geographical areas. Known as the 'Wrap project', this initiative focuses on educational under attainment, which is key to tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime and, in particular, the impact which socio-economic deprivation has on children and young people's outcomes. Influencing community attitudes to education and raising aspirations is key to both reducing educational underachievement and, therefore, tackling paramilitary activity and organised crime.

#### *Youth Service Projects*

- 1.93 These projects provide a range of youth work support including through partnership with the community and voluntary sector. They include: 1) intensive, specialist outreach and mentoring working with young people within communities at risk of being harmed by paramilitaries; 2) agile responses during times of community tensions and social unrest; 3) the CONNECT programme placing youth workers in hospital

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/publication-key-restorative-justice-documents>

Emergency Departments to support vulnerable young people and reduce the physical and social effects of paramilitary activity; 4) prevention of youth violence programmes, and other activities including capacity building.

*Mid and East Antrim Youth Support Hub*

- 1.94 This project involves the creation of a multi-agency youth stream of the Mid and East Antrim Support Hub to support young people (up to 25 years old) who are at risk of being involved with, influenced by, or exploited by paramilitary gangs. The project plays an important role in achieving a range of benefits, including, potentially, a reduction in threat-to-life warnings; improvement in relations between PSNI and communities; victims receiving effective help and an improvement in individual protective factors. This is a good example of what we meant earlier by “locality working”, and replicating at ground level the joined-up, integrated approach at the strategic level of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, e.g. the Sponsor Group.

*Developing Women in Community Leadership Programme*

- 1.95 This programme provides women with the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to become influencers and take on roles such as leadership and decision making in their communities. It targets women of all ages and is delivered within the community, in areas where paramilitary influence is prevalent. The programme also provides the opportunity for participants to partake in a volunteering role within their community and to develop and deliver a small programme. The focus is on empowering women with the confidence to become involved in transformational community development

*InSync: Holistic Support for Victims of Paramilitary Crime*

- 1.96 This project supports victims of paramilitary activity and harm. The bulk of the project is geared towards providing support to individuals on a range of issues, most pressingly trauma or counselling support, but also with issues such as drug misuse, debt, self-esteem, training and employment, access to benefits, housing, and family relations. The project also aims to build capacity among service providers to work with victims.

*Communities in Transition*

- 1.97 Communities in Transition is a key project of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. A core aim is building capacity and support in communities which are most impacted by paramilitary activity and coercive control, building community resilience. It is led by The Executive Office and is currently delivered in eight areas: Derry/Londonderry; Carrickfergus/Larne; North Down; Lurgan/Craigavon; North Belfast; East Belfast; Shankill; and West Belfast. Work has focused on seven key emerging themes: Community Safety and Policing; Addressing the needs of young people; Health and Wellbeing; Environment and Culture; Community Development Issues; Restorative Justice and Restorative Practice; and Personal Transition. The feedback has been positive that it is making a significant impact across the eight areas covered.

### **The additional dimension – Group Transition**

- 1.100 For a number of Reports now we have been developing our view that in addition to the Twin Tracks of tackling paramilitarism described above, an additional dimension is required if it is to be ended, namely, a process of engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves to bring about Group Transition and, ultimately, disbandment.
- 1.101 Last year we made a formal Recommendation that as an intermediate step the two Governments consider appointing an Independent Person to explore the concept with various stakeholders and prepare the ground for what a process of engagement and Group Transition might look like. We welcome the discussions which have taken place since our last Report about the role for an Independent Person, including at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. We have had constructive conversations on this topic with various stakeholders, and we have followed discussions and analysis of the recommendation in the public sphere with interest. We appreciate the engagement to date with the two governments to discuss our Recommendation, and we urge them to progress the implementation of this Recommendation as soon as possible. Whilst undoubtedly such a process would carry certain risks, we consider that the greater risk would be in not progressing this important work given the continuing existence of the groups and their structures.
- 1.102 Given the considerable discussion of Group Transition since we first recommended it, including the expression of some criticism and concern, we thought it would be useful to re-state in this Report the main elements of our thinking and why we feel an initiative of this kind is necessary. We also add where appropriate some further insights that we have gleaned from conversations during the past year.
- 1.103 We said at the outset of this Overview that our contribution as the IRC stands or falls on the quality of our analysis. In seeking to fulfil our mandate as a reporting body, we have engaged pro-actively and intensively over the last seven years with a vast range of interested parties and looked closely at best practice elsewhere. These contacts have included experts in policing, law enforcement, criminal justice, terrorism, socio-economic deprivation, public policy, community activism, academia, peace-building, to name but a few. Our net conclusion in the wake of such a wide process of consultation and reflection, and having carefully weighed up the sincerely felt concerns of many – some of which we share ourselves – is that we continue to firmly believe that a process of engagement is needed with the paramilitary groups themselves if Group Transition to disbandment is to be achieved. Disbandment is ultimately a voluntary act. We simply see no other credible way that the goal of ending paramilitarism can be delivered.
- 1.104 We wish to be clear that Group Transition, and the process of engagement required to bring it about, are not a substitute for the Programme. On the contrary, our point is that an effective response to paramilitarism requires all of the above.

1.105 The concerns expressed about engaging with the groups themselves to bring about transition to disbandment have mostly been couched in terms of the risks, complexities and sensitivities involved. These range from concerns about further embedding coercive control, questions about motivations, uncertainty about details of a process, and a misconception that this is a proposal to pay off paramilitaries. We fully understand those concerns and we see them as design challenges to be worked through by an Independent Person and the governments. We also noted that this would be a difficult and challenging path to undertake. We remain firmly of that view. However, we fear that if we do not move forward with scoping the potential for a formal Group Transition process, there is little or no chance of achieving the Fresh Start goal of ending paramilitarism once and for all. We feel that would be a major missed opportunity.

1.106 We move on now to examine in more detail some of the concerns that have been expressed, and how in our view they can be mitigated.

### **Clarity of definition – the meaning of Group Transition**

1.107 One of the concerns that recurs regularly in our exchanges is a perceived lack of clarity about precisely what is meant by the concept of “Group Transition” or even “Transition” more broadly in this context. It is a reasonable question and concern. The concept of “Transition” is mentioned frequently in the various Fresh Start documents – the Agreement itself, the Three Person Panel Report and the Executive Action Plan. In broad terms it means the movement from involvement in or connection to paramilitary activity to a life lived entirely based on peaceful, democratic norms. Moreover, we see three main forms of Transition – individual Transition, community Transition and Group Transition.

1.108 The Programme makes clear that there is no mandate in the Executive Action Plan for them to progress Group Transition. We fully accept the validity of that point. But it is our task at the IRC to keep measures to end paramilitarism under constant review and we have an obligation to point out where we feel gaps exist. We are strongly of the view that the absence of measures to address Group Transition is a significant policy gap and needs to be closed.

1.109 It is our view that a key feature of paramilitarism today is the continuation of its structures and infrastructure in the form of the various groups, both Republican and Loyalist. The existence of the structures means that they can be employed for criminal activity, and the continued existence of the names means that criminal activity can be associated with that ‘brand’ and in some way provide an additional flag of convenience and/or standing due to historic connotations. Another way of looking at this is through the question “who owns the badge or the brand of the paramilitary group?”. That badge or brand has deep historic resonances for those groups and indeed for many in the communities in which they mainly operate. One of the strong views that emerged in our conversations this year is that ownership of that brand – and the ability to take it “off the stage” – will be a key feature of the process of ending paramilitarism.

Indeed, some expressed the view – and it is one we share – that taking the brand of a paramilitary group “off the stage” will be essential to the ending of paramilitarism. In design terms, therefore, if paramilitarism is to be ended, it follows that the issue of the groups themselves organisationally and structurally must be addressed. In our view, the end state of that journey of Transition is disbandment of the groups, though we acknowledge that there are a variety of means by which that can be achieved.

1.110 Another important question 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 include an event. If the definition of Transition incorporates a process, then one question which has arisen in our discussions over the past couple of years is whether Group Transition is already happening in some form. To delve deeper into that question begs a further one – is paramilitarism the same today as it was in the height of the Troubles/conflict, over 30 years ago? One reply we have heard to that question is: “it is different”. We referred earlier in this Section to how paramilitarism has evolved over the last 25 years. But there is widespread agreement, that although it is different to back then, it does, nonetheless, also contain linkages to the nature of paramilitarism at the height of the Troubles. That is why we continue to argue for some dimension of the process used then to be deployed again today, including some form of engagement with the Groups themselves.

1.111 Our conclusion last year was that while some dimension of Transition had taken place at group level, the reality was that it had stalled or not been completed. We went on to say that a major obstacle to completion was the absence of a formal process of engagement with the authorities to ensure Group Transition was accelerated and completed. A year on, we are even more convinced that that is the case. We are not saying that success of a formal process is guaranteed and it is clear that the continued instability at political level is not helping. But nonetheless we feel that there is enough evidence of the potential of the situation to warrant taking the risks involved. Protecting victims, communities and individuals must be a key part of the approach taken.

#### **Reduction of the problem is still success**

1.112 The view that reduction of the problem is still valuable success is a key finding that has emerged from our consultations and reflection. One particular risk associated with undertaking a process of formal engagement with the groups is that their lack of cohesion and their fragmented nature could inhibit the ability to achieve meaningful Transition of groups at scale. This is a valid concern but not one which in our view should preclude initiating a formal process. Achieving the transition of a significant portion of the paramilitary groups would ensure a strong reduction in the scale of paramilitarism. In our view, that would count as success and a very significant advance on where we are at the moment. Moreover, it would also mean that the groupings, or parts of groupings, left behind after the process would be of a much smaller scale.

## **DDR**

- 1.113 There is nothing unusual about a focus on the issue of the transitioning of paramilitary groups to civilian life – indeed on the contrary, it is a key design feature in addressing and ending conflicts globally. We thought it would be useful to examine experiences elsewhere for possible lessons in our case, although we stressed that there is no “one-size-fits-all” – that each conflict situation is different and that our situation in Northern Ireland has characteristics that are not found elsewhere. Nonetheless, there are common features also and we felt it would be useful to explore those.
- 1.114 A key player in international conflict resolution is, of course, the United Nations (UN), and we were interested to look at how some of the mechanisms the UN has developed. It summarises the issue in a concept called DDR: Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration. The UN recognises DDR as an essential part of a conflict resolution process stating that its elements “should be seen as integral parts of efforts to consolidate peace and promote stability, and not merely as a set of sequenced technical programmes and activities”<sup>23</sup>.
- 1.115 The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement included elements of DDR (decommissioning of weapons, the release of prisoners, normalisation of security arrangements etc.), but it did not formally frame these as DDR in the sense outlined by the UN. In this the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year of the Agreement, we believe there is enhanced merit in having a Group Transition process viewed through the lens of DDR, as defined by the UN. As we have just stated, it is true that Northern Ireland differs to a significant degree to situations where armed groups operate in quasi-military format and often at a distance from their own neighbourhoods. In Northern Ireland, paramilitaries continued to live for the most part in their own or connected communities and as a consequence a different kind of process would be required – one tailored to its context. In other words, the DDR process as applied elsewhere could be adapted to apply to ending paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today. Lessons could also be gleaned from other concepts such as post-conflict reconstruction.
- 1.116 One obvious question is what would Reintegration – the R in DDR – mean in Northern Ireland terms. We believe exploring this question could be a valuable element of a Group Transition process in Northern Ireland today. Many of the worries expressed are not unique to Northern Ireland and are valid issues to be addressed, drawing on models of practice that have worked elsewhere. It is vital that careful consideration is also given to how we prepare society for further reintegration efforts.
- 1.117 We appreciate also that such developments would have implications for the current outworkings of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. We are very conscious of the need to ensure that whatever emerged from this Process would not interfere

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/pb\\_review\\_thematic\\_paper\\_orsl\\_dds\\_-\\_role\\_of\\_ddr\\_in\\_pb\\_and\\_sp-final.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/pb_review_thematic_paper_orsl_dds_-_role_of_ddr_in_pb_and_sp-final.pdf)



negatively with the Programme. Rather our hope would be that it would complement the Programme and enhance wider efforts to end paramilitarism.

### **The role of women in Group Transition**

1.118 In this the year of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, it is only right that we highlight again the critical role that women play in communities and throughout society, including politics. Women have made a vital contribution to bringing about everyday peace, positive change and the transformation of Northern Ireland. They have played a critical role within local communities and beyond, and continue to make an important contribution at multiple levels. The value of that contribution in terms of tackling paramilitarism and promoting Transition was recognised in the Three Person Panel Report, the Executive Action Plan and today in the Programme through dedicated projects with a focus on the particular leadership role women can actively play. We draw attention again to paragraph 1.95 above on valuable projects underway under the Programme supporting women and further details about this are outlined in Section C of the Report.

1.119 There is a growing understanding of what paramilitarism looks like and means to women in communities. As this understanding is deepened, projects, programmes and policy can be further tailored to reflect this. The experiences of participants in the Developing Women in the Community project are important to this. The project sees women becoming empowered and developing as leaders in their communities, local groups and support networks being established, and local community infrastructure growing and so contributing to increasing community resilience. This project continues to be necessary to ensure women reach their full potential within communities and is part of wider Programme efforts to challenge paramilitary control, in that it supports the transformation of areas where paramilitaries operate. The project helped deliver positive change for individuals. To give just one example, in 2022/23, the project measured whether participants reported having a leadership role; this increased from 35% at baseline to 61% at the end of the project. Evaluations of this project found interesting trends and generated useful data<sup>24</sup>. It is vital that these insights are shared widely in order to inform policy making and service delivery across government. Because women are impacted in particular ways by paramilitarism and because of their essential role in communities, a Group Transition process must ensure that the voice of women living in the most adversely impacted communities is listened to.

### **Possible elements of a Group Transition process**

1.120 We have given considerable thought to possible elements for inclusion in a Group Transition process. Our thinking takes account of very valuable conversations we have had with a range of stakeholders, including over the past year. Whilst these ideas are not definitive, we hope that they are a useful contribution to the debate

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<sup>24</sup> [https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/321875393/DfC\\_Developing\\_Women\\_in\\_the\\_Community\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/321875393/DfC_Developing_Women_in_the_Community_Evaluation.pdf)

around the issue and could be helpful to the work of the Independent Person or others working on Group Transition in the future.

1.121 A critical question is “Who would own the process?” Our answer last year was, and remains, the two Governments and, in the event of its return, the NI Executive, acting on a coordinated, collective basis. Only the Governments and the Executive have the mandate and authority to take forward what is needed.

1.122 We 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.

1.123 In terms of the various milestones, we reiterate here some of the steps we would see involved in the Process, but we acknowledge that there could well be others:

- Ending recruitment to paramilitary groups;
- 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 materiel;
- 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 the new Legacy Bodies.

1.124 We have said repeatedly that the primary goal of the Process should be disbandment of the groups. Achieving each step in itself would be valuable progress. That said, we have also heard views, including during the past year, that there might be other outcomes marking the ending of the activities of the groups. Our point is that whatever the shape of the end-point, it has to be such as to engender public confidence that the threat of a resumption of paramilitary activity by that group has been definitively removed.

1.125 A further factor that would need to be considered is whether there would be any role in the process of Group Transition for Deproscription of the paramilitary organisations (i.e. removing them from the list of prohibited terrorist groups under UK counterterrorism legislation). We continue to acknowledge that Deproscription is a highly sensitive issue. As before, we are not taking a view on its merits, but point out that it remains on the statute books and would be a factor to be considered in any comprehensive process of Group Transition.

1.126 The issue of prisoners connected to the paramilitary groups will also be a factor. We are not suggesting any particular measure in this regard; we are simply re-stating the

obvious point that they are an influential constituency within each paramilitary group and this will have to be taken into account in finalising any process of Group Transition.

### **Legacy of the Past**

- 1.127 While Legacy of the Past is not part of our mandate at the IRC, we have stated in each Report that it is a relevant contextual factor that has an impact on any Process of Group Transition and efforts to tackle paramilitarism. We note the passage of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act recently by the UK Government in that regard. We also note the strong opposition of the Irish Government, the NI parties, many victims' groups and others in civic society in Northern Ireland to this legislation. It is not for us to comment on the substance of the legislation or the difference of views that has arisen. We have identified co-operation with legacy bodies as one of the possible steps in a formal Group Transition process (in paragraph 1.123), and the positions of the Irish and UK Governments on dealing with the past are noted on pp.138-140.

### **Victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict**

- 1.128 We are acutely mindful of the impact of our recommendation on the many victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict. More than 3,500 people lost their lives and over 40,000 were injured, and individuals, families and entire communities continue to feel the hurt, suffering and trauma caused by decades of violence and instability. We have listened to victims' groups and it is without doubt that the Troubles has had a profound and deep-rooted impact on generations of families in the UK, Ireland and beyond. We are conscious that for victims and survivors the ongoing debate around paramilitarism and bringing it to an end has a particular resonance which is deeply personal. We acknowledge the courage of those who live with the continuing impact and harm caused by paramilitaries, and we commend the work of Victims and Survivors Groups to ensure that people are supported and their voices are heard. As a Commission, we are committed to long-term peace and stability and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and we believe that real and lasting peace cannot be achieved while paramilitary groups and their structures continue to exist. We reiterate our commitment to and support for the wide-ranging work needed to achieve the goal of bringing an end to paramilitarism once and for all and ensuring that there are no more victims of paramilitary violence. We will continue to engage with victims' groups as we take this work forward.

### **Other issues for comment in the Overview**

- 1.129 There are other issues relating to paramilitarism we wish to offer our views on and these are set out in the following paragraphs. In most cases, they are matters that have been raised before, but we do so here as we believe them to be of continuing relevance in the work of bringing paramilitarism to an end.

### **Coercive control of communities**

- 1.130 In our most recent Reports, we have included a Section on coercive control of communities by paramilitary groups as an often-underappreciated dimension of the

overall paramilitary issue. We wish to highlight the challenge again in this Report. Conversations we have had in 2023 with people living in these communities have reinforced graphically for us the ongoing reality in terms of daily life. One statistic that we have found particularly shocking each year is the data from the Housing Executive around the number of households accepted as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation<sup>25</sup>. In 2022/23 that was 194 households. That figure only provides a snapshot of intimidation, and we are mindful of the life-changing effect of paramilitary threats forcing people to leave an area and that there is limited information available about this. 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.

- 1.131 In our Analysis Section above we pointed to the complexity that there can often be some support or tacit acceptance within communities for the control exercised by paramilitary groups or individuals claiming to be associated with them – including in respect of “paramilitary style attacks”. Nonetheless, it is clear that coercive control by paramilitary groups is an unacceptable feature of Northern Ireland life today and another reason for the urgent need to bring paramilitarism to an end, and we support those who are seeking to call out and address these human rights abuses.
- 1.132 Part of our rationale for highlighting this point in our Report is that it is an unseen part of the problem for most people living in Northern Ireland. The evidence shows that the great majority of communities in Northern Ireland do not experience or witness paramilitary influence in their daily lives. Indeed, looking at the NI Life and Times Survey, 13% of those surveyed believed that paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in their area<sup>26</sup>. By contrast, in areas where dedicated Communities in Transition work is being done, that rises to almost 30% and was almost 50% in certain areas<sup>27</sup>. This shows that for those communities where the paramilitaries operate, it is a very different situation indeed.
- 1.133 One issue we regularly hear about is the rise in drug dealing and addiction, and the associated impact on mental health, debt and drug debt-related intimidation. There were 213 drug-related deaths in 2021 (the second highest on record)<sup>28</sup> and the level of drug seizures recorded in 2022/23 (8,867) was almost three and a half times the level recorded in 2006/07. The drug-related arrest figures almost doubled in that same

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/housing-statistics>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results>

<sup>27</sup> <https://cooperationireland.org/projects/communities-in-transition-area-reports/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/news/drug-related-and-drug-misuse-deaths-northern-ireland-2011-2021>

time period.<sup>29</sup> This is a cross-cutting issue, as it involves health, criminal justice and socio-economic dimensions, and as such requires a multi-agency response. We realise that drug addiction is a growing concern throughout the UK, Ireland, and many other jurisdictions; however, the additional element in NI is that the drugs trade can be linked to paramilitarism. We have heard how paramilitary-linked groups can be involved in supplying drugs; ‘taxing’ dealers; intimidating those with drug debts and their families; and coercing and exploiting young people into dealing and other activities. Some young people may be manipulated into carrying out these activities through the exploitation of their vulnerabilities (including trauma), some may have drug debts, or, in some cases, they want to earn additional money to cope with the rise in the cost of living. We commend the many community and voluntary groups in their work to support those with addiction problems, and welcome the Department of Health’s ten-year Strategy *Preventing Harm & Empowering Recovery: A Strategic Framework to Tackle the Harm from Substance Use*<sup>30</sup>, which was launched in 2021. We call on all Departments and Agencies to redouble efforts to tackle this issue.

- 1.134 In Section B we have highlighted the key findings from an important piece of work this year around Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) funded by the Programme. This research looked at young people’s experiences of and attitudes towards criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland. We set out more information about these findings in Section B, but it appeared that initially young people were generally unaware of the ways in which organised criminal networks leverage the vulnerabilities of children for their own gain. As the young people discussed things further and critically analysed their experiences, they could see this occurring in their communities. It is important that the whole system recognises the challenges around CCE and that the recommendations made about developing the system’s response to CCE are taken forward, building on the concerns raised by the previous Children’s Commissioner in this area. We understand that a senior officials group is working to that end.
- 1.135 Another important piece of research commissioned and published by the Programme this year explored the systemic response to threats to life.<sup>31</sup> We have commented on intimidation above, and support the call made by this piece of research for the system to do further work to ensure a consistent approach to threats to life to both adults and children, and we encourage further work to that end. We also note the ongoing work by the NI Housing Executive to develop proposals around housing intimidation points.

### **Financial commitments**

- 1.136 As we have made clear in this Report and previous ones, the task of putting an end to paramilitarism requires an ongoing and comprehensive focus, including multi-year financial commitments to reflect the need for sustained investment. To fulfil our shared

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/drug-seizure-statistics>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/substance-use-strategy-2021-31>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.endingtheharm.com/research-papers/reviewing-the-threat-to-life-process-in-northern-ireland/>

ambition of ending paramilitarism once and for all requires commensurate investment of resources. Dedicated and targeted investment is not sufficient alone. Funding for prevention, tackling socio-economic need and transformative change must also be priorities. We reiterate the call we have made in previous Reports that the funding secured for the Fresh Start initiatives on tackling paramilitarism should be maintained by both the UK Government and the NI Executive, and be given a high priority in what we acknowledge is a very challenging current fiscal climate. As covered in paragraph 1.50 above, this targeted support must also be underpinned by a cross-departmental commitment to ambitious strategies to tackle socio-economic issues which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today.

### **Cost of living crisis**

- 1.137 We highlighted in our last Report how the effect of the cost-of-living crisis was disproportionately felt in those communities already struggling in socio-economic terms. Those are also the communities where the paramilitary influence tends to be at its strongest. We repeat our concern in this regard even more forcefully in this Report. We know from experience that when economic difficulties arise, people in these communities are more likely to be exposed to paramilitary influence, thus further deepening the grip of the latter in those communities. Good work has been undertaken to address the issues at community level, including in socio-economic terms, and it is vital that this progress is not undermined, but rather that the communities involved continue to be supported.
- 1.138 **We, therefore, reiterate our call on the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to give continued special consideration to the needs of communities where paramilitaries mainly operate in addressing the cost-of-living crisis in Northern Ireland.**

### **Memorialisation**

- 1.139 In our last three Reports, we have raised the issue of commemorations of the past that have a paramilitary dimension: “Memorialisation” of the paramilitary past. In our view, the matter continues to be deeply contentious, as events during the past year have once more demonstrated. While the focus of these events is the past, they clearly have the capacity to impact negatively on the present also, including in terms of continuing to promote peace-building and reconciliation. We believe an express focus should be brought to bear on Memorialisation.
- 1.140 In our Last Report, we welcomed the publication of the Report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) which addressed this subject comprehensively. In particular, we noted with interest the chapter entitled “Memorials, Remembrance and Commemoration”.<sup>32</sup> Much of this chapter was in fact exploring

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/commission-flags-identity-culture-and-tradition-final-report>

commemoration of events and people connected to paramilitarism, which has been the focal point of our consideration. The complexity is reflected in the fact that the Commission was unable to reach agreed recommendations on a number of matters relating to the subject. We reiterate here our view that the FICT Commission's exploration has done a considerable service and is highly relevant to the debate around several of the dimensions of the task of ending paramilitarism. We ask that the issue of Memorialisation continue to be given a focus in the debate around ending paramilitarism. 55% of respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2022 indicated that they had been personally annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags in the last year, and 40% by Republican murals, kerb paintings or flags; 39% and 28% respectively had felt intimidated by them<sup>33</sup>. We encourage further work by the public sector to partner with communities to transform physical manifestations of paramilitary control such as murals, which has been done with some success in the last year.

### **Shared Housing and Integrated Education**

- 1.141 We have included a focus on Shared Housing and Integrated Education in all of our Reports. We continue to believe that the current approaches to housing and education in Northern Ireland are among the contextual factors that influence the challenge of tackling paramilitarism on a long-term, sustainable basis. In May 2023, the Department of Education published its first Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. We recognise that people feel this Strategy should be more ambitious, but we welcome this step as, in our view, Integrated Education breaks down barriers, builds good relations amongst young people from an early age and promotes a culture of tolerance – all of which we believe play a role in tackling paramilitarism. 5% of schools are integrated and 8% of all NI pupils are in integrated schools<sup>34</sup>. 68% of respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey indicated that if they were deciding where to send their children to school, they would prefer a mixed-religion school<sup>35</sup>.
- 1.142 A small proportion of new build social housing is now delivered as shared. There have been 77 schemes delivering 2,515 homes, with an accompanying investment of more than £25m to develop area good relations plans. Unfortunately, the vast majority of social housing in Northern Ireland is still segregated. Whilst the reasons for this are complex, this is a deeply challenging reality in the context of peace-building and reconciliation. 74% of people responding to the NILT said that, if they had a choice, they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20Census%20Key%20Statistics%202022.23.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2022/Community\\_Relations/OWNMXSCH.html](https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2022/Community_Relations/OWNMXSCH.html)

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/>

1.143 We remain of the view that the slow progress being made towards Shared Housing and Integrated Education is an inhibiting factor in the ending of paramilitarism, as is the continuing existence of interface barriers. These are important contextual factors in the way that they perpetuate separated structures in their respective spaces. Our view is that every opportunity must be taken to promote shared approaches and shared interaction if ending paramilitarism is to be achieved. We urge all relevant stakeholders to take this reality into account in developing their strategies and plans.

### **Conclusion**

1.144 We hope that this Overview has served to provide a comprehensive snapshot of where paramilitarism stands in Northern Ireland today – why it continues, the progress being made in tackling it, the challenges that remain and the opportunity that we believe now exists for ending it. We are under no illusion that anything is guaranteed in that regard. We are acutely conscious of the complexities involved, not least because of the instability at political level in the absence of the Executive and Assembly at Stormont at the time of writing. We also appreciate that there is widespread impatience in wider society about the continuation of paramilitarism. We share that impatience. The work to address all the dimensions is often slow and painstaking, and requires a whole of Government approach. In that regard, we have sought to bring assurances around the major scale of the effort underway in the form of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme and the dedicated contributions of so many stakeholders at public service and community levels. We believe that strong encouragement can be taken from the quality and impact of that effort.

1.145 So as 2023 draws to a close, and while nothing is guaranteed, we believe that the opportunity to deliver the promise of both the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Fresh Start Agreement in terms of a definitive end to paramilitarism exists in a very real way. We recognise that a particular responsibility rests with the two Governments, who led the Fresh Start Agreement process and who commissioned us as a reporting body. Achieving the goal of tackling paramilitarism will require political leadership from every quarter and is closely linked to reconciliation. The task now is to ensure that every opportunity to meaningfully tackle paramilitarism is taken to the full. We hope our Report can make a useful contribution to its achievement.



## SECTION B: DATA AND INDICATORS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

2.1 This Section of the Report contains data from various statutory bodies, departments and agencies that are relevant to considering trends in reported paramilitary activity.

### Security situation statistics

2.2 The PSNI publishes monthly statistics relating to the security situation in Northern Ireland including the numbers of security situation deaths, shootings and bombings, and casualties of paramilitary style assaults and shootings<sup>37</sup>. Over the following pages we reproduce statistics up to March 2023 (i.e. the end of the last financial year).

2.3 While there has been a generally downward trend in security-related incidents over recent years there has been an increase in the number of shootings from 25 in 2021/22 to 43 in 2022/23. We look at trends in each domain below.

### Security Situation Deaths

2.4 Table 1 shows deaths related to the security situation in the past ten years. The PSNI defines security-related deaths as “those which are considered at the time of the incident to be directly attributed to terrorism, where the cause has a direct or proximate link to subversive / sectarian strife or where the death is attributable to security force activity”.

**Table 1: Security Situation Deaths**

13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
1	3	3	5	2	2	1	3	1	1

*Source: PSNI security situation statistics bulletin*

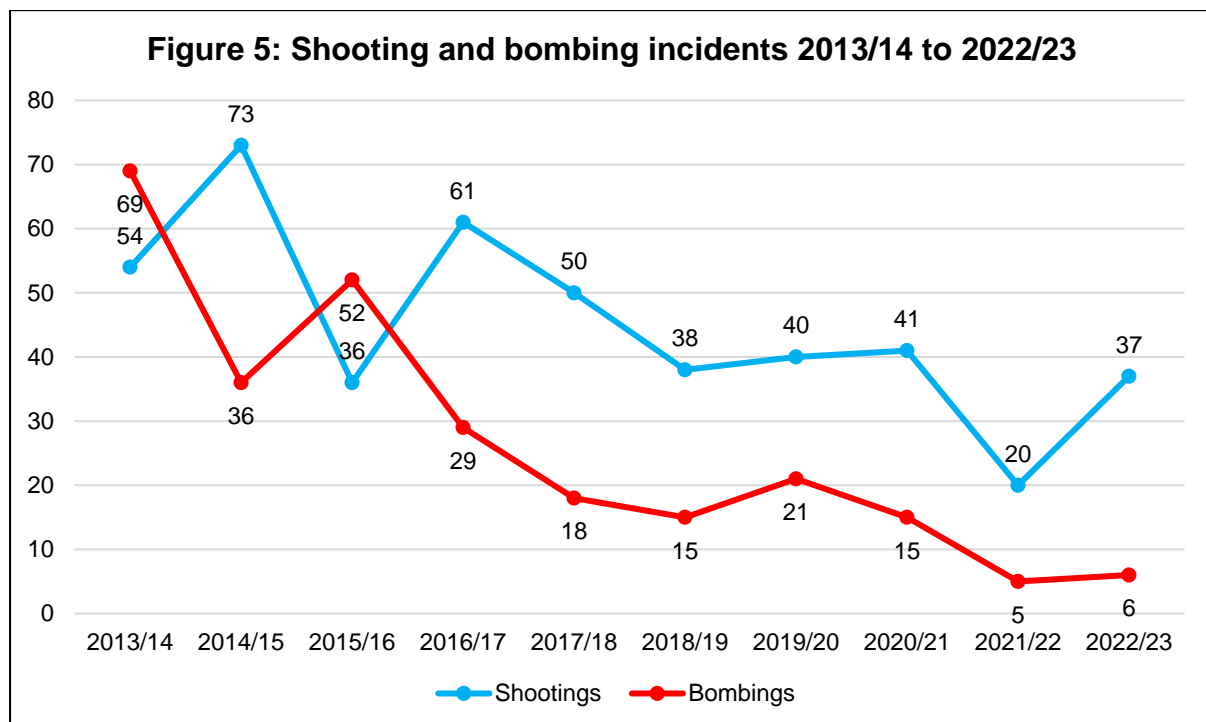
2.5 There was one death in the 2022/23 period, which occurred in Belfast. There have been one to three deaths a year in the last ten years, apart from 2016/17 when there were five. In the period 2013/14 to 2017/18 there were 14 security situation deaths; in the period 2018/19 to 2022/23 there were eight.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/security-situation-statistics>

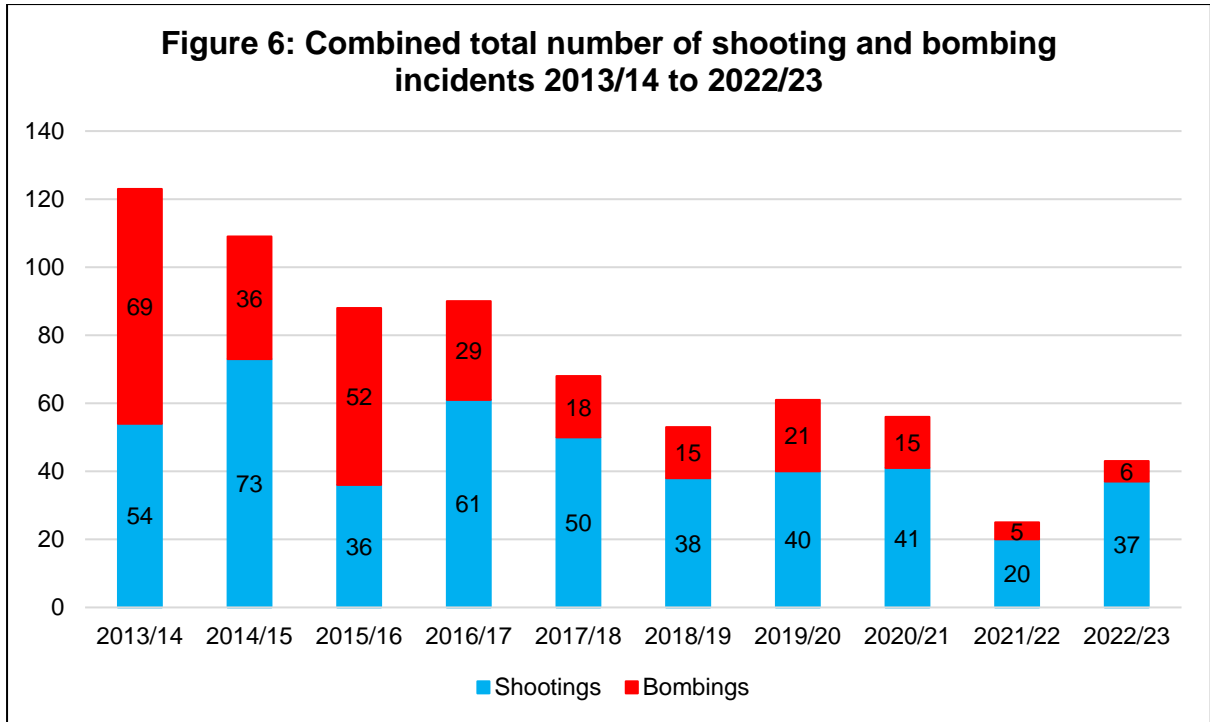
## Shooting incidents and bombings

- 2.6 Figure 5 shows shooting incidents and bombings recorded in the past ten years (see PSNI definitions below)<sup>38</sup>.
- 2.7 There were six bombing incidents last year (1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023), which is one more than in 2021/22. The number of bombing incidents over the past five years (62) has decreased by over two-thirds (70%) compared to the number that occurred during the previous five years (204). In the period April – September 2023 there were two bombing incidents.
- 2.8 There were 37 shooting incidents in 2022/23, compared to 20 in 2021/22. There were 176 shooting incidents in the last five years, a reduction by over a third (36%) compared to the preceding five years (274). In the period April – September 2023 there were 17 shooting incidents.

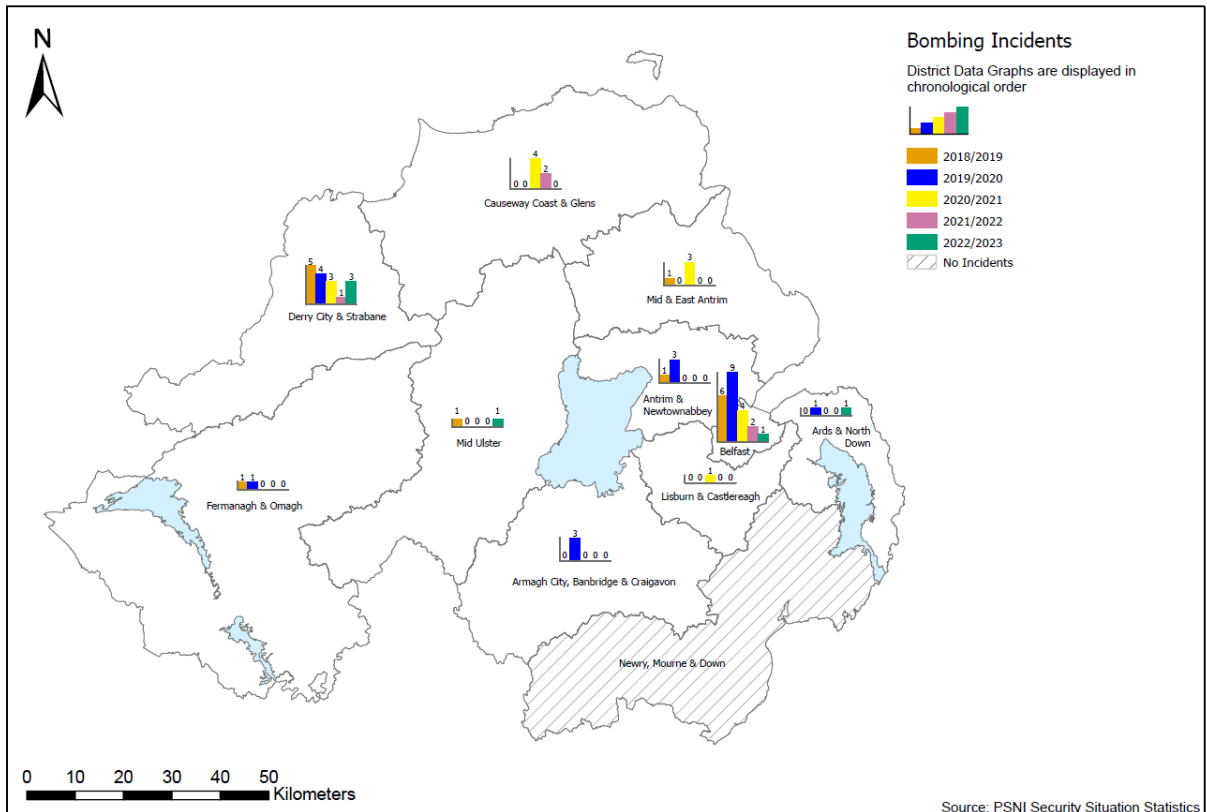


<sup>38</sup> These PSNI figures for shootings include any shooting incident relating to the security situation and include shots fired by terrorists, shots fired by the security forces, paramilitary style attacks involving shootings and shots heard (and later confirmed by other sources).

PSNI's bombing statistics include all incidents where a bombing device explodes or is defused. If a device is found that is not complete or armed, then it is recorded as a 'find' and not as a bombing. Petrol bombings or incendiaries are also excluded.



**Figure 7: Number of bombing incidents broken down by Policing District 2018/19 to 2022/23**



2.9 In Derry City & Strabane the number of incidents increased from one in 2021/22 to three in 2022/23. Ards & North Down and Mid Ulster each recorded one incident in 2022/23, having recorded no incidents in previous years. In the Causeway Coast &

Glens District, the number of incidents fell from two in 2020/21 to zero in 2022/23. In Belfast City, the number decreased from two to one.

**Table 2: Attribution of bombing incidents related to the security situation in Northern Ireland between 2013/14 and 2022/23<sup>39</sup>**

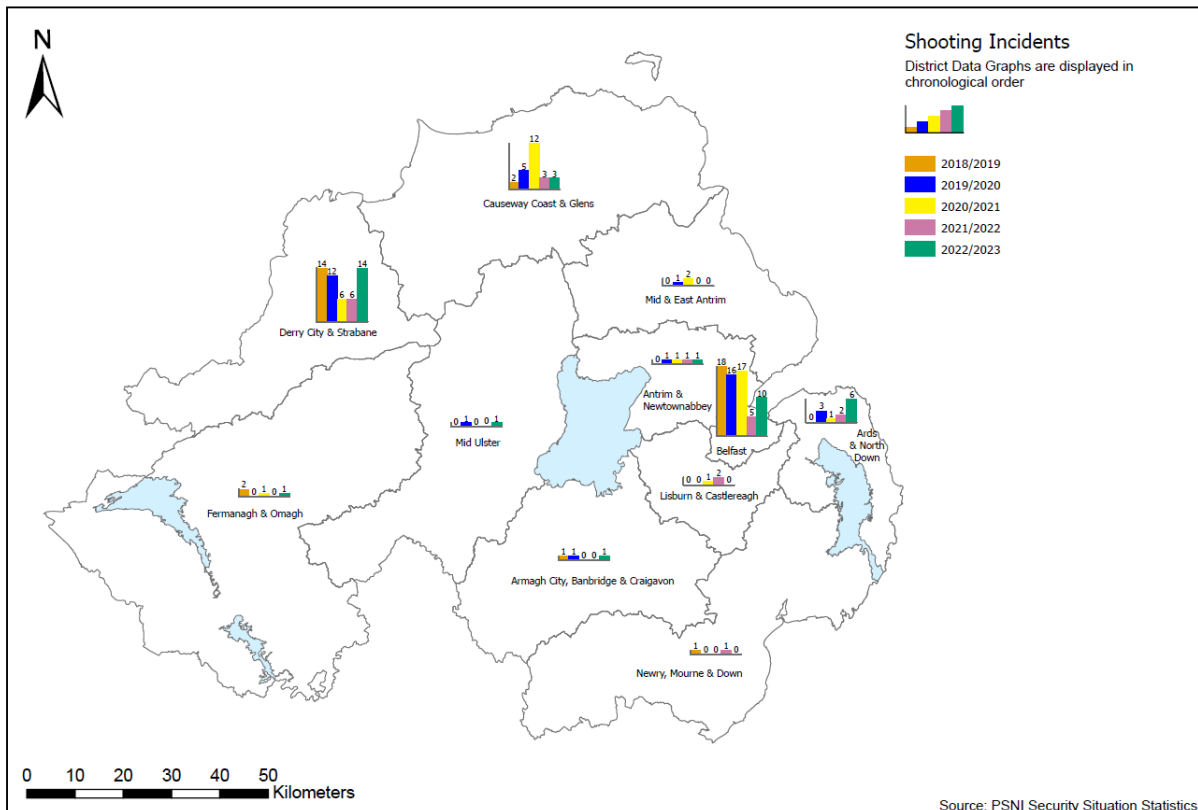
<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Loyalists</b>	<b>Republicans</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>Total</b>
2013/14	18	39	12	<b>69</b>
2014/15	5	22	9	<b>36</b>
2015/16	13	30	9	<b>52</b>
2016/17	4	20	5	<b>29</b>
2017/18	5	13	0	<b>18</b>
2018/19	6	6	3	<b>15</b>
2019/20	8	13	0	<b>21</b>
2020/21	11	3	1	<b>15</b>
2021/22	2	3	0	<b>5</b>
2022/23	2	4	0	<b>6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>266</b>

Source: PSNI data

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<sup>39</sup> Attribution is as perceived by the PSNI based on the information available at the time of the incident and does not necessarily indicate the involvement of a paramilitary organisation.

**Figure 8: Number of shooting incidents broken down by Policing District from 2018/19 to 2022/23**



2.10 The greatest number of shooting incidents took place in Derry City & Strabane (14) – an increase of eight from 2021/22 – and Belfast City (10) – an increase of five from 2021/22. The number of incidents in Ards & North Down increased from two in 2021/22 to six in 2022/23. Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid Ulster and Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon each had one recorded shooting incident (these Districts had no such incidents in 2021/22). Causeway Coast & Glens had three incidents (the same number as last year); Antrim & Newtownabbey had one incident (the same number as in 2022/23). Both Lisburn & Castlereagh, and Newry, Mourne & Down Districts had a decrease in the number of incidents with no incidents recorded in 2022/23.

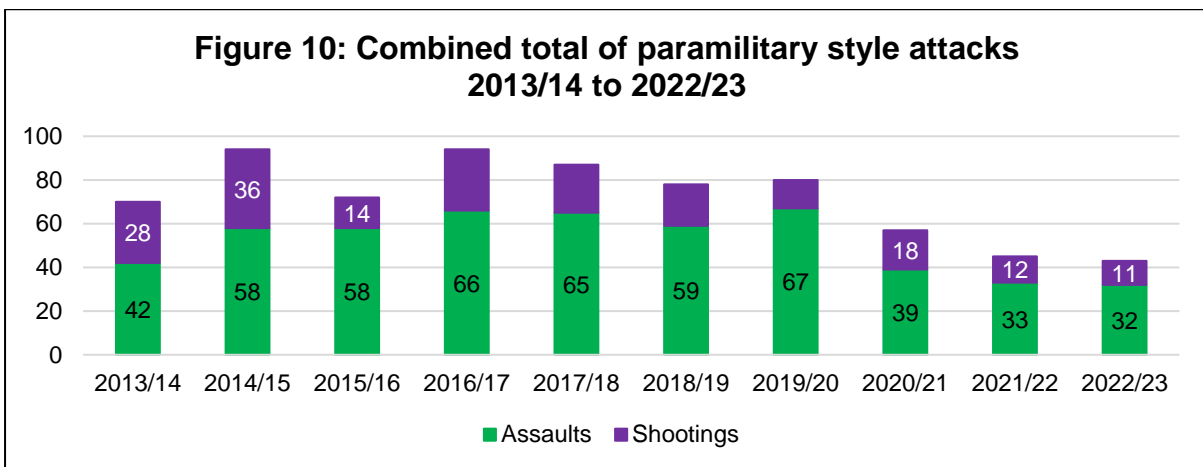
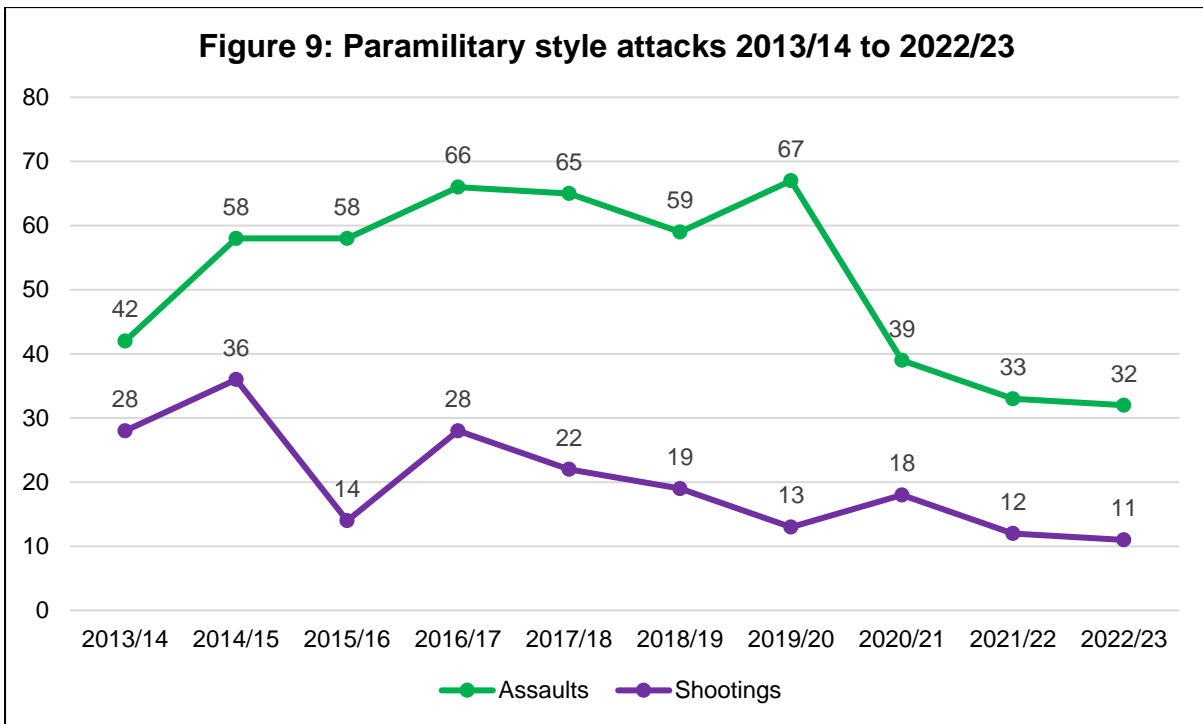
**Table 3: Attribution of shooting incidents related to the security situation in Northern Ireland between 2013/14 and 2022/23**

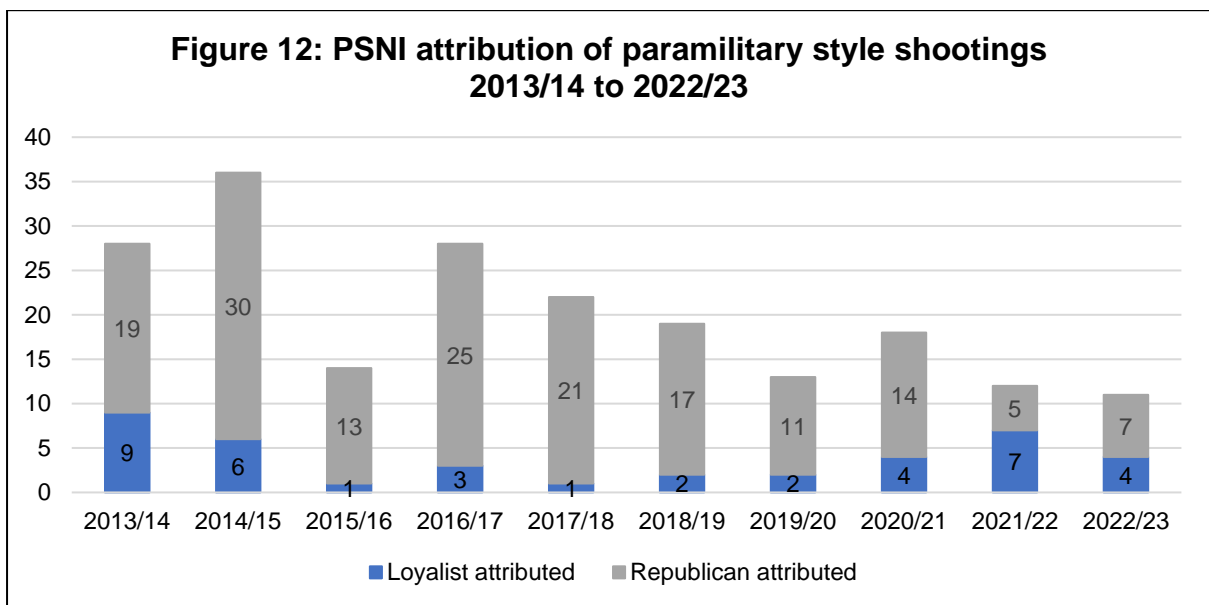
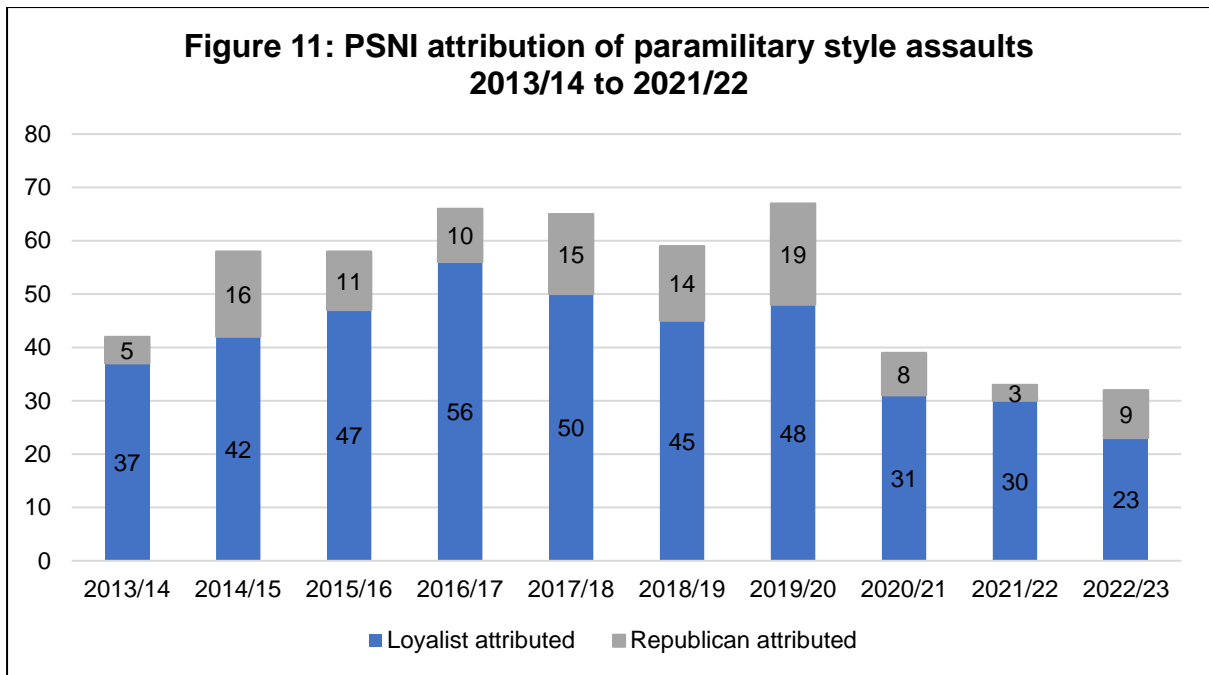
Financial Year	Loyalist	Republican	Unknown	Total
2013/14	16	33	5	<b>54</b>
2014/15	14	53	6	<b>73</b>
2015/16	5	30	1	<b>36</b>
2016/17	8	47	6	<b>61</b>
2017/18	8	37	5	<b>50</b>

2018/19	6	29	3	<b>38</b>
2019/20	9	30	1	<b>40</b>
2020/21	17	23	1	<b>41</b>
2021/22	11	9	0	<b>20</b>
2022/2023	12	24	1	<b>37</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>450</b>

Source: PSNI data

**Paramilitary Style Attacks**





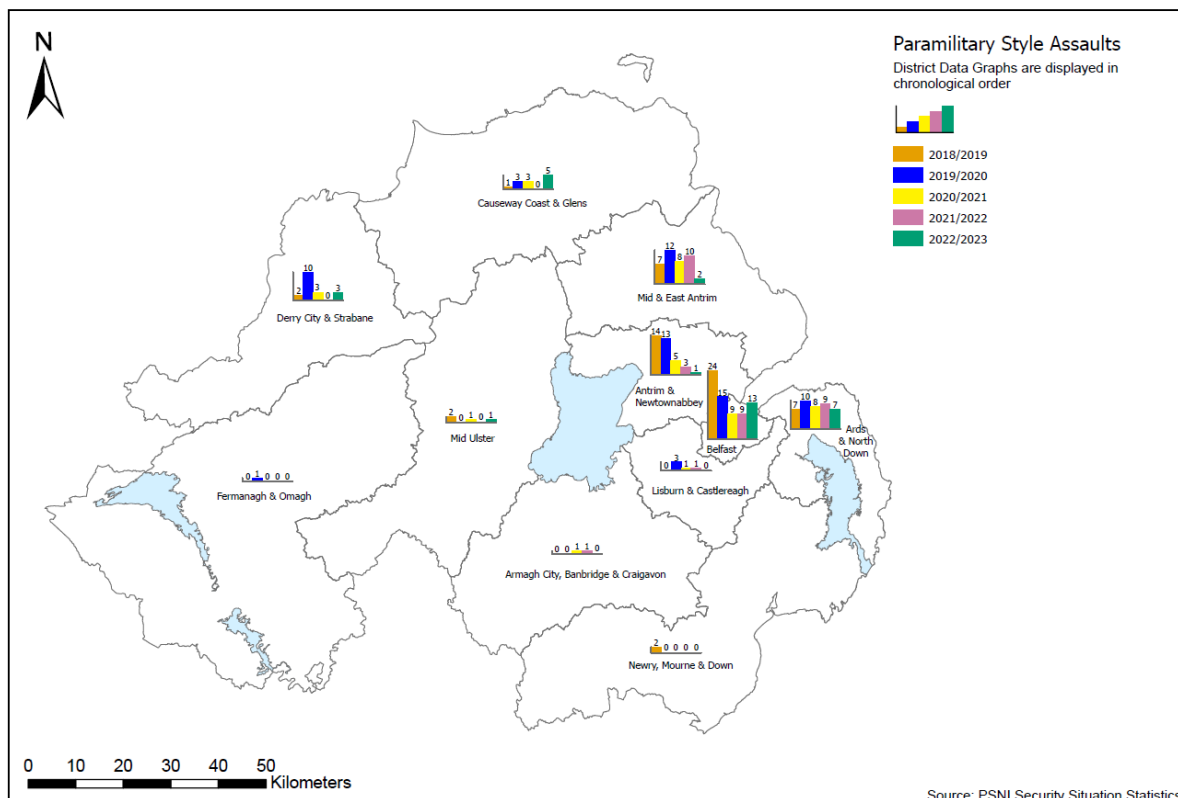
Source: PSNI data

2.11 Figure 10 shows reported paramilitary style assaults and shootings in the past ten years. There were 32 casualties of paramilitary style assaults during 2022/23, one less than the previous year and the lowest number since 1985/86. The number of assaults has fallen by 20% from 289 in the period 2013/14 – 2017/18 to 230 in the last five years. In the period April – September 2023 there were 17 paramilitary style assaults.

2.12 There were 11 casualties of paramilitary style shootings during 2022/23, one less than the previous year (12) and the lowest number since 2007/08. The number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings during the past five years has fallen by 43%

compared to the number during the previous five years (128 recorded in the period 2013/14 – 2017/18, and 73 recorded in the last five years). In the period April – September 2023 there were 11 paramilitary style shootings.

**Figure 13: Number of casualties of paramilitary style assaults in each policing district between 2018/19 and 2022/23**



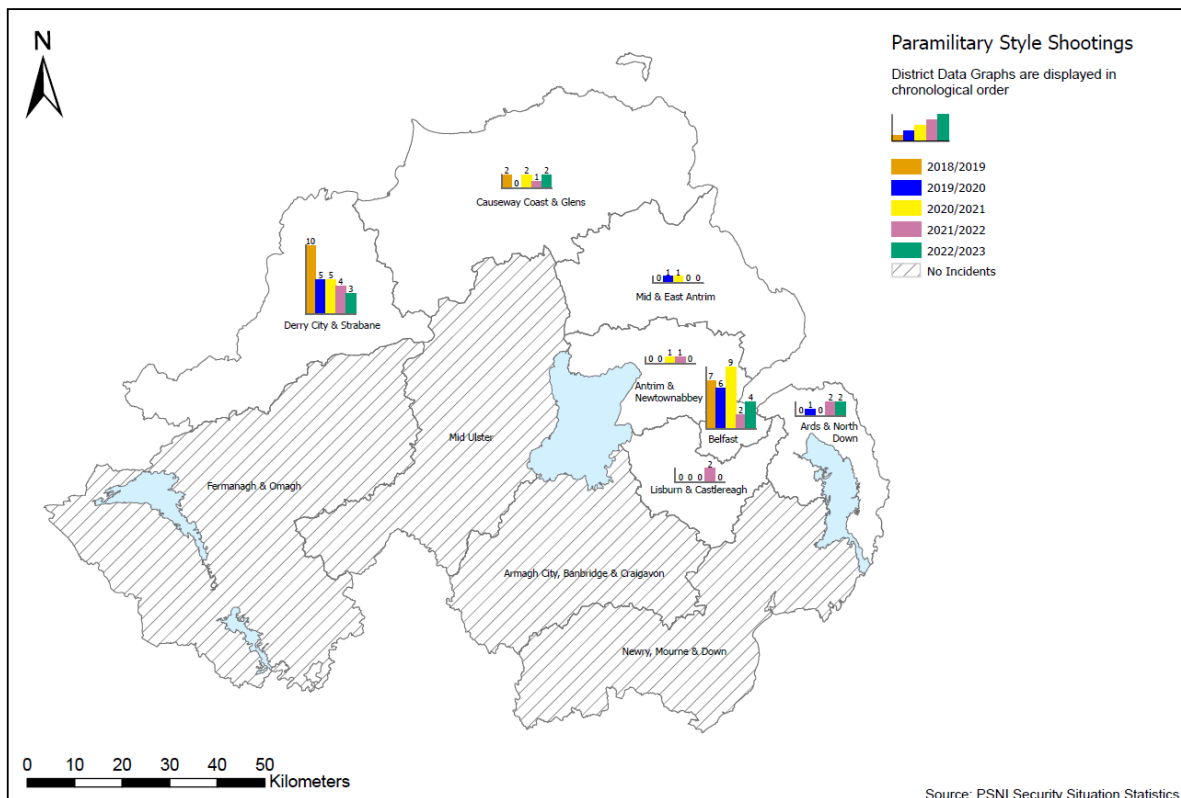
Paramilitary style assaults/shootings that result in death are counted as security related deaths and not included in the casualties of paramilitary style assaults/shootings figures.

2.13 The greatest number of paramilitary style assaults occurred in Belfast City (13), followed by Ards & North Down (seven) and Causeway Coast & Glens (five). The number of paramilitary style assaults increased from zero to three in Derry City & Strabane. In Mid & East Antrim the number of casualties fell from 10 in 2021/22 to two in 2022/23, and in Antrim & Newtownabbey and Mid Ulster there was one casualty recorded in each District in 2022/23. Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon and Lisburn & Castlereagh City both reduced from one to zero casualties of paramilitary style assaults this year.

2.14 In 2022/23, 23 of the 32 paramilitary style assaults (72%) were attributed to Loyalists (a decrease of 19% from 2021/22); nine were attributed to Republicans (28%).



**Figure 14: Number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings in each policing district between 2018/19 and 2022/23**



Paramilitary style assaults/shootings that result in death are counted as security related deaths and are not included in the casualties of paramilitary-style assaults/shootings figures.

2.15 Belfast City had the highest number of casualties of **paramilitary style shootings** (four, an increase of two from the previous year). Other Districts where there were paramilitary style shootings were:

- Causeway Coast & Glens (two), an increase of one from the previous year,
- Derry City & Strabane (three), one less than the previous year, and
- Ards & North Down (two), the same number as last year.

2.16 Antrim & Newtownabbey reduced from one to zero casualties of paramilitary style shootings this year and Lisburn & Castlereagh reduced from two to zero.

2.17 Of the 11 paramilitary style shootings in 2022/23, seven were attributed to Republicans and four were attributed to Loyalists (in 2021/22 it was 5:7).

### **Seizure or recovery of firearms, explosives and ammunition**

2.18 There were 20 firearms found during 2022/23 compared to 45 the previous year. There was 0.2kg of explosives found during 2022/23 compared to 0.5kg the previous year, and 1,172 rounds of ammunition found during 2022/23 compared to 1,877 the previous year.

**Table 4: Seizure or recovery of firearms, explosives and ammunition<sup>40</sup>**

	<b>Firearms</b>	<b>Explosives (kg)</b>	<b>Rounds of ammunition</b>
2013/14	101	23.1	5,057
2014/15	58	22.9	4,569
2015/16	66	2.4	4,418
2016/17	45	75.1	2,635
2017/18	40	0.4	5,758
2018/19	45	1.2	1,284
2019/20	30	0.9	774
2020/21	17	2.9	2,049
2021/22	45	0.5	1,877
2022/23	20	0.2	1,172

Source: PSNI security situation statistics

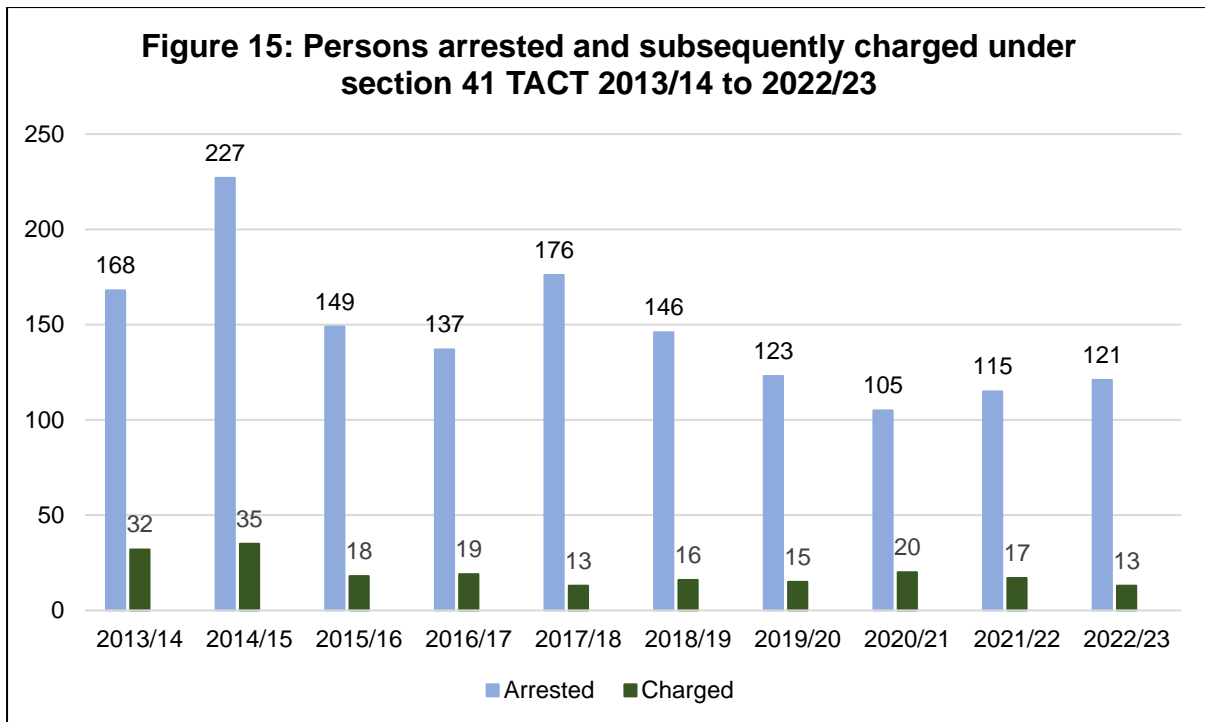
### **Terrorism Act arrests and subsequent charges**

2.19 There were 121 persons arrested under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 during 2021/22 compared to 115 during the previous year (see Figure 15). That legislation provides that a constable may arrest without a warrant a person whom they reasonably suspect to be a terrorist. Of the 121 arrests, 54 (45%) of them occurred in Derry City & Strabane and 33 (27%) occurred in Belfast City. There were 13 persons arrested under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequently charged (with any offence) during 2022/23, compared to 17 during the previous year. In the period April – September 2023 there were 58 security-related arrests.

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<sup>40</sup> These refer to the seizure or recovery of all illegal firearms, ammunition, explosives, rocket/mortar launchers, detonators and bomb making material/equipment.

Replica/blank firing firearms, petrol bombs and petrol bomb making materials, grenades and munitions from World War 1 or World War 2 found on the beach or in attics etc. are not recorded as finds.



Source: PSNI security situation statistics bulletin

### Terrorism legislation statistics

2.20 Reproduced below are some key statistics from the latest *Northern Ireland Terrorism Legislation: annual statistics* bulletin<sup>41</sup>.

#### **Outcomes of charges for terrorism-related offences under terrorism and non-terrorism legislation in Northern Ireland, by year of arrest**

2.21 In 2022, 13 persons were charged after being detained in Northern Ireland under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which provides that a constable may arrest without a warrant a person whom they reasonably suspect to be a terrorist. 46 charges were brought against those 13 persons: two were for attempted murder, 21 for firearm offences, eight for explosives offences, three for membership and a further three for preparation of terrorist act.

<sup>41</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65140308f6746b0012a4bac3/Northern\\_Ireland\\_Terrorism\\_Legislation\\_Annual\\_Statistics\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65140308f6746b0012a4bac3/Northern_Ireland_Terrorism_Legislation_Annual_Statistics_2022.pdf)

Following a consultation exercise, data within that bulletin moved to a calendar year reporting format from 2021. Figures for 2021 therefore only cover April to December to facilitate that move.

	18/19	19/20	20/21	2021	2022
<b>Charged</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>
Not proceeded against	1	3	0	1	0
Awaiting prosecution	4	3	15	14	13
<b>Prosecuted</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
Found not guilty	4	3	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Convicted</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
TACT offences	1	0	2	0	0
Schedule 7 TACT	0	0	0	0	0
Other legislation (non-TACT) -terrorism-related	5	8	2	0	0
Other legislation (non-TACT) -non-terrorism -related	1	0	1	0	0

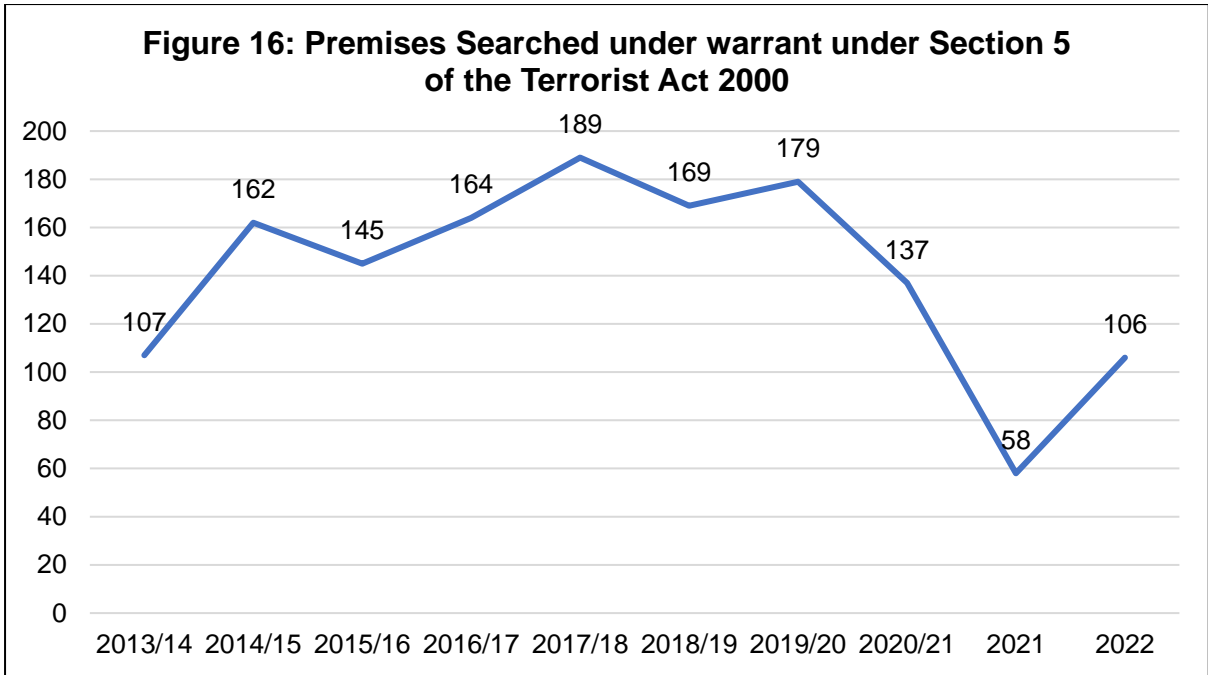
Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

2.22 During 2022, four persons detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 were charged with a total of six offences under the same legislation. Three of these charges were related to membership, two for directing terrorist organisation and the remaining charge related to possession for terrorist purposes.

2.23 Three persons detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 were each charged with an offence under the Terrorism Act 2006 in 2022. All three charges related to preparation of terrorists acts.

#### **Premises searched under warrant under Schedule 5 of the Terrorism Act 2000**

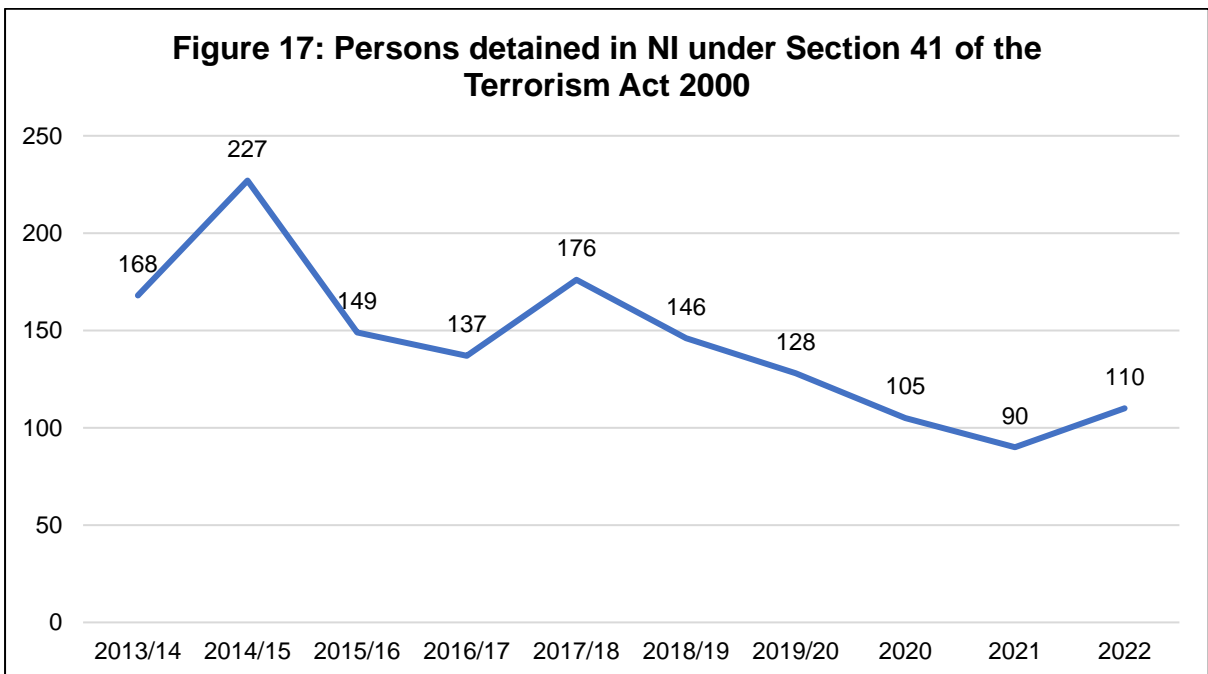
2.24 106 premises were searched in 2022 under warrant under section 37, Schedule 5 of the Terrorism Act 2000.



Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

**Persons detained in Northern Ireland under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000**

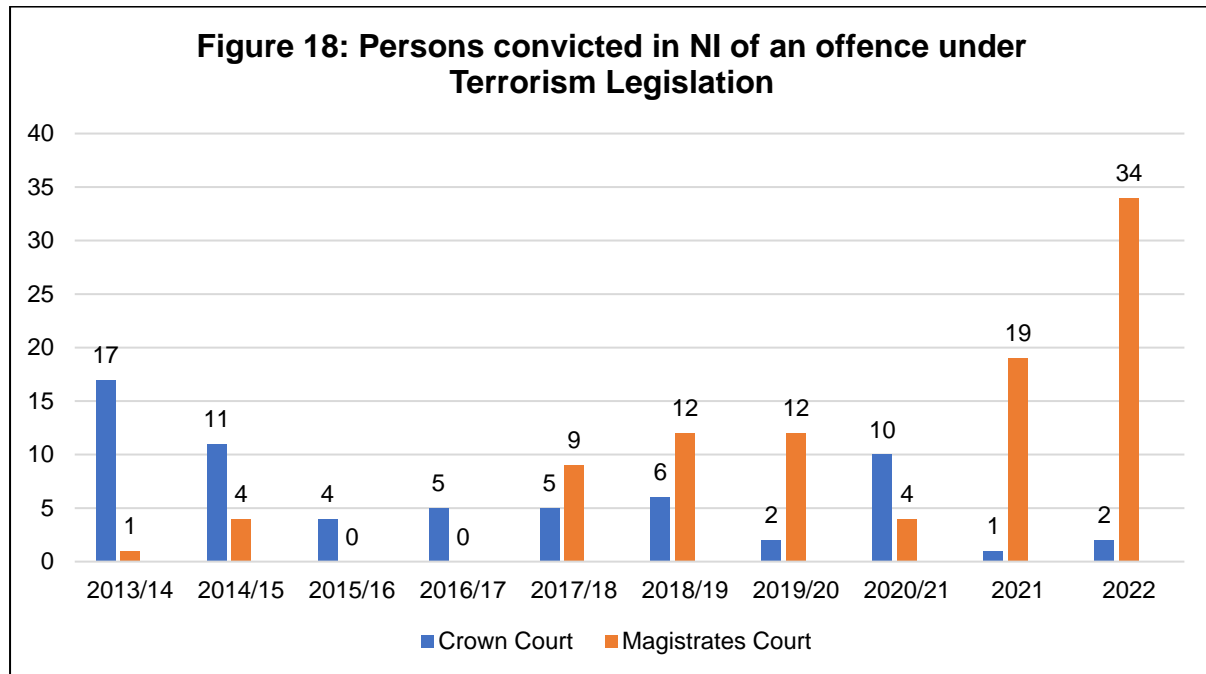
2.25 In 2022, a total of 110 persons were detained in Northern Ireland under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000.



Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

## **Persons convicted in Northern Ireland of an offence under Terrorism Legislation**

2.26 In 2022, 36 persons were convicted in NI of an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006 or the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008.



Source: *Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin*

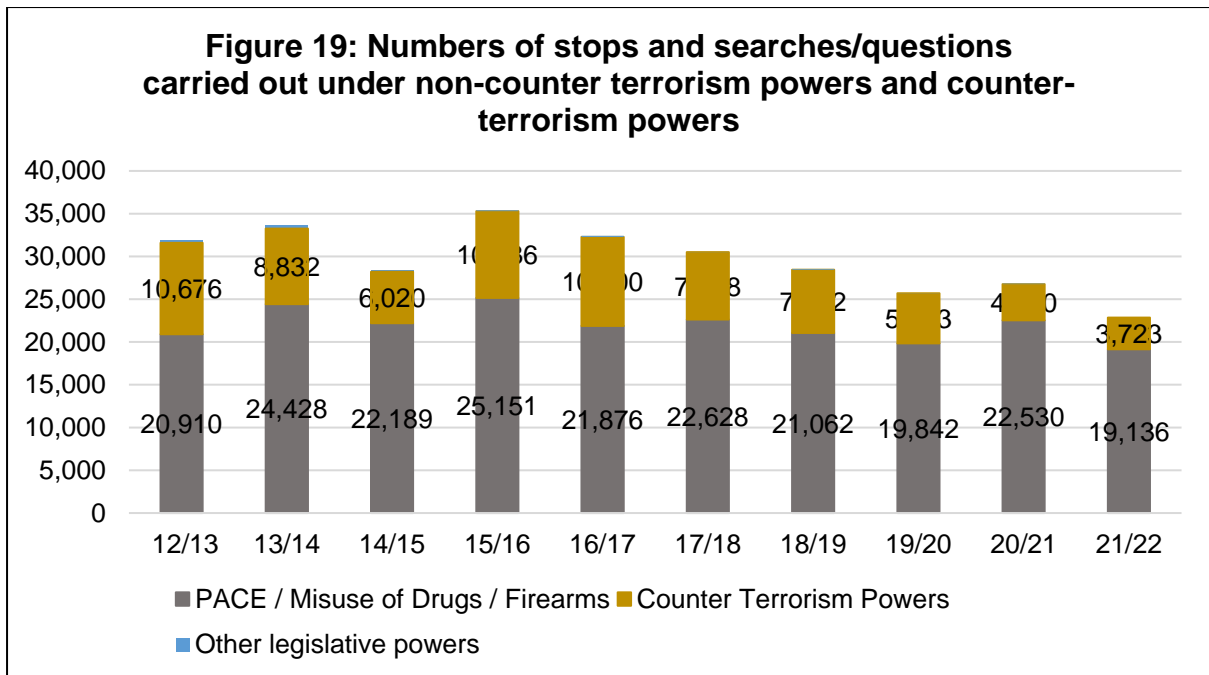
## **Use of stop and search powers by the PSNI**

2.27 In 2022/23, there were 3,723 stops and searches carried out under counterterrorism legislation<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> For statistical purposes, PSNI categorise this as those searches carried out under the Terrorism Act and the Justice and Security (NI) Act. Other legislation is: Section 139B of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, Schedule 5 to the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011, Article 6 Crossbows (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, Article 25 Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, Article 23B of The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 and The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

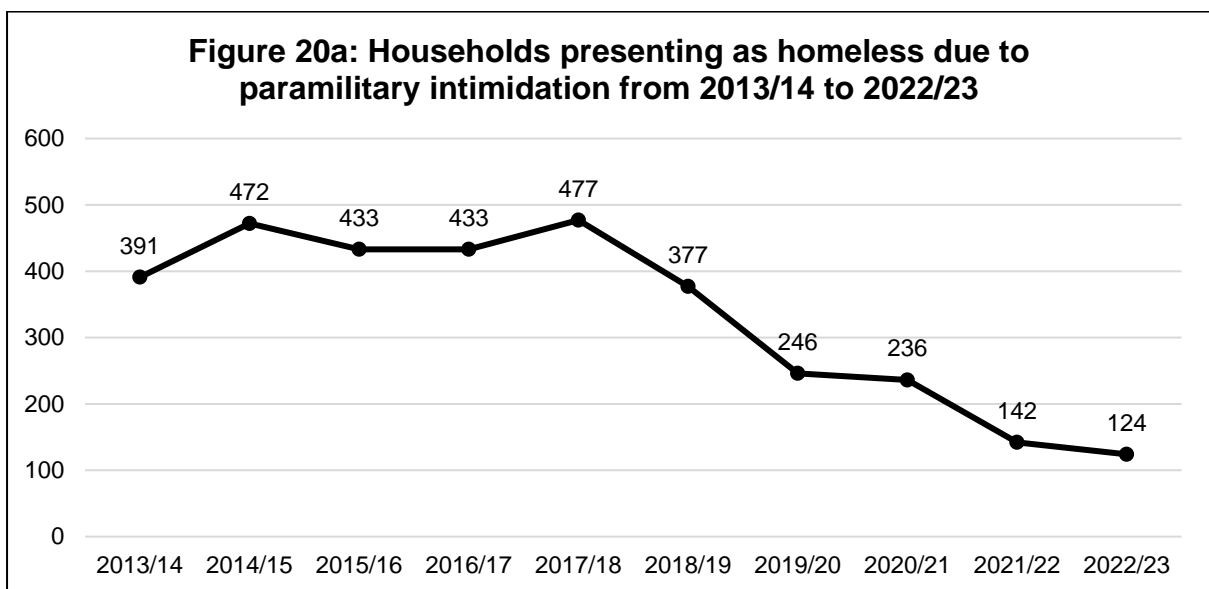
NB: There is a difference between total uses of each legislative power and total number of persons stopped and searched/questioned, as persons stopped under combinations of powers are counted under each legislation used (e.g. someone stopped under Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989 (PACE) and the Misuse of Drugs Act will have a count of one under each of these powers).



Source: *PSNI Stop and Search statistical bulletin*<sup>43</sup>

### Homelessness due to Paramilitary Intimidation

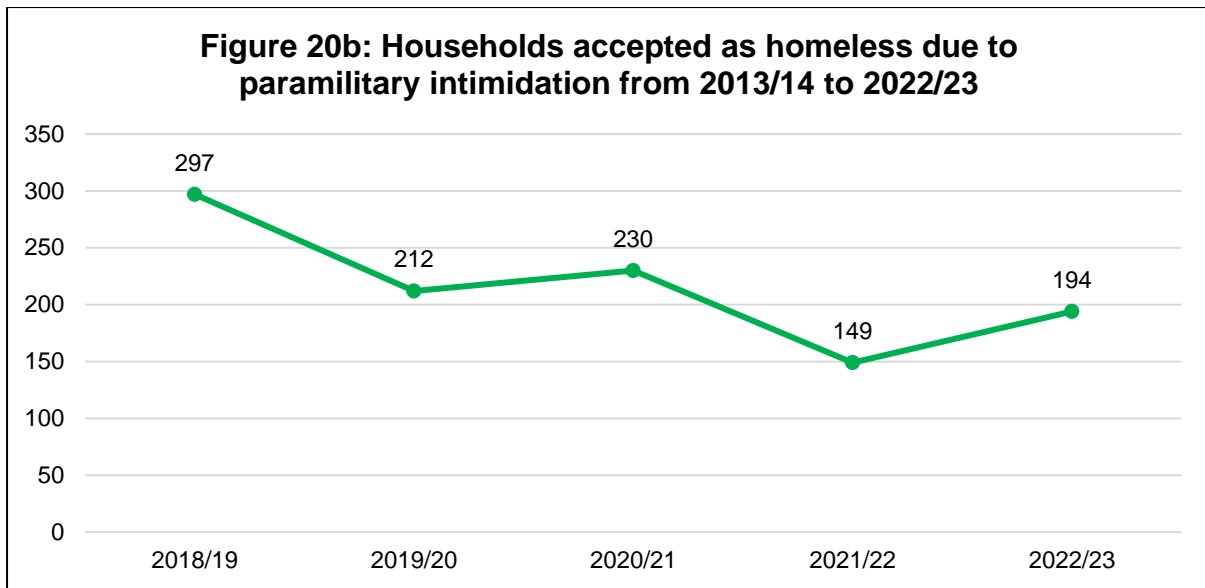
2.28 Figure 20a shows numbers of households presenting to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homeless due to intimidation by paramilitaries over the past ten years<sup>44</sup>.



Source: *Department for Communities*

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/stop-and-search-statistics>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/housing-statistics>



Source: Department for Communities

2.29 124 households presented as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation in the last financial year. 194 households were accepted as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation in 2022/23, an increase of 45 from 21/22.

2.30 The table below shows where households were accepted as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation last financial year broken down by District.

District	Intimidation Paramilitary
Antrim & Newtownabbey	<5 <sup>45</sup>
Ards & North Down	111
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	0
Belfast	35
Causeway Coast & Glens	<5
Derry City & Strabane	12
Fermanagh & Omagh	<5
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	9
Mid & East Antrim	13
Mid Ulster	<5
Newry, Mourne & Down	<5
<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>

Source: Department for Communities

<sup>45</sup> Data is anonymised where there are 4 or fewer cases.



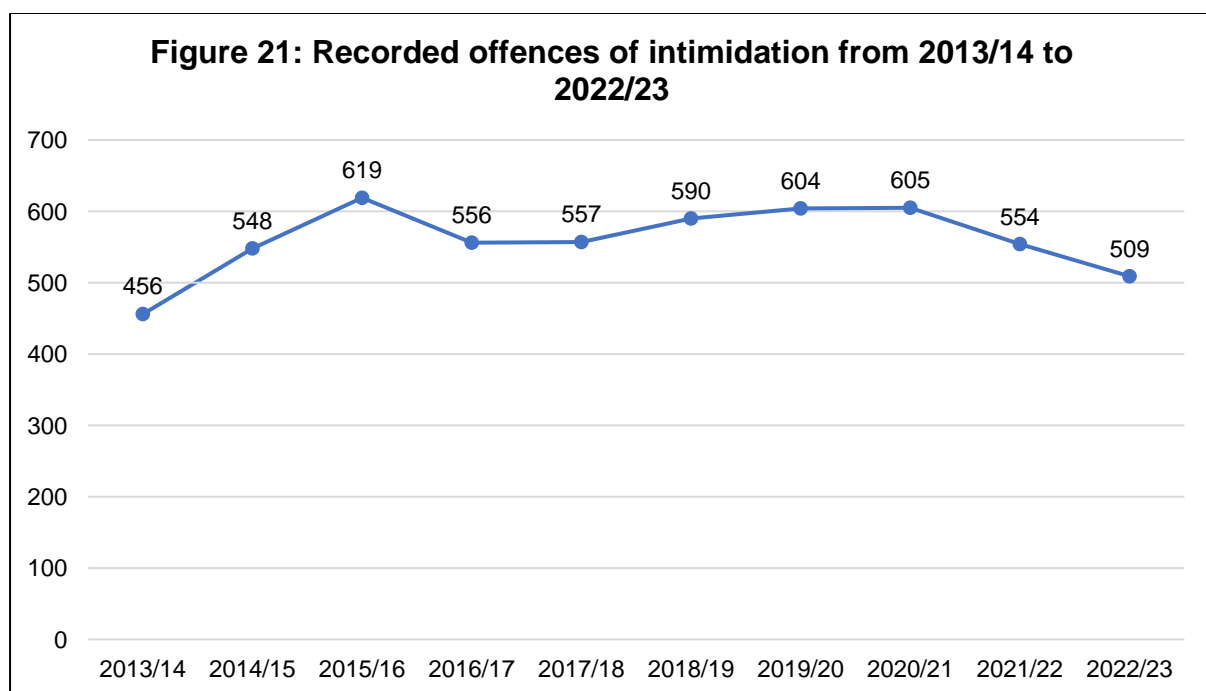
## Other criminal justice trends and metrics

2.31 In the following Section we consider general trends in crime data from the PSNI, specifically intimidation and sectarian crimes and incidents, and the average time taken from a crime being reported to disposal at court, as published by the NI Courts and Tribunals Service.

2.32 *Relevance:* Although not all intimidation and hate crime is carried out by paramilitaries, we know that sectarian and hate crimes and intimidation take place in areas where paramilitaries operate. These statistics provide an indication of the environment in which paramilitaries operate.

### Intimidation

2.33 Last year there were 509 recorded offences of intimidation in Northern Ireland, an 8% reduction from the previous year. The intimidation offence covers threats to individuals to leave their home, their occupation, or to 'refrain from doing any act', as well as threatening individuals to terminate providing services or employment to another person.



Source: PSNI Crime Statistics<sup>46</sup>

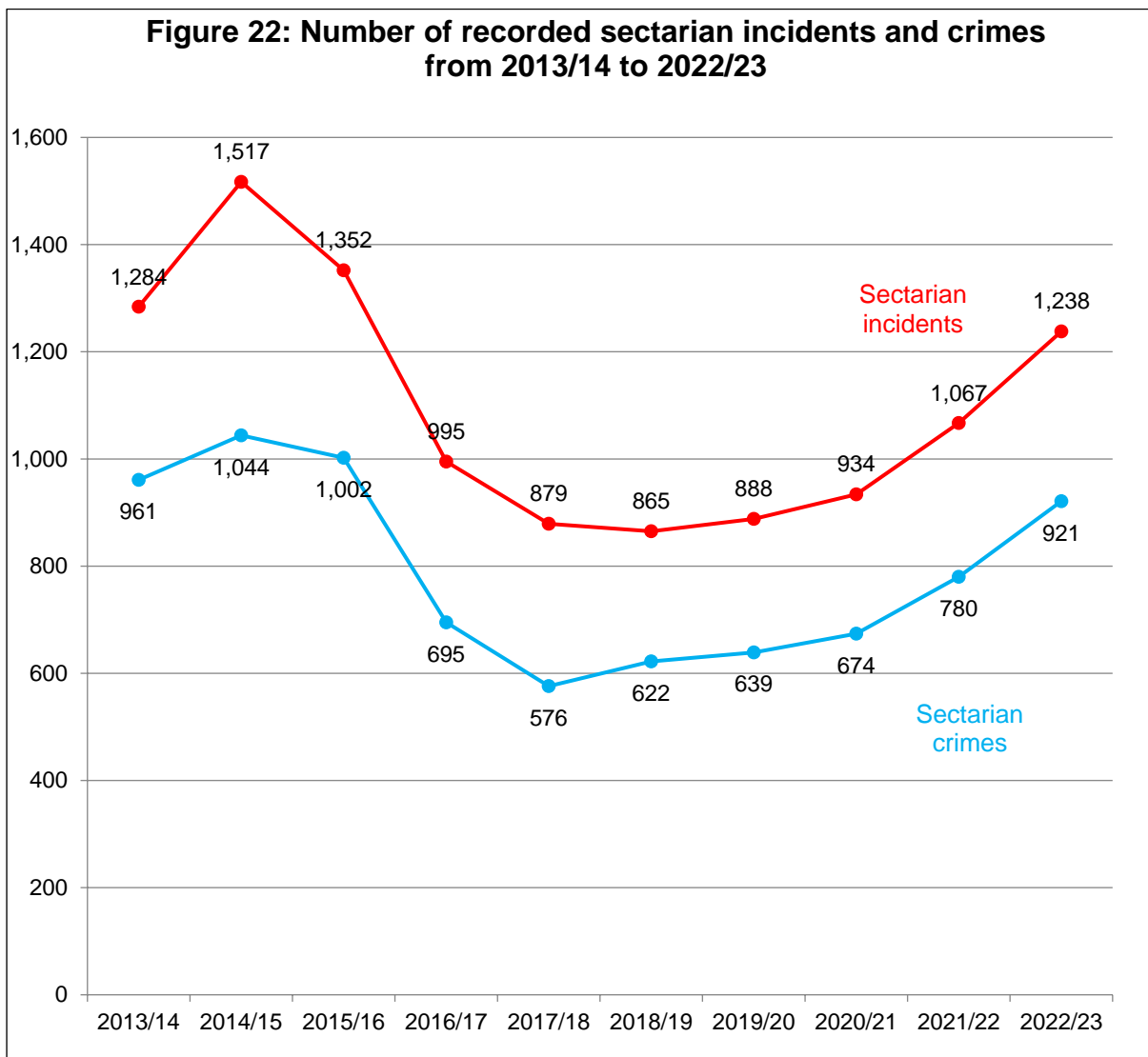
The PSNI issued 66, 85 and 120 threat-to-life (TM1) notices in each of the last three

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics>

years (2020, 2021 and 2022)<sup>47</sup>.

### **Sectarian incidents and crimes recorded by PSNI**

2.34 The number of sectarian incidents and crimes increased in 2022/23 compared to 2021/22. There were 1,238 sectarian incidents recorded by the police in Northern Ireland in 2022/23, an increase of 171 when compared with the previous 12 months. The number of incidents has increased in each year since 2018/19. The number of sectarian crimes recorded by the police rose to 921, an increase of 141 on the previous 12 months. The number of incidents has increased in each year since 2017/18.

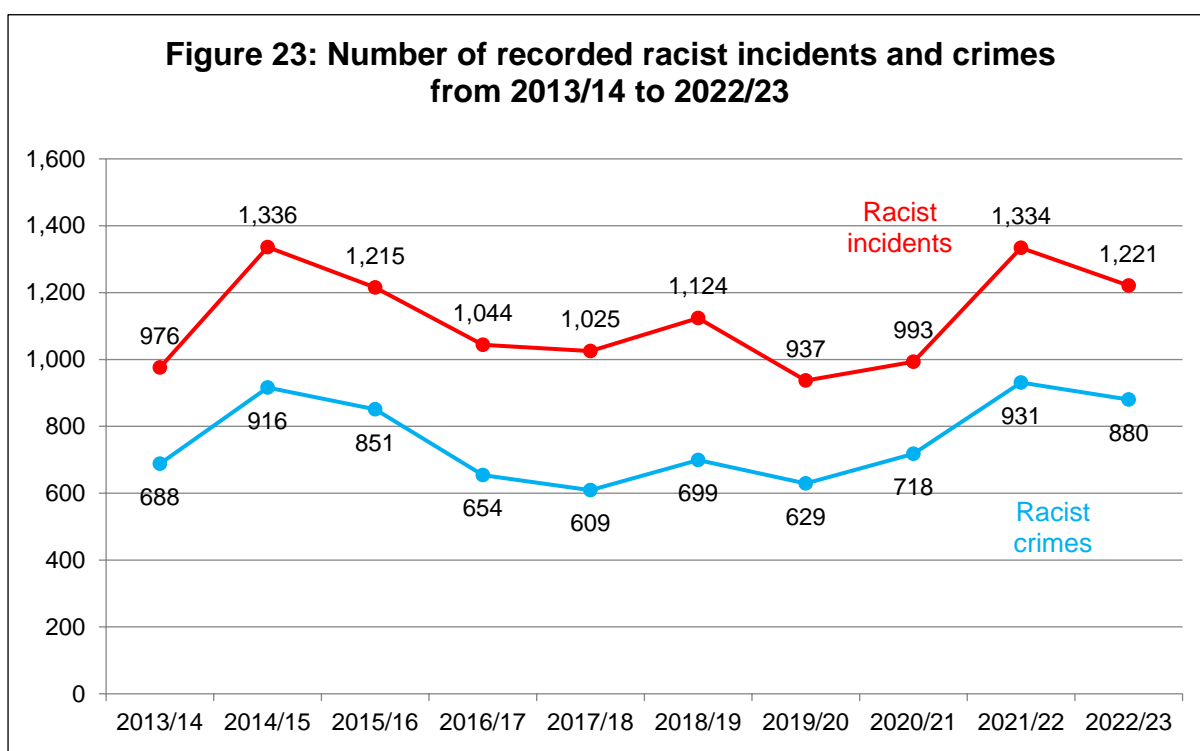


<sup>47</sup> <https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/questions/threat-life-processes>

Source: PSNI Bulletin: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland<sup>48</sup>

The PSNI note that “not all sectarian incidents will result in the recording of a crime, as what has occurred in the incident may not be of the level of severity that would result in a sectarian crime being recorded. Some sectarian incidents will result in multiple crimes being recorded. Sectarian crimes are included in the incident count and the two should not be added together”.

2.35 There were fewer racist incidents and crimes reported in 2022/23 compared to the previous 12 months. The number of racist incidents recorded in 2022/23 was 1,221, which is 113 fewer than 2021/22. The number of racist crimes recorded in 2022/23 was 880, which is 51 fewer from the previous 12 months.



Source: PSNI Bulletin: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland

The PSNI note that “Not all racist incidents will result in the recording of a crime, as what has occurred in the incident may not be of the level of severity that would result in a racist crime being recorded. Some racist incidents will result in multiple crimes

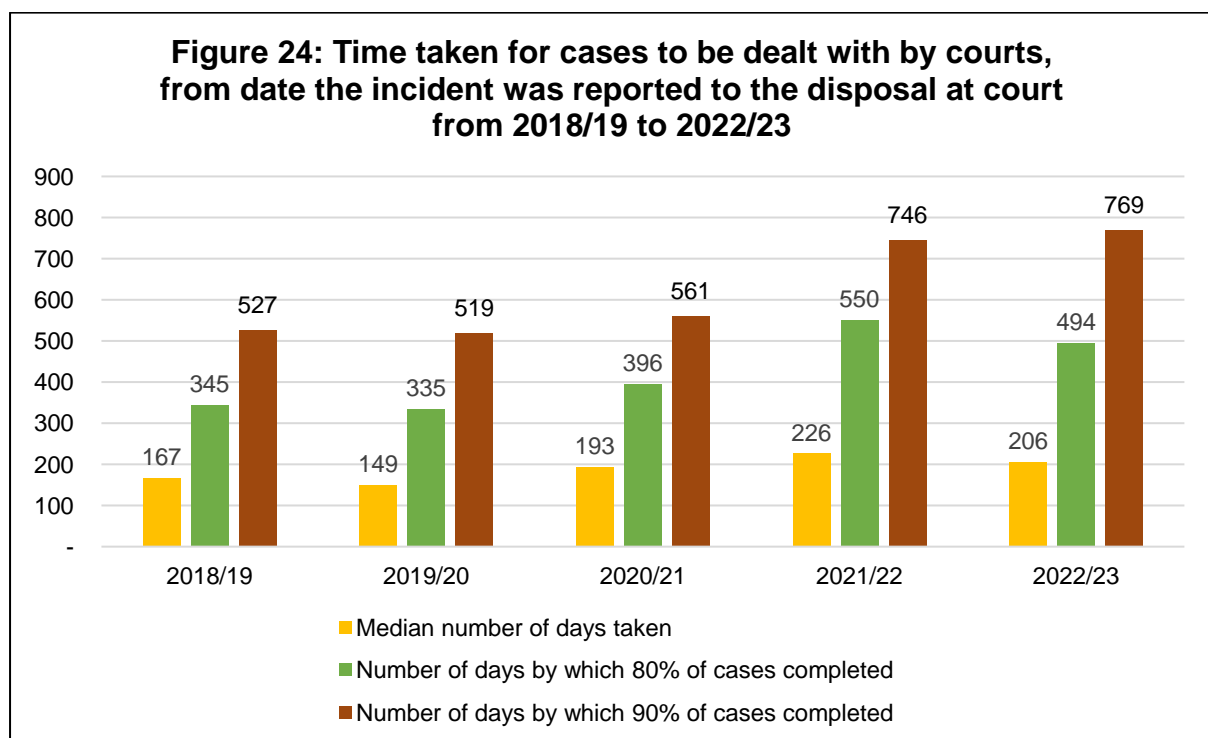
<sup>48</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics>

being recorded. Racist crimes are included in the incident count and the two should not be added together”.

### **Court statistics**

2.36 *Source:* The graph below shows data from the NI Courts and Tribunals Service<sup>49</sup> about the time taken for cases to be dealt with at courts, from the date an offence was reported to the court disposal date. Although the data below are not limited to paramilitary and terrorist cases only, they do include such cases.

2.37 *Relevance:* We comment on the impact of delays further in Section A of our Report; speed of justice is critically linked to trust and confidence in policing and the criminal justice system.



*Source: Department of Justice statistics*

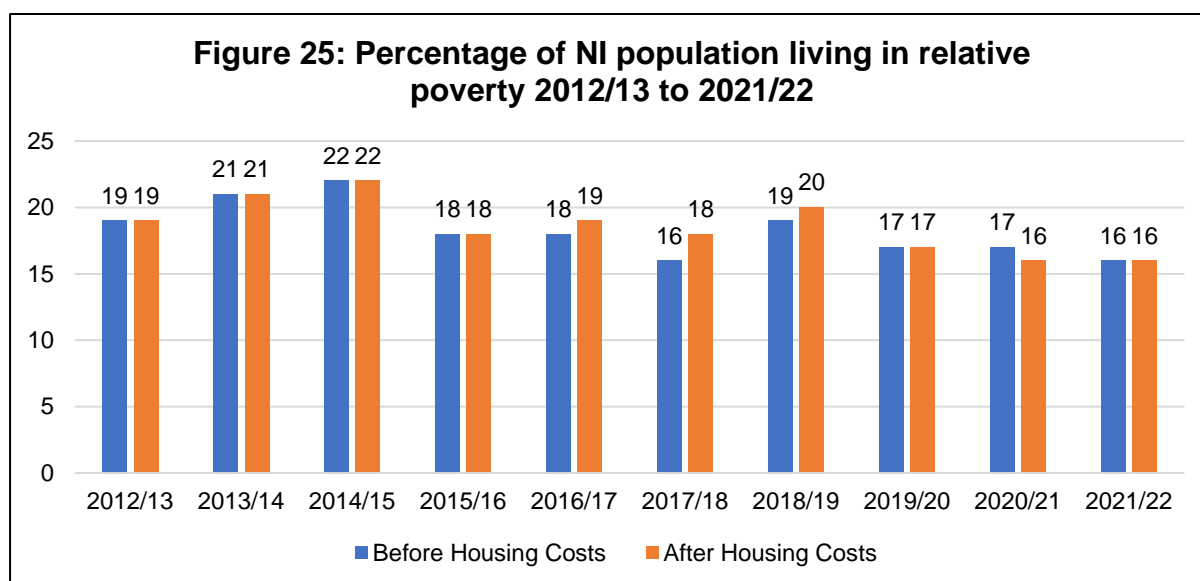
<sup>49</sup> [https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/202223\\_case\\_processing\\_time\\_tables\\_0.xlsx](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/202223_case_processing_time_tables_0.xlsx)

## **Poverty and living conditions**

2.38 *Source:* Each year, a sample of Northern Ireland households provide responses to the NI Family Resources Survey. Findings are published in an annual poverty bulletin and Households Below Average Income report which is the primary source used by the public sector for measuring poverty, household income and inequality in NI<sup>50</sup>.

2.39 *Relevance:* Links between poverty, deprivation, disadvantage, lack of aspiration and vulnerability are well established in research and literature about violence. Our Twin Track analysis emphasises the importance of addressing broader socio-economic issues, including these factors, as critical to the success of work to tackle paramilitarism. Given the continuing levels of poverty in Northern Ireland, transformative work is required to deal with this ingrained issue.

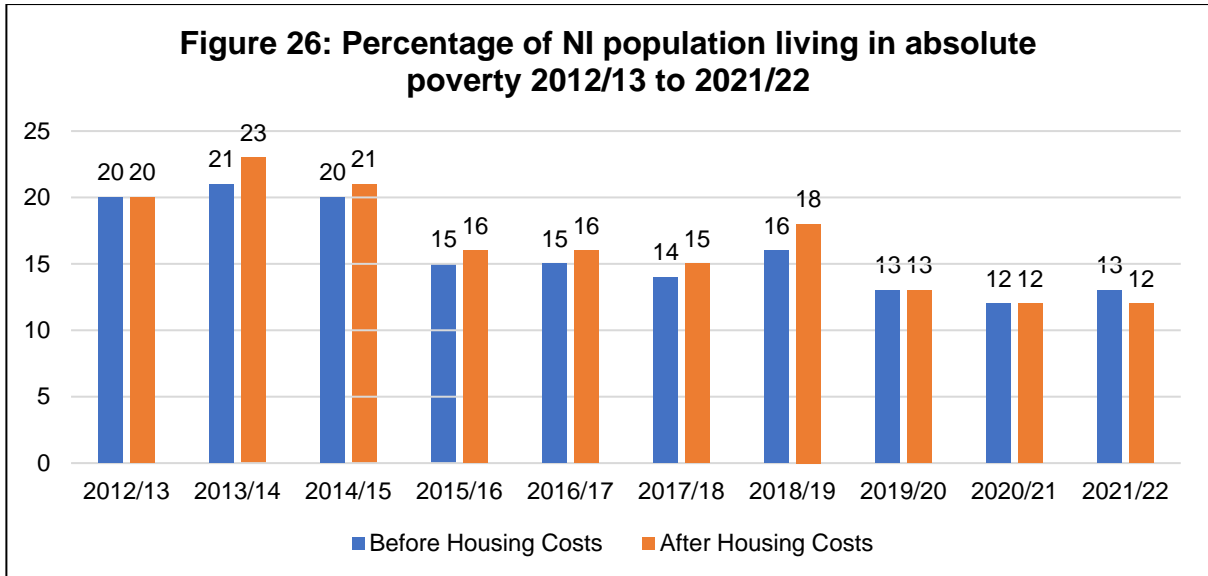
2.40 In 2021/22 the proportion of individuals estimated to be living in relative poverty was 16% (representing 306,000 people) and 12% (c. 224,000) were estimated to be living in absolute poverty (both figures are after housing costs and are not statistically significant changes from the previous year). The tables below show the ten year trends<sup>51</sup>.



<sup>50</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-and-income-inequality-report-2021-22>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-and-income-inequality-report-2021-22>

An individual is considered to be in relative poverty if they are living in a household with an equivalised income below 60% of UK median income per year in the year in question. An individual is considered to be in absolute poverty if they are living in a household with an equivalised income below 60% of the inflation adjusted UK median income in 2010/11.



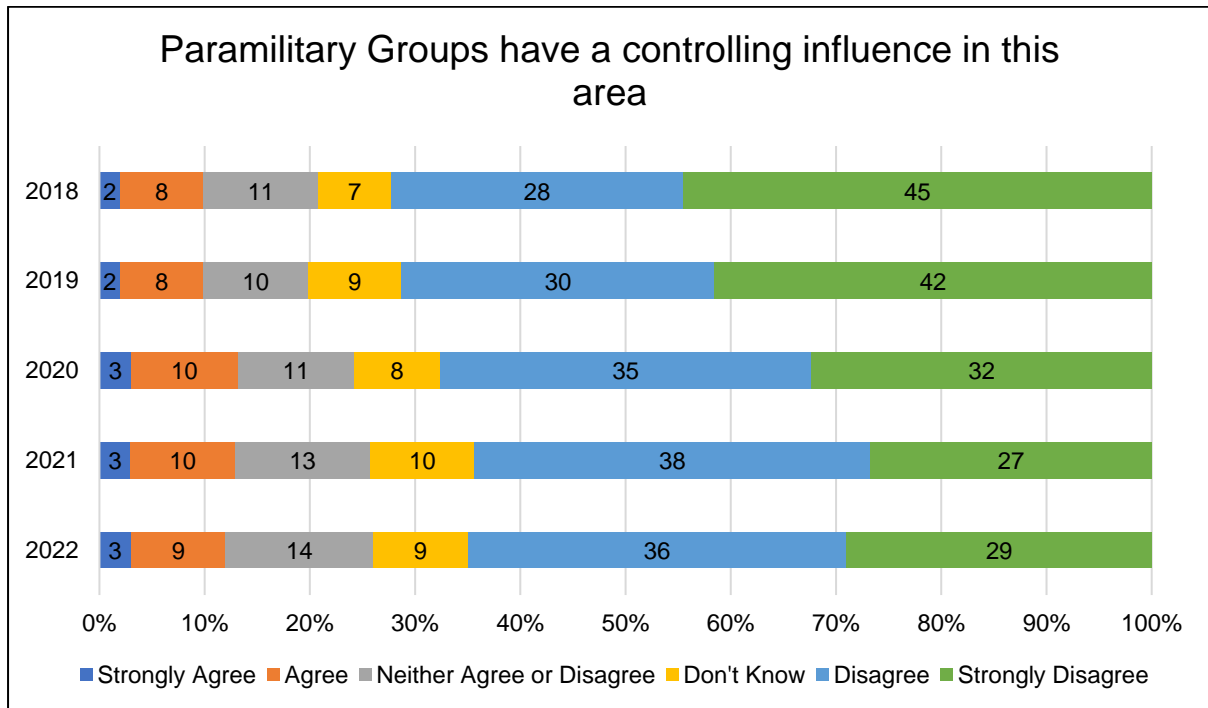
## Community views on paramilitary influence and community safety

### Views about paramilitaries

- 2.41 *Source:* The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is run each year to record the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues<sup>52</sup>. A number of the questions about paramilitarism are funded by the Programme and are used by it as measures at population-level of the impact of interventions.
- 2.42 *Relevance:* Understanding how communities perceive paramilitaries, the control paramilitaries may exercise, and any community role that they might be seen by some to play, are vital to understanding how society sees paramilitaries and therefore tackling paramilitarism. Deepening that understanding can shape further work required to explain the harm that they cause, to understand what (if any) ‘void’ they may be filling and/or exploiting in communities so that this can be addressed, to support work to challenge the normalisation of their existence and activities, and to demonstrate the risk that their continuing existence represents.

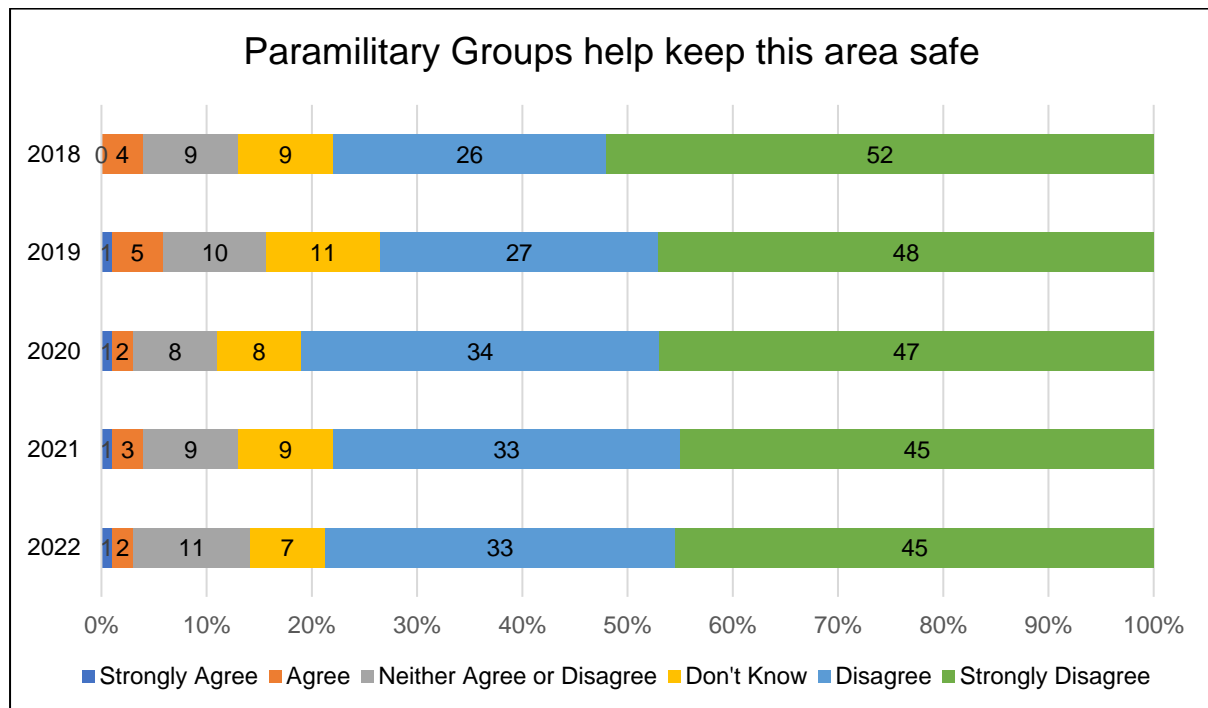
<sup>52</sup> <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/>

Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree with the statement: **“Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in this area.”**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑1	↑1	↑3	↑2	↑8	↓-16
3 year trend (2020-2022)	→0	↓-1	↑3	↑1	↑1	↓-3
1 year trend (2022-2023)	→0	↓-1	↑1	↓-1	↓-2	↑2

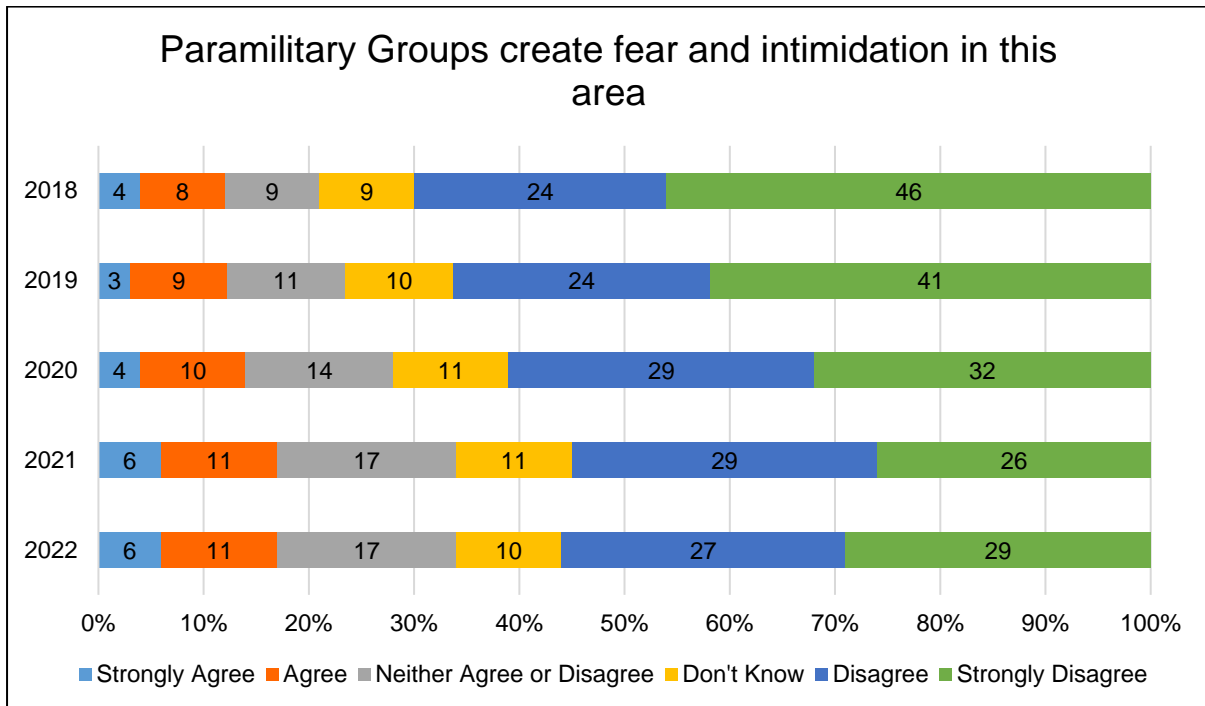
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“Paramilitary groups help keep this area safe.”**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑1	↓-2	↑2	↓-2	↑7	↓-7
3 year trend (2020-2022)	→0	→0	↑3	↓-1	↓-1	↓-2
1 year trend (2022-2023)	→0	↓-1	↑2	↓-2	→0	→0

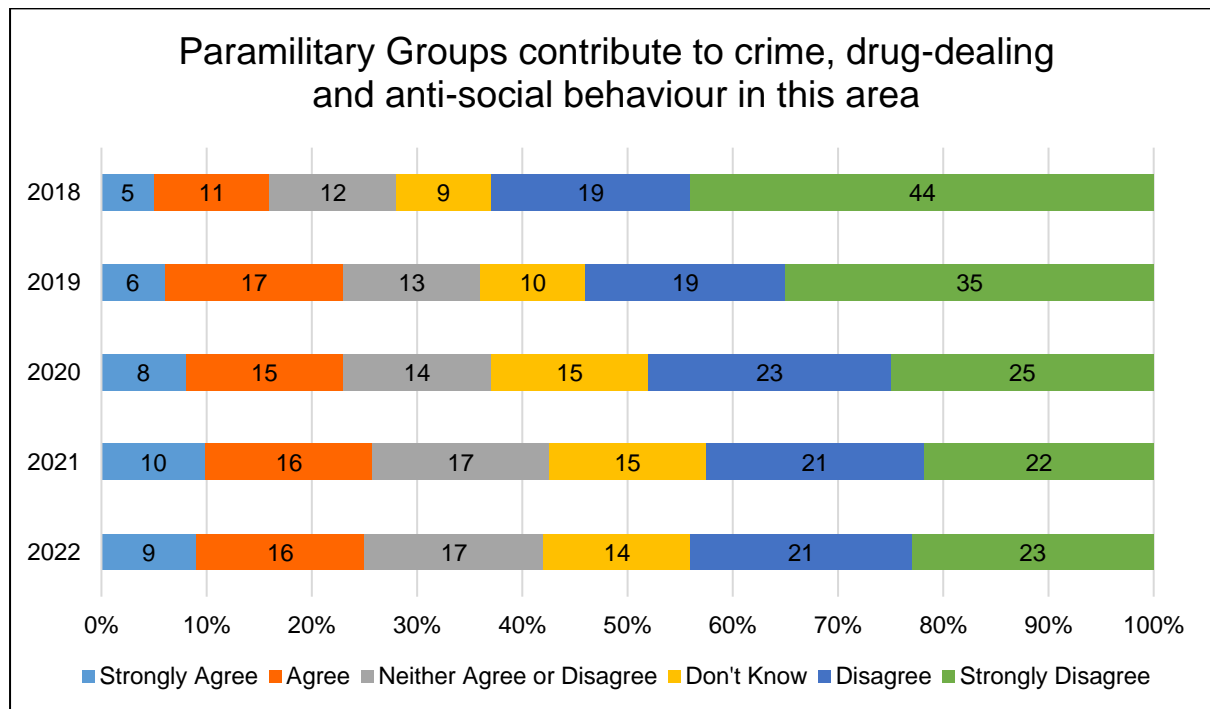


Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **“Paramilitaries create fear and intimidation in this area.”**



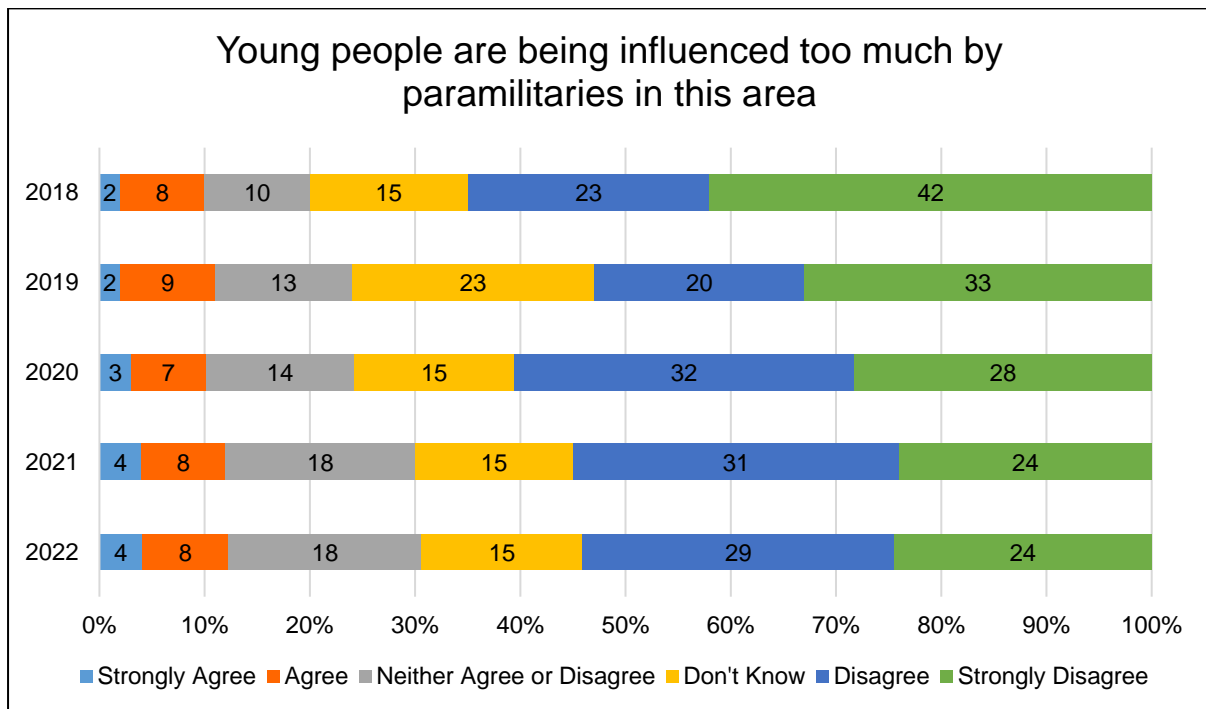
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑2	↑3	↑8	↑1	↑3	↓-17
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑2	↑1	↑3	↓-1	↓-2	↓-3
1 year trend (2021-2022)	→0	→0	→0	↓-1	↓-2	↑3

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **“Paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour in this area.”**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑4	↑5	↑5	↑5	↑2	↓-21
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑1	↑1	↑3	↓-1	↓-2	↓-2
1 year trend (2021-2022)	↓-1	→0	→0	↓-1	→0	↑1

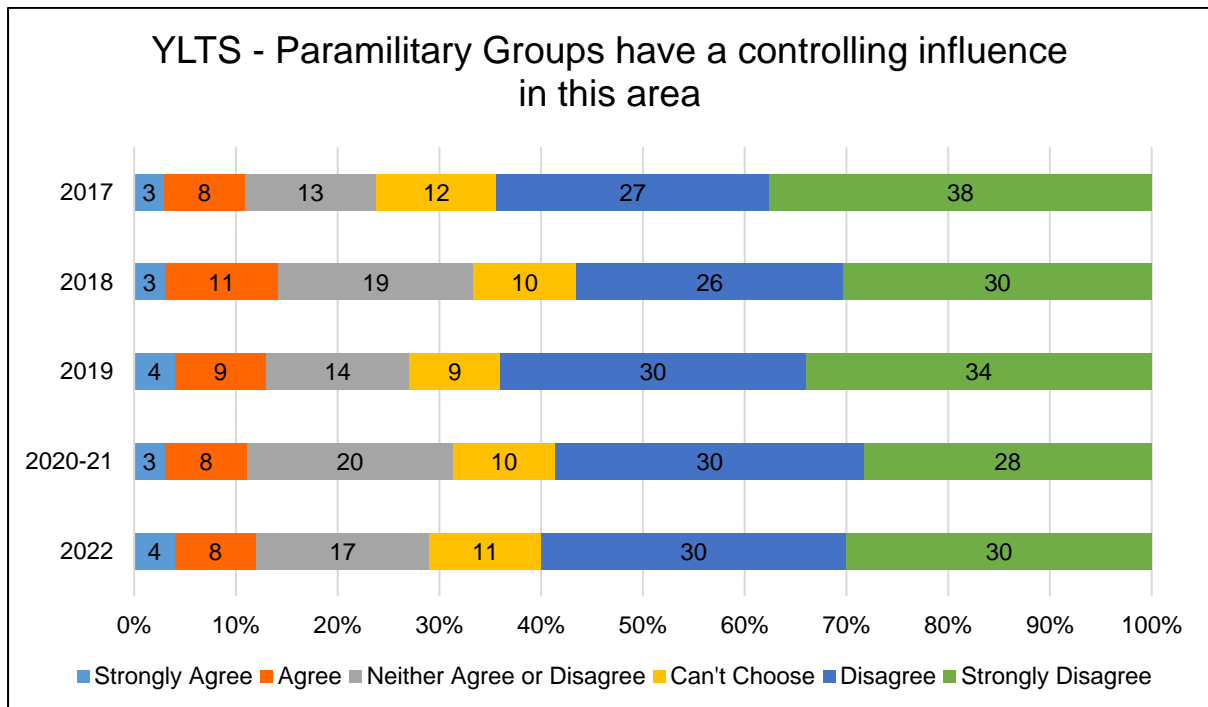
Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: “Young people are being influenced too much by paramilitaries in this area.”



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑2	→0	↑8	→0	↑6	↓-18
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑1	↑1	↑4	→0	↓-3	↓-4
1 year trend (2021-2022)	→0	→0	→0	→0	↓-2	→0

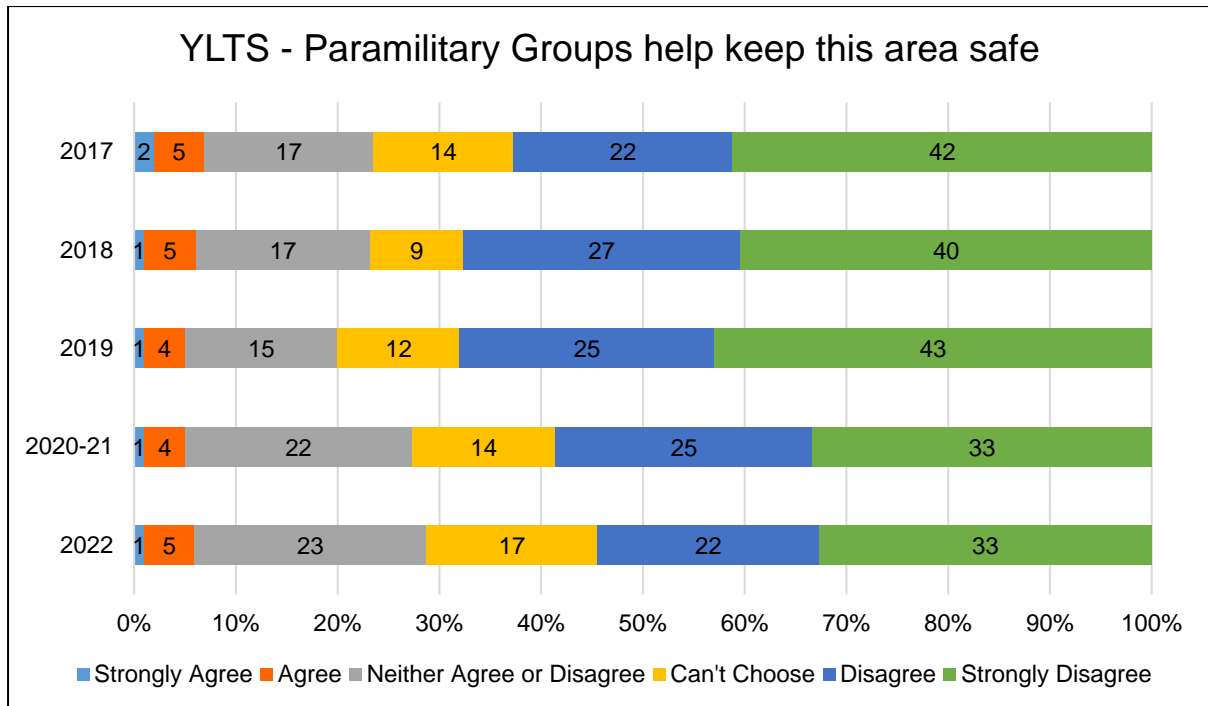
Source: The Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) records the attitudes and opinions of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland about the issues that concern them.

Young people were asked to consider how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: “**Paramilitary Groups have a controlling influence in this area.**”



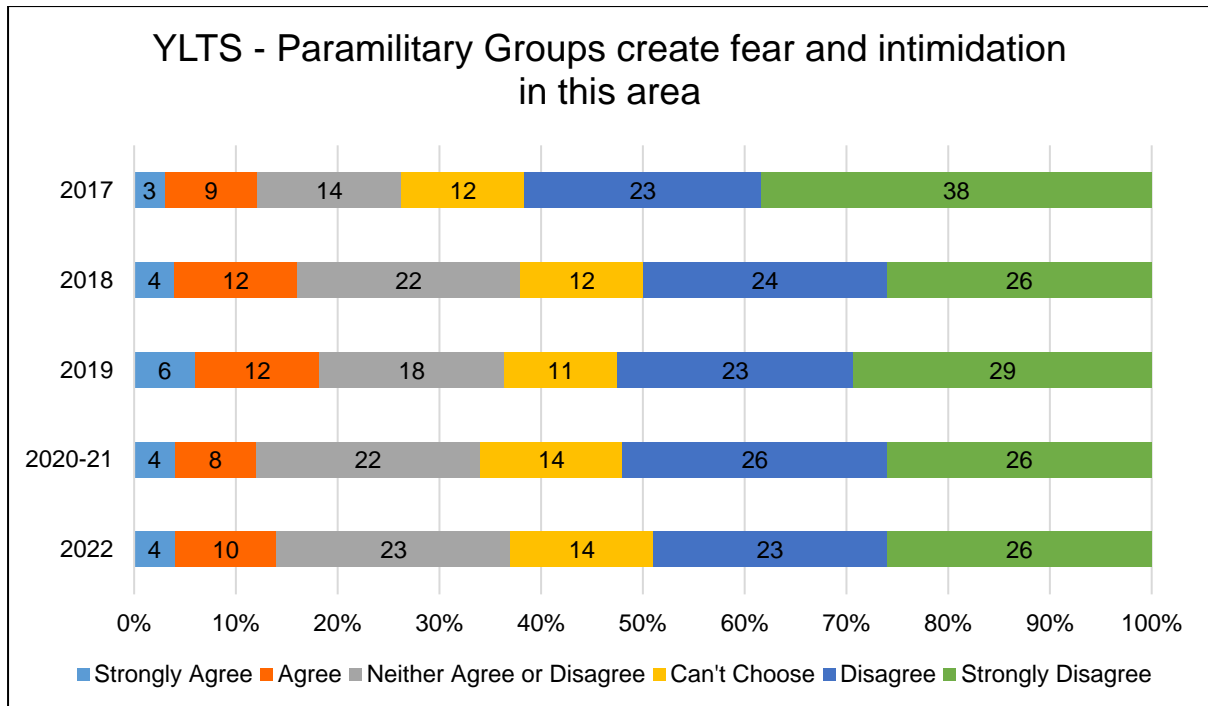
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Can't Choose	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2017-2022)	↑1	→0	↑4	↓-1	↑3	↓-8
3 year trend (2019-2022)	→0	↓-1	↑3	↑2	→0	↓-4
1 year trend (2022-2023)	↑1	→0	↓-3	↑1	→0	↑2

Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **'Paramilitary groups help keep this area safe.'**



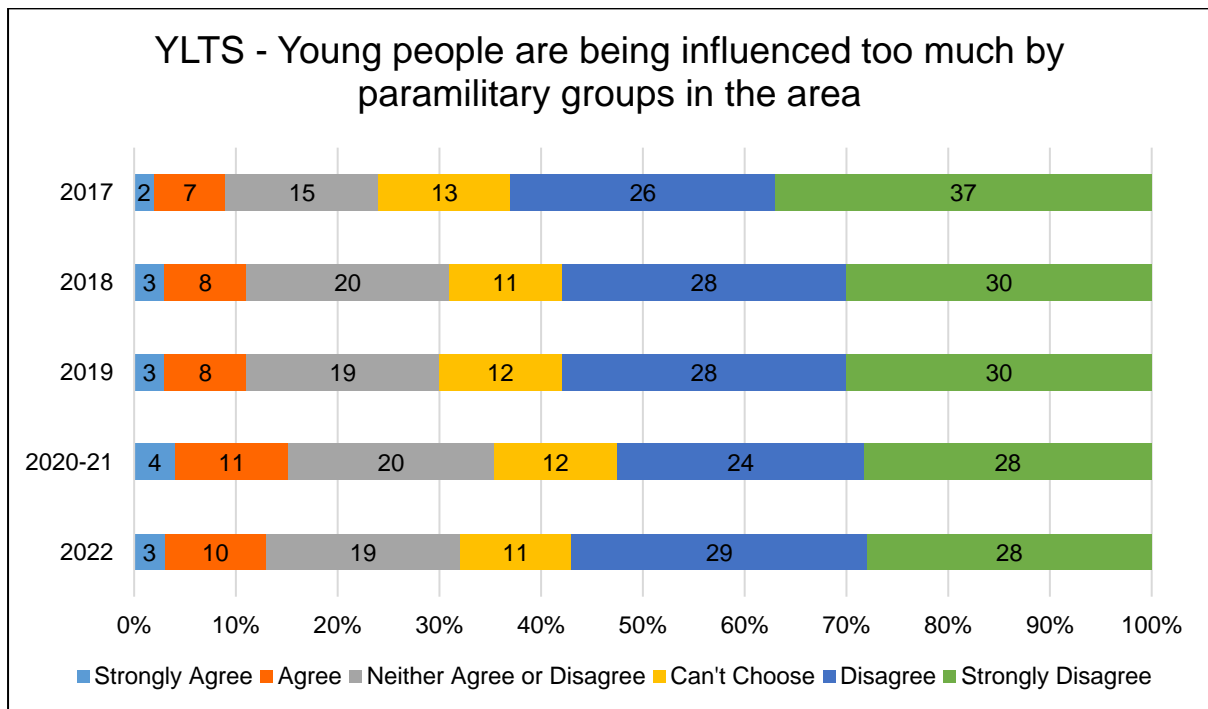
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Can't Choose	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2017-2022)	↓-1	→0	↑6	↑3	→0	↓-9
3 year trend (2019-2022)	→0	↑1	↑8	↑5	↓-3	↓-10
1 year trend (2022-2023)	→0	↑1	↑1	↑3	↓-3	→0

Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **'Paramilitaries create fear and intimidation in this area.'**



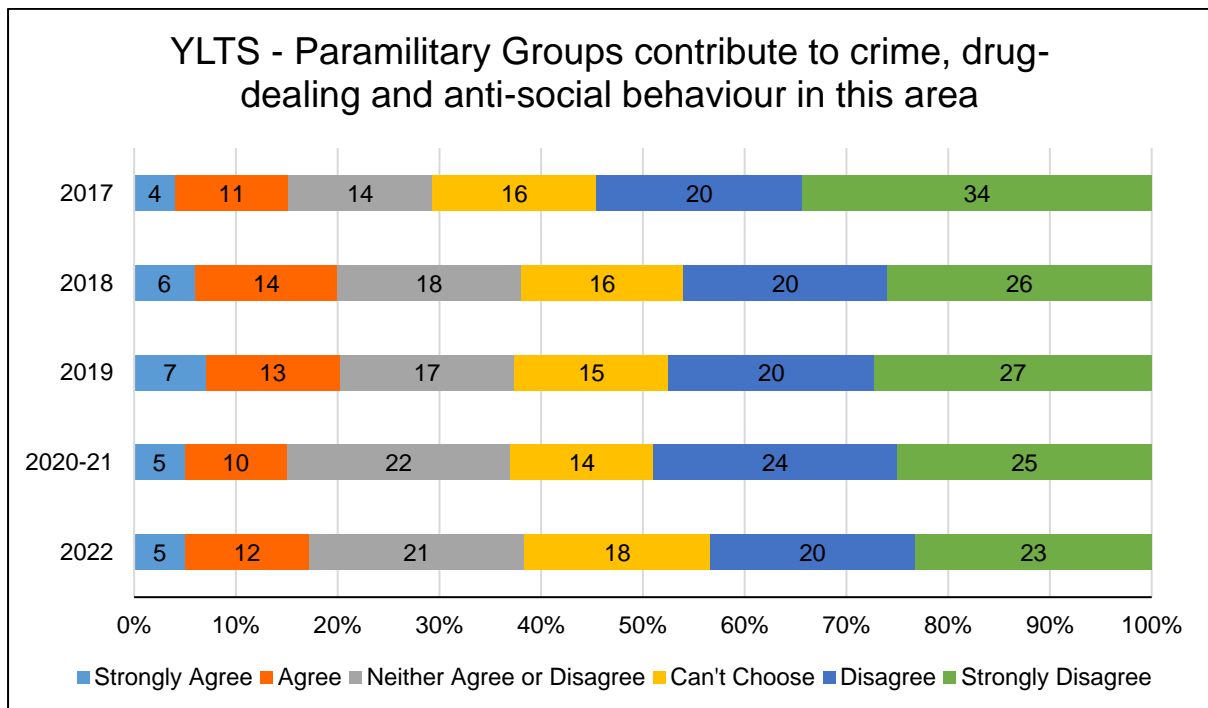
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Can't Choose	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2017-2022)	↑1	↑1	↑9	↑2	→0	↓-12
3 year trend (2019-2022)	↓-2	↓-2	↑5	↑3	→0	↓-3
1 year trend (2022-2023)	→0	↑2	↑1	→0	↓-3	→0

Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'Young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in the area.'



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Can't choose	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2017-2022)	↑1	↑3	↑4	↓-2	↑3	↓-9
3 year trend (2019-2022)	→0	↑2	→0	↓-1	↑1	↓-2
1 year trend (2022-2023)	↓-1	↓-1	↓-1	↓-1	↑5	→0

Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **'Paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour in this area.'**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Can't Choose	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2017-2022)	↑1	↑1	↑7	↑2	→0	↓-11
3 year trend (2019-2022)	↓-2	↓-1	↑4	↑3	→0	↓-4
1 year trend (2022-2023)	→0	↑2	↓-1	↑4	↓-4	↓-2

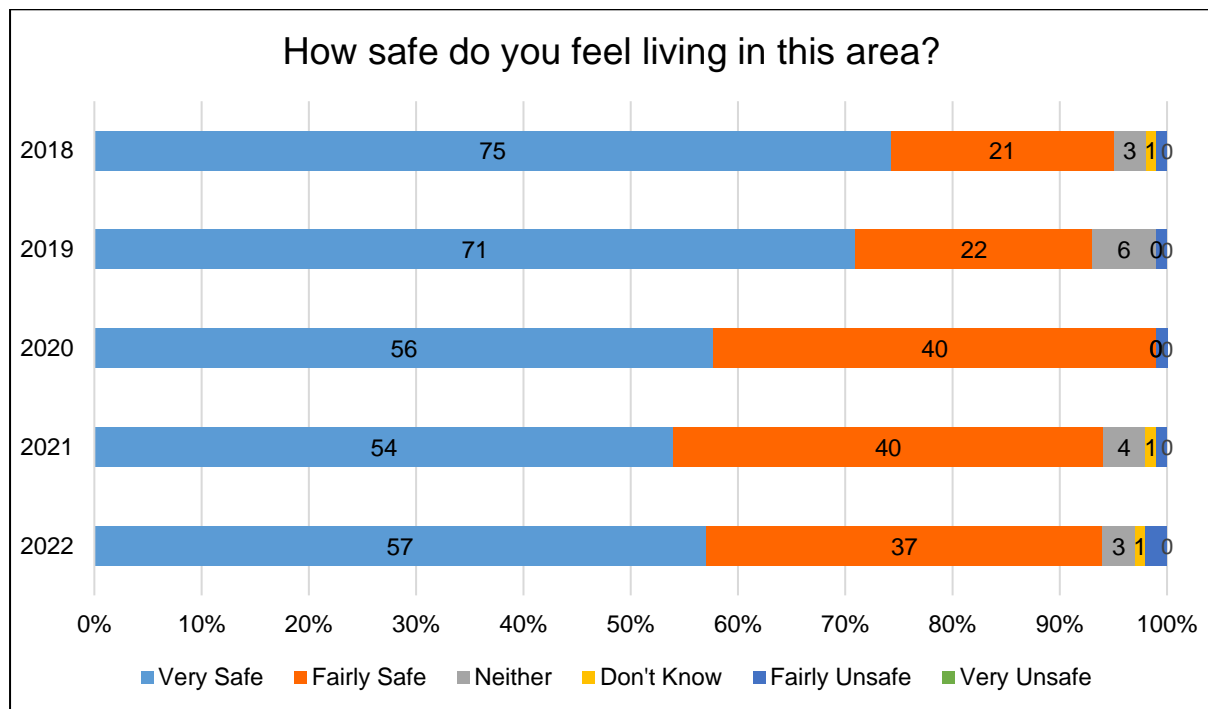


## Views about the police and criminal justice system

Source: NILT

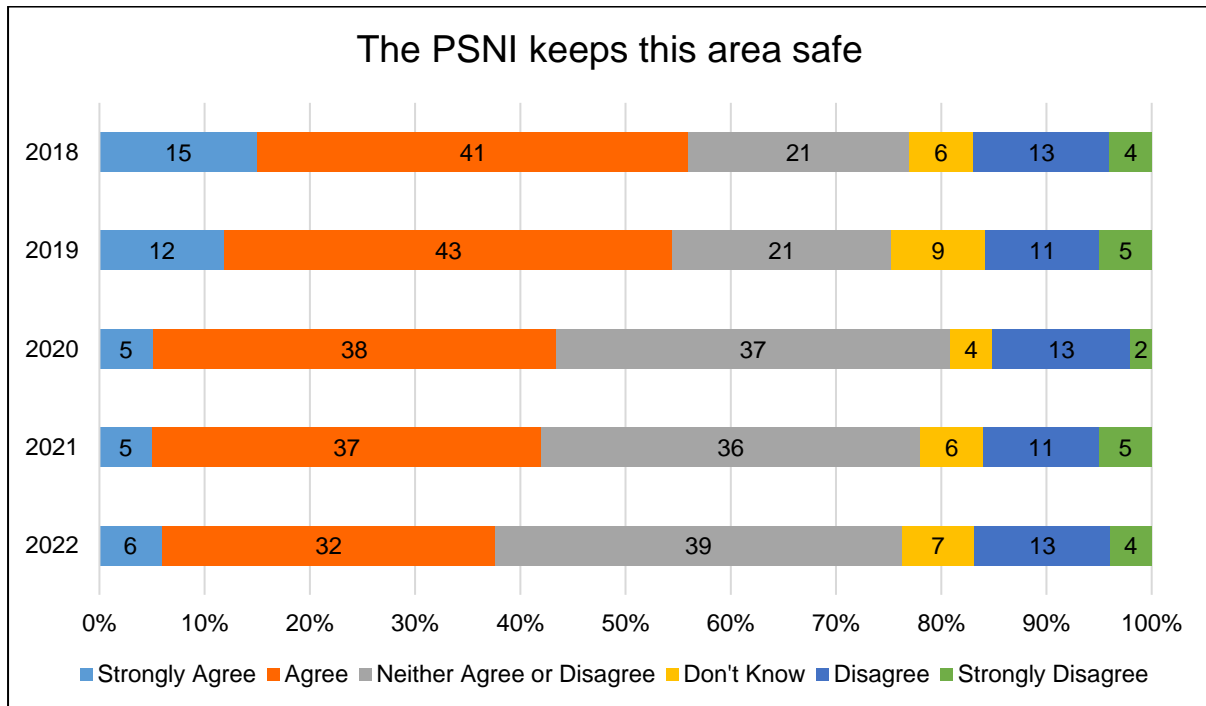
2.43 *Relevance:* Trust and confidence in the police and criminal justice system is a key element in understanding confidence communities have in the institutions of the state, and creating a culture within communities where the majority of individuals are law-abiding citizens. Understanding trends and developments in this area helps shape activity and work accordingly.

Respondents were asked: ‘**how safe do you feel living in this area?**’



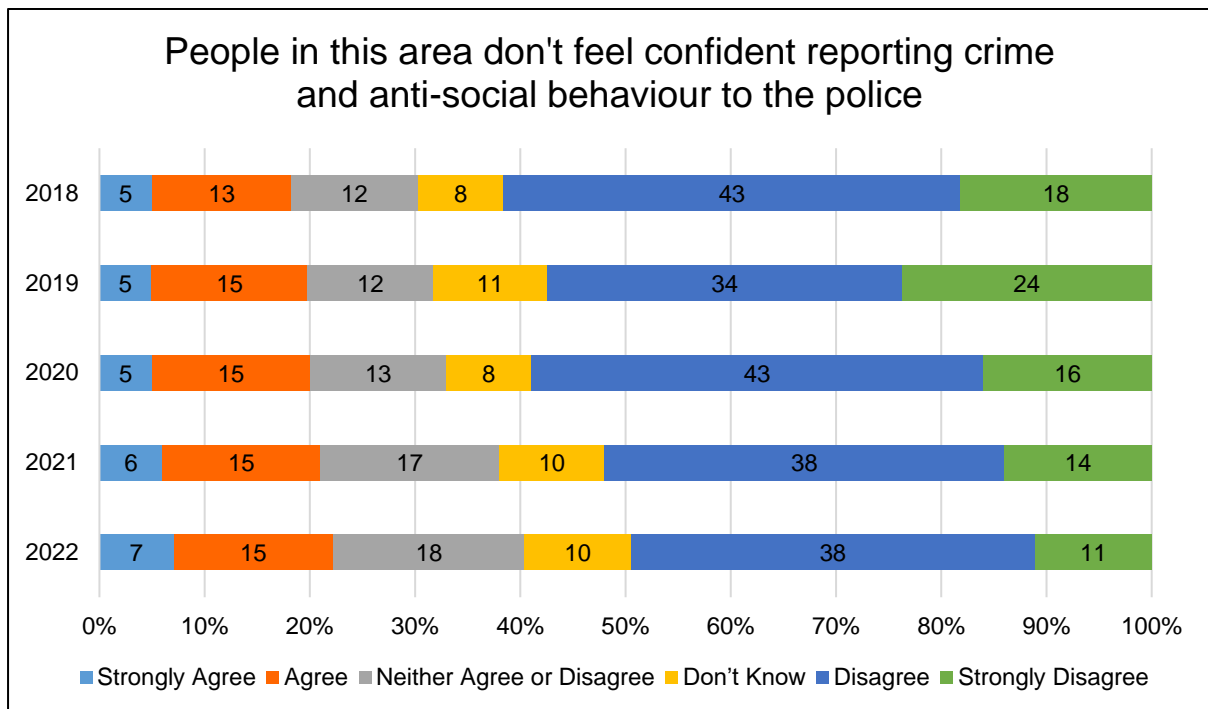
	Very Safe	Fairly Safe	Neither	Don't Know	Fairly Unsafe	Very Unsafe
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↓-18	↑16	→0	→0	↑1	→0
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑1	↓-3	→0	↑1	↑1	→0
1 year trend (2022-23)	↑3	↓-3	↓-1	→0	↑1	→0

Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement: ‘the PSNI keeps this area safe.’



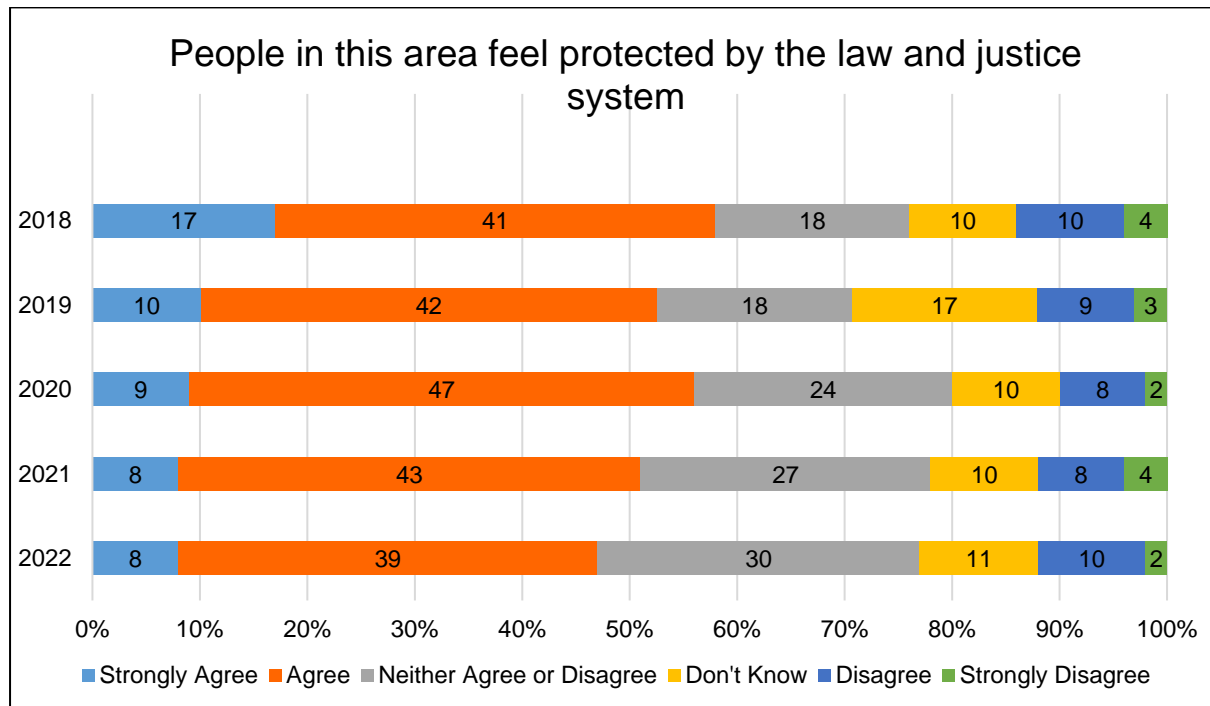
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↓-9	↓-9	↑18	↑1	→0	→0
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑1	↓-6	↑2	↑3	→0	↑2
1 year trend (2021-2022)	↑1	↓-5	↑3	↑1	↑2	↓-1

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **'People in this area don't feel confident reporting crime and anti-social behaviour to the PSNI.'**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↑2	↑2	↑6	↑2	↓-5	↓-7
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↑2	→0	↑5	↑2	↓-5	↓-5
1 year trend (2021-2022)	↑1	→0	↑1	→0	→0	↓-3

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed and disagreed with the statement: **‘People in this area feel protected by the law and justice system.’**



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5 year trend (2018-2022)	↓-9	↓-2	↑12	↑1	→0	↓-2
3 year trend (2020-2022)	↓-1	↓-8	↑6	↑1	↑2	→0
1 year trend (2021-2022)	→0	↓-4	↑3	↑1	↑2	↓-2

2.44 Household surveys carried out in each of the Communities in Transition areas in 2022 generated a number of interesting findings. Residents surveyed expressed significant positive community sentiment:

- 68% of participants across all the CiT areas agreed or strongly agreed that there was a strong sense of community in their neighbourhood,
- 84% of participants said they would know who to contact if they identified a problem in their area, and
- 61% felt that that residents in their area abided by the rule of law.

2.45 However, the research also identified that:

- 60% of participants felt that changes to the local environment would help people feel safer in their area.
- 59% indicated that improved relationships with the PSNI would help make

people feel safer.

- 57% felt anti-social behaviour was a problem in their area.
- The same percentage felt that drug-related crime was a problem in their area.
- 32% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that paramilitary groups had too much influence on young people in their area, which is striking as the NI Life and Times Survey found only 12% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement.
- 34% felt that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in their area, which is double the rate of the NI Life and Times Survey.
- 52% indicated that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug dealing and anti-social behaviour in their area – again, this was double the response to the same question in the NI Life and Times Survey.
- 27% said that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in their area, compared to just 13% in the NI Life and Times Survey.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> <https://cooperationireland.org/projects/communities-in-transition-area-reports/>

## Other recent research concerning the impact of paramilitaries in NI

2.46 The report, *'From Contextual to Criminal Harm: Young People's Perceptions and Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland'*, explores young people's perceptions and experiences of criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland. Criminal exploitation is broadly defined as the incitement, coercion and/or manipulation of children and young people into criminal activity, including in cases where children and young people believe that their behaviours are consensual. The research led by Dr Colm Walsh was carried out from December 2021 – April 2022. In-depth focus group interviews were held with 44 young people connected with a programme to identify and support young people at risk from paramilitary-related harms from across Northern Ireland. The work was funded by the Programme.

2.47 The key findings were:

- The term child criminal exploitation was new to many participants, and for some did not resonate; almost none of the young people routinely used it. For a minority criminal exploitation was connected to paramilitarism and its structures, for others it was drug dealers recognising vulnerability and exploiting children in sale and distribution of drugs. For the latter, paramilitaries were seen to be a buffer against true organised criminals, providing a para-policing function. When probed further it seemed that some of their beliefs were contradictory. Some of the conversations created cognitive tensions for young people trying to reconcile their beliefs about those they knew personally with the reality that they engaged in serious crime and violence.
- Young people fondly referred to 'our way': a few streets in their local area, where family are clustered together and often had been for decades. This contributed towards familiarity. But fondness for the area was in contrast to examples of social and environmental causes of stress; and as interviews progressed it emerged that most of the violence, threat and intimidation experienced was in their local area despite their verbalisation that these areas were the safest. Exposure to violence, including being witness to and/or a victim of it, appeared to be a normal part of life, and had become so normalised that even when they had experienced harm this was not connected to their sense of safety more widely. In some areas, drug use appeared to be endemic, with very easy access to drugs and routine usage of a wide range of drugs, again from early adolescence.
- Family and other social support can act as a buffer against risks. When young people were asked to consider the factors that place some young people at risk, one of the strongest themes was the role of parents and parental monitoring. Many described the factors within families that pushed young people out into the community where they became more vulnerable to the risks. But where parents

understood the risks and made conscious efforts to facilitate avoidance, risks appeared to be mitigated.

- Exhibiting a strong commitment to education and learning as well as achieving educationally are known protective factors. But there was a lack of positive learning experiences for most of these young people, starting from the beginning of secondary school, and motivation and optimism for the future was low.
- Most young people spoke of their local youth clubs with affection. They were providing several buffers to community risks – a safe space where young people could socialise and relax without the threat of violence or exploitation, and engage in critical conversations. Youth services can provide pathways for young people as volunteers, to achieve vocational qualifications and assume a peer leader role. However, there was significant evidence that there had not been active engagement around issues of child exploitation and violence more generally.
- Every young person provided examples of when they had experienced (directly or indirectly) violence-related harm; some described experiences when they were still toddlers. Some forms of threat and aggression were not considered by some to be violence (e.g. being shot at with metal pellets). Some of the focus groups explained that given the prevalence of violence and perceived threat, young people have increasingly been carrying knives and other sharps; motivations were believed to be for self-protection.
- Each focus group affirmed the reality of the presence of paramilitary and organised crime groups despite the transition towards peace. Whilst the specific functions of those groups tended to differ between personal gain and protection of the community, most of the young people believed that their presence presented a threat to young people and despite the façade of community safety they actively undermined it, contributing towards cultures of criminality and violence. Despite their influence and presence, there were few safe spaces to talk about personal safety, violence and crime. They thought that schools avoided it and were hostile towards learning from and understanding young people's exposure to paramilitaries. The researcher concluded that the young people had a desire for learning which connects to their lived experiences and identified a challenge that the formal education system has in engaging young people who live in a context of significant harm across multiple systems.
- Most young people were highly critical of the way that police 'policed' and lacked confidence in the police keeping them safe; some avoided any contact with them (perhaps depending on the seriousness of a problem). Some believed that the community had more confidence in paramilitaries to take action. Dominant community norms actively denounced information sharing, colloquially known as

'touting', and symbolically endorsed extra-judicial or community forms of justice. Among this group, those norms were themselves 'policed' by a fear of reputational damage as well as the threat of (further) violence.

- There was a mistrust of 'outsiders' differentiated by religious identity which has facilitated and sustained coercion within communities, providing leverage for organised crime groups to maintain, often via interpersonal and family norms, the façade of protecting hyperlocal communities against the 'others'.
- Young people described two distinct networks existing within communities – one involved in the sale and distribution of drugs for financial gain, and paramilitaries who were perceived to moderate the other network's influence and had a role in ensuring that more harmful drugs were less available (sometimes for the benefit of the community). There was a broad assumption that the structure and identity of paramilitaries was separate from that of drug dealers. There was no consensus as to which of the two networks were involved in child criminal exploitation but a broad consensus that the motivation to exploit was primarily financial gain and material acquisition. The author observed a very effective marketing strategy in which two apparently distinct illegal networks were portrayed to exist in the community, whilst in reality their existence mutually reinforced each other and concluded that this smokescreen is fundamental to the Northern Ireland business model which is distinct from other areas where child criminal exploitation exists.
- More senior network members were generally unknown to young people, whilst active, younger members were well known.
- Theory suggests that the more time young people spend with others who hold attitudes that endorse criminality, as well with those who are actively engaged in crime, the greater the chance that they will engage in criminality themselves. In the context of these young people's lives, both drug use and violence were normalised and certain levels of both were tolerable. In part, increased vulnerability to 'consent' to engage in criminal behaviour is associated with a desire for status and for respect, both of which are intimately connected to masculine ideals, which may help to explain the role of boys and young men in criminal ventures, particularly those characterised as highly violent and aggressive. But status cannot wholly explain vulnerability. Safety and the desire for belonging may also play a part. In regard to personal safety, it is well established that those most at risk of criminal exploitation often live in areas characterised as having high rates of violence. Indeed, many victims have been victims of other forms of violence themselves, including in the home. In contexts where mistrust is endemic and communities are programmed to pathologically doubt the intentions of others, fear becomes currency. The more fear that can be leveraged, the more people can be exploited – often with impunity, and indeed the tacit support of the community.

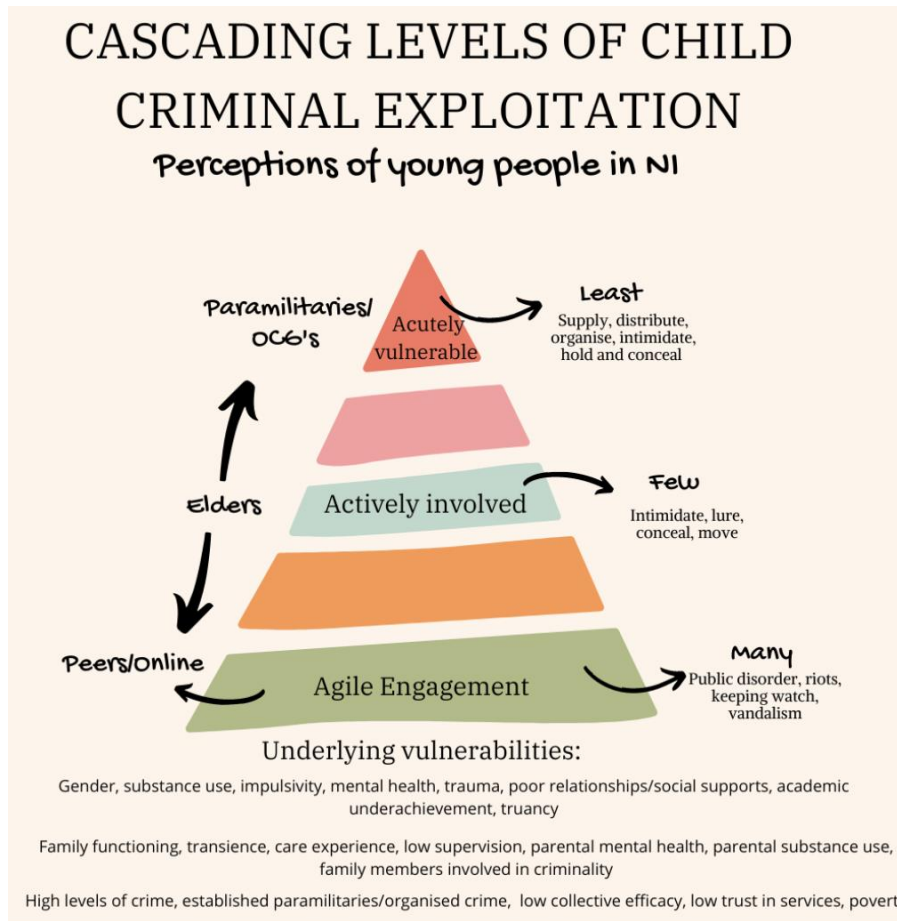


- Initially participants reported that young people were not exploited in their area, but when examples were given of what could be considered exploitation, significant evidence was provided of how young people were actively being used, being actively groomed, taking increasingly dangerous risks to perform a criminal act, or more agile forms of exploitation during the organised 2021 spring riots.
- Drugs were central to the activities that young people were criminally exploited to engage in. From an outside perspective, these young people, often living in areas of multiple deprivation, witnessed their peers having access to money and all the things that money provided access to; and certain opportunities. Young people could be engaged in the supply of drugs in a number of ways. For example, unwitting young people may be asked to provide transport and help to facilitate the 'deal'. Those actively and strategically engaged in the supply of drugs also leveraged the economic vulnerability of children and young people, creating the illusion of a transaction with the understanding that many of those who accepted the terms would be unable to fulfil the expectations. A small number of young people appear to be more chronically engaged in criminality and are routinely exploited by higher ranking members of the networks. Often they can become members of these groups and sometimes unwittingly. Girls and women were believed to be more targeted for subtle forms of abuse and exploitation (sexual abuse) and it appeared to be endemic in some of the focus groups. There was significant overlap between child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation with exploitation via drugs to engage in sexual activity.
- Those who were asked to engage in potentially criminal behaviour believed they had had a choice, and sometimes believed that because of their relationship to the perpetrator (friend/family) it was consensual. They did not necessarily see themselves as victims.

Evidence from the study suggests that there are a range of contextual vulnerabilities that collectively contribute to contextual harm, existing across the social system and together contributing to social and environmental causes of stress. Given the range of vulnerabilities in different communities, not all children and young people are at similar risk or engaged in the same exploitive activities. A small number of people who are most acutely affected tend to be older and more engaged in harmful and often dangerous criminal activities, and a larger but still relatively small number of young people are exploited to intimidate others, sell or move drugs, conceal goods or weapons. They are also engaged in the exploitation of other young people through cascading levels of exploitation (see diagram below).

A larger proportion of young people in these communities are actively engaged in more flexible ways. They perform temporary roles, and their function is to fill gaps. Many young people are unaware they are being exploited or that their behaviours are

criminal, and motivation can be the desire to belong, help friends out, or simply have a buzz. These insights provide mechanisms and opportunities for prevention and interruption. This model recognises the harms experienced and well-established risks that increase exposure to those harms.



This study supports and qualifies the fact that stressors are experienced by some young people and when experienced in multiples and over time, create fractures that can be exploited by those engaged in organised crime. The 'business model' requires the exploitation of young people through existing relationships, often peer relations. On this rung young people may be unaware of the motivations of others and, as their role is often dynamic and short-lived, may never consider their role to have been the result of exploitation, i.e. the spring 2021 riots. However, a smaller number of young people are more actively and persistently engaged in exploitative practices. Whilst the motivations may be similar (safety, status and belonging), these victims are more likely to have direct contact with individuals known to be actively engaged in organised crime, and exploited to perform specific functions, such as the concealment of drugs/weapons or the intimidation of others. On this rung it is more difficult for young people to maintain a non-criminal normal. They are required as individuals, as opposed to peer groups, to comply, and even where the 'request' appears to be benevolent, failure to courteously comply is associated with some degree of risk. On the top rung young people are intimately connected to paramilitary members and

organised crime groups. They are acutely vulnerable to a range of harms and actively engaged in criminal practices such as the supply and distribution of drugs. Given the different levels of need, distinct forms of identification and support may be required. This aligns well with the public health approach to violence prevention which generally focuses on three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary.

The full Report can be read at <https://www.endingtheharm.com/research-papers/from-contextual-to-criminal-harm/>, as can other research commissioned by the Programme.

## **SECTION C: DETAILED CONSIDERATION OF THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER WORK**

3.1 We now outline in further detail progress of various aspects of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme (“the Programme”) and highlight other relevant work by the Governments and public sector bodies. We structure our consideration of the work of the Programme using the same key themes as its benefits realisation groups, which draw together those people working on projects contributing to its key outcomes:

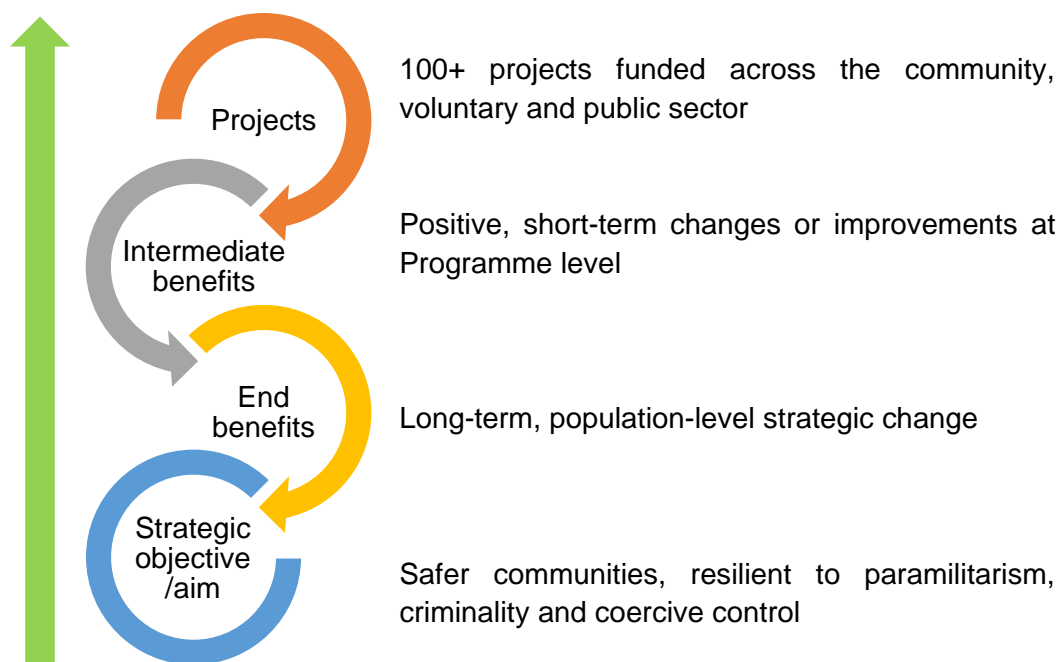
- keeping people safe;
- protective factors; and
- community resilience.

For each benefit we cover:

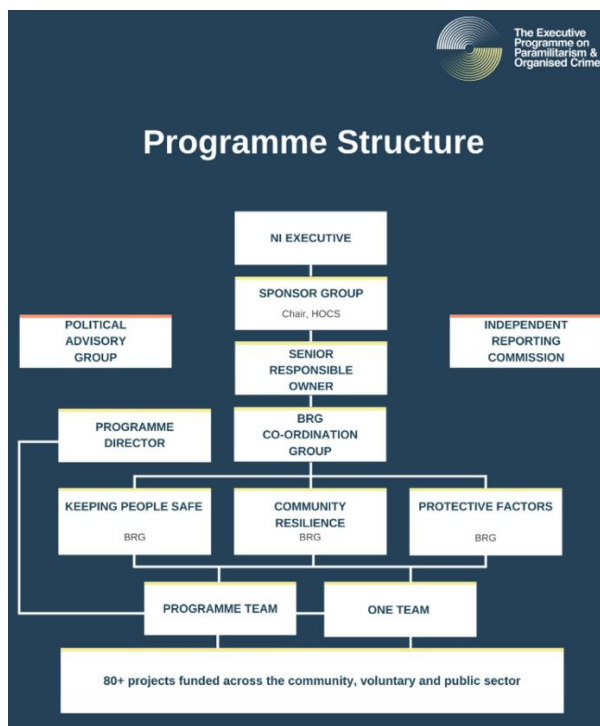
- a short introduction to the benefit;
- a summary of relevant Phase Two Programme activity;
- some other initiatives that might contribute to success; and
- areas for further work.

### **Phase Two of the Programme**

3.2 The overall aim of the Programme is “safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control”. Phase Two of the Programme has a particular focus on outcomes. A benefits realisation approach to the work was adopted in 2021 to support a collective focus on desired outcomes, and a strong focus on evidence, evaluation and data. Each project and Programme activity contributes to one or more ‘intermediary benefits’ and these in turn collectively help to deliver change when it comes to ‘end benefits’ and long-term progress.



3.3 Through these processes and this collaboration, projects and those involved in them share ideas, experiences and learning with each other, build further expertise, foster ongoing collaboration, and identify gaps, overlap and dependencies. The Programme has acknowledged – and we agree – that it cannot alone achieve all of the necessary change required to end paramilitarism once and for all, but it has a key role to play in exploring what can and does work (testing and refining new approaches, and learning from best practice including from other jurisdictions), promoting understanding and awareness of the issues, supporting those delivering this vital work, and promoting the aims more widely.

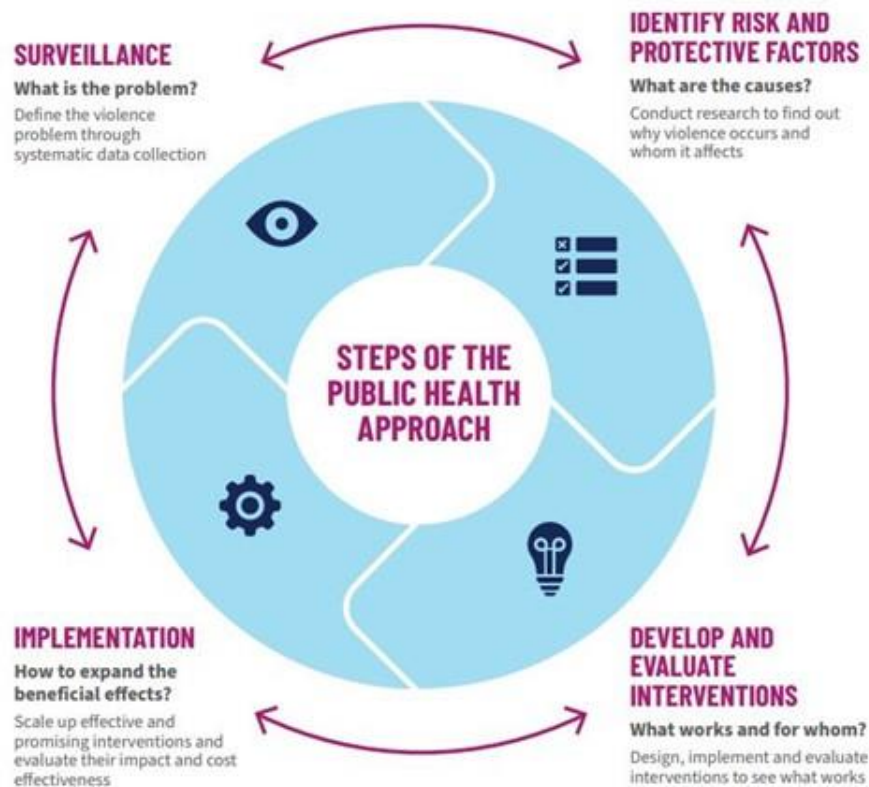


3.4 A dedicated **Programme Team** supports coordination of the work, and projects are led by delivery leads in various departments and agencies, often in partnership with the community and voluntary sector. Those involved in the work come together in a range of structures which should help to ensure that officials from across NI Departments, the UK Government and the wider public sector are aware of Programme learning, working together, identifying common risks and issues, and fostering further collaboration and development. **One Team** brings together project delivery leads for them to update on their respective work, exploring issues of common concern and promoting a joined-up approach to all of these endeavours. Three **benefits realisation groups** (BRGs) meet quarterly to consider progress made, difficulties encountered and future opportunities. The leaders of each group form a **benefits realisation coordination group** which, together with the Programme Director and Senior Responsible Owner, form an oversight group. A senior **Sponsor Group** is chaired by the Head of the Civil Service, bringing together senior leaders from various Departments and agencies responsible for this work. Sponsors are responsible for championing the Programme in their business areas and for considering and addressing relevant factors that will either accelerate or slow progress towards outcomes, including the broader policy landscape, strategic enablers, risks and obstacles. Sponsors have specific responsibilities to address gaps or blockers to progress, informed by evidence and data. Areas they have been working on in the past year include:

- data and evidence gathering: comprehensive data on vulnerability and harm being collected, shared and assessed more effectively to enable a joined-up approach to tackling paramilitarism,
- locality and inter-agency working, and alignment of community safety initiatives,
- early intervention,
- promoting trauma-informed practice, and
- join-up and understanding of relevant funding (both Executive and non-Executive), including locations of community investment.

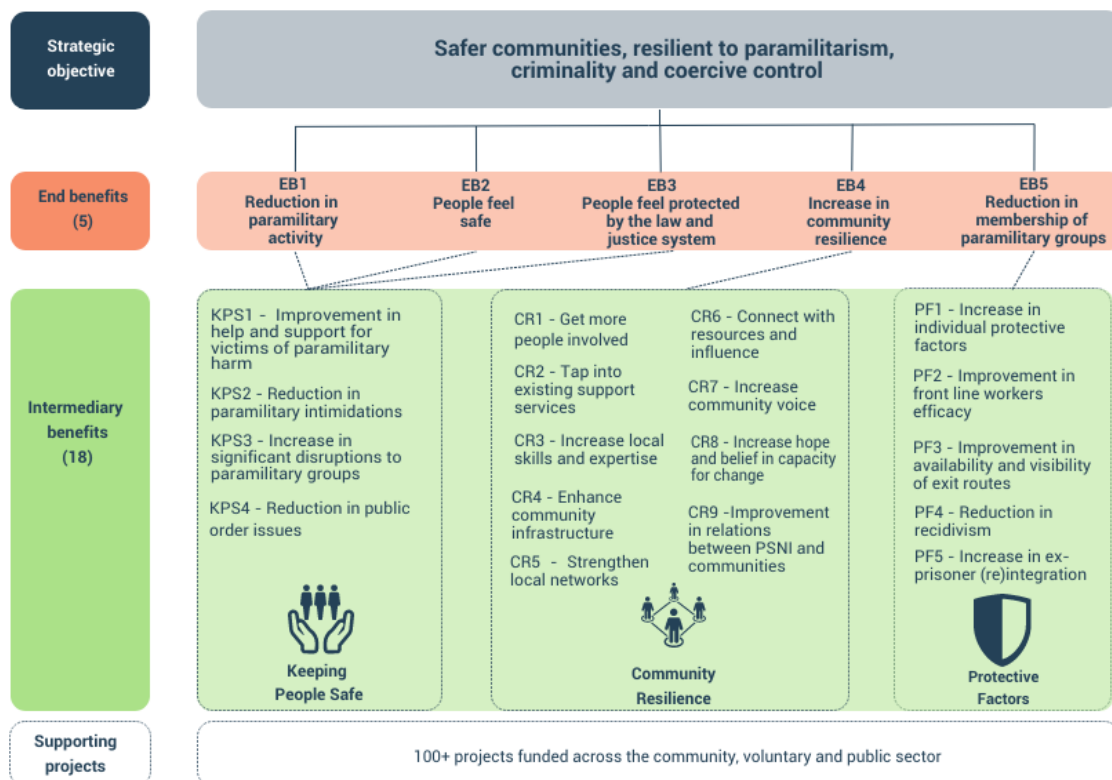
The Programme adopts a **public health approach to violence**, that is to say: treating violence like a disease, seeking to understand the problem, diagnosing its causes, developing and testing innovative practice to prevent it, refining the model, scaling up what has proven to be effective and monitoring progress. The following diagram from the World Health Organisation (WHO) helps illustrate this model:

## Steps of the public health approach



The Programme has sought to put evaluation and data at the heart of its operation, and an impressive body of data and evidence is now being produced, evaluating what has been trialled and drawing out key lessons for policy and practice. Continued awareness-raising of these lessons, efforts to shape delivery based on them and embedding them into future funding and policy decision making will all be vital to strengthening efforts to tackle paramilitarism. This learning is important to the Programme but is also relevant to a wide range of practitioners, funders, policymakers and other professionals, both those working to tackle paramilitarism and those working on linked socio-economic issues.

3.5 The diagram overleaf shows the end benefits and intermediate benefits against which the Programme is seeking to deliver change. We will explore each in greater detail, and comment on the various projects being delivered in terms of the end benefits, as well as identify areas for further work or progress.



3.6 Underpinning this work is an “enabling framework”, which was agreed by the previous Executive. It consists of six elements:

- **Governance** – the creation and championing of cross sectoral structures that facilitate genuine collaboration (focused on measurable outcomes as well as outputs) and cross Departmental working to ensure shared understanding, learning and positive impact beyond the lifecycle of funding.
- **Political Leadership** – demonstrating clear political leadership through active support for the Programme’s values and outcomes, linking these to other political priorities.
- **Partnerships & Alignment** – consciously aligning the Programme with other strategies and policies; facilitating connections between sectors to collectively deliver change; and helping everyone understand that they have a role to play in addressing the drivers and outworking of paramilitarism and related criminality. To demonstrate it is possible to deliver outcomes across sectors.
- **Communications** – communicating that violence is preventable and not inevitable, being clear about ‘what works’ and delivering public awareness campaigns that contribute to understanding and attitudinal change.
- **Locality working** – maximising the use of existing resources in particular areas and drawing on local expertise and connections.



- **Research & Best Practice** harnessing and developing robust data and evidence to understand the problem and to develop solutions that work and provide a sound basis for investment. The implementation of an innovative, tested public health approach to violence prevention and reduction – a relay team effort across sectors to support good outcomes.

- 3.7 We consider that the Programme makes a vital contribution to efforts to tackle paramilitarism, as do various community and voluntary sector initiatives funded by philanthropic and other bodies, alongside wider strategies and work of the Executive, and the UK and Irish Governments. It is important that the totality of this work is considered when judging progress towards ending paramilitarism once and for all.
- 3.8 Through supporting projects, building connections, raising awareness, deepening understanding of how paramilitarism manifests differently in different areas, increasing knowledge of what works by way of targeted interventions, fostering collaborative working, building a community of informed practitioners with a shared commitment to this goal who can motivate others to play their part, and resourcing practitioners and policymakers, the Programme can significantly contribute to progress in tackling paramilitarism. Evaluation and data are showing that various projects are making a tangible difference in individual lives, communities, and services provided, and we see good evidence of linkages and partnerships developing. However, the Programme alone cannot achieve the collective objective of ending paramilitarism once and for all. This requires a concerted Whole of Government, whole of system approach which includes (but isn't limited to) addressing the socio-economic factors connected to why people still join or engage with paramilitary groups and the groups' continuing existence. These factors include perceived or actual lack of opportunity; ending of division and further integration and reintegration; tackling exclusion; drug and alcohol addiction; sustained political leadership and commitment; trauma including intergenerational trauma; social capital and structures; poverty; underinvestment; trust and confidence in the criminal justice system; ineffective public service delivery; and the structures and 'brand' of the groups. As noted in the Overview, we believe that a further dimension of a formal process of Group Transition to disbandment needs to run in addition to this work. The Programme plays a vital role in tackling paramilitarism and we consider some of its successes and achievements – as well as some key relevant broader policy initiatives – in greater detail below.

### **Keeping People Safe**

#### *Overview:*

- 3.9 Keeping people safe is a crucial aspect of this work, as paramilitary-linked criminality continues to cause harm to individuals, groups and communities.
- 3.10 The Programme's work in this area is designed to contribute towards measurable and positive change over the long-term. This includes:

- reduction in paramilitary activity;
- people feeling safe; and
- people feeling protected by the criminal justice system.

3.11 The benefits realisation approach means that the collective impact of the Programme's projects, if delivered effectively, focused on the right issues, in the right places and based on robust data, should help realise intermediary benefits, which in the case of keeping people safe are:

- victims receive effective help;
- reduction in paramilitary intimidation;
- reduction in public order issues; and
- increase in significant disruption to paramilitary groups.

*Relevant Programme activity:*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Paramilitary Crime Task Force</b>
<b>Description</b>	Trilateral law enforcement task force (PSNI, NCA, HMRC). Collaboration focuses on sharing of resources, capacity and capability with the singular aim of frustrating, disrupting and dismantling paramilitary organised crime groups
<b>Funding</b>	£5,556k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in public order issues; and</li> <li>• Increase in significant disruptions to paramilitary groups.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	Over the period April 2022 to March 2023, the PCTF made 75 arrests, completed 197 searches, and 101 charges/reports were brought/made. It seized drugs with a street value of £754,438, along with 47 firearms/weapons, six explosive devices and £301,741 (plus €2,380) in cash.
<b>IRC comment</b>	We welcome the ongoing work of the PCTF to disrupt paramilitary-linked criminality. A structured, systematic and adequately resourced set of investigations into paramilitary-linked criminality is vital to ensure that the harm caused by that criminality is significantly disrupted, and also sends a clear message to the public that this behaviour will not be tolerated, strengthening community confidence in policing. The specialist capabilities brought by the NCA and HMRC are essential to an effective, joined-up approach to tackling paramilitary crime, and we see this partnership with the PSNI as having been successful in disrupting activity in recent years. We note the visibility and significance of various operations in the last year.

	<p>We also welcome the review of the PCTF’s work undertaken earlier this year, as part of ensuring that all of the Programme is evaluated and operating as effectively as possible. The constructive approach of management engaging with the review and responding to its findings is commendable, and we encourage them to continue work to implement its findings.</p> <p>This collaborative approach to law enforcement has increased the organised crime investigative capacity for tackling the harms caused by paramilitarism, and whilst we recognise the very challenging fiscal environment, it is vital that these sorts of investigations continue to receive appropriate priority into the future.</p>
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Support for victims of paramilitary violence (InSync)</b>
<b>Description</b>	Consent-based support for victims of paramilitary violence. Includes trauma/counselling/signposting/mentoring support and support for drug misuse, debt, self-esteem, training and employment, access to benefits, housing and family relations. Also aims to build capacity among service providers to work with victims.
<b>Funding</b>	£134k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victims receive effective help.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	InSync had 63 service users last financial year. Evaluation is ongoing but early feedback notes that many service users have tried counselling unsuccessfully before but, for various reasons, their time with InSync has marked the only time when they completed a full course of counselling. Service users have reported that having a mentor/support worker was a major factor in their ability to continue with counselling. Many of the victims of paramilitary style attacks report that despite being beaten, shot or both, they remain a target for abuse and lower-level threats, intimidation and verbal abuse. There are also other complicating factors such as the victims knowing the perpetrators of the attacks. Housing is a recurring issue which service users require support with and is key to successful outcomes.
<b>IRC comment</b>	It is vital that appropriate, and where required tailored, supports are available to victims of paramilitary violence. This project is doing important work and providing much-needed support to its clients. We welcome the early evaluation work being done, and would encourage an ongoing dialogue with other victim support

	services to share learning and good practice, and to explore possible vehicles for delivery of such support in the future.
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Belfast City Council support project for people under threat</b>
<b>Description</b>	Develop, support and implement the multi-agency arrangements to address the associated issues attached to victims of paramilitary groups and those under threat throughout West and North Belfast and will contribute to a reduction in the prevalence rates of paramilitary-related incidents in these areas.
<b>Funding</b>	£95k until March 2023
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors;</li> <li>• Reduction in paramilitary intimidations; and</li> <li>• Victims receive effective help.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	<p>In 2022/23, 109 individuals were supported through this work in West Belfast and 96 in North Belfast. Evaluations have been carried out in each of the last three years. This project was wound down in March 2023.</p> <p>In autumn 2023, Dr Colm Walsh published a report sponsored by the Programme entitled <i>Human rights and the management of threats to life: an evidence informed review of a multi-agency response in Northern Ireland and directions for the future of safeguarding victims of community violence and serious harm</i>. The report examines how the relevant bodies in Northern Ireland deal with threats to life against individuals. It recommends a number of ways in which the current response can be improved.</p> <p>The report outlines the importance of protecting individuals from violent harm under Sustainable Development Goal 16.1 (Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere) and under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child article 6 (all children and young people have the right to survive and the right to develop). The report found that despite these responsibilities to safeguard individuals, the existing response to threats to life was not consistent. Key findings of the report are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The PSNI service instruction guides officers on how to deal with threat-to-life cases, but it is not implemented consistently and there are few opportunities for officers to familiarise themselves with it.</li> </ul>

- Despite legislation compelling statutory agencies to share information, there is no standardised system for the “collation, sharing and analysis of data between relevant statutory agencies”.
- Current procedures for dealing with threats to life are “insufficient at reducing risk” and are not implemented consistently across Northern Ireland. The report argues that these factors put the State at risk of failing to fulfil its international obligations and devolved policy commitments.
- The report identifies the need for a coherent and consistent regional response, requiring joined-up working between the PSNI and relevant stakeholders. Citing one reason for standing down the multi-agency partnership for reducing threats to life in Belfast as concerns around information sharing, the report says that clear parameters for the sharing of information are critical for the functioning of any joined-up response.
- There should be one organisation with responsibility for “convening, facilitating and monitoring” the threat-to-life process and ultimately reducing the harm produced by threats, and it identifies the Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland as one possible appropriate body.

The report recommended that the Community Safety Board consider these findings, and added that in the absence of a single entity assuming responsibility for threat management, the PSNI and Health and Social Care Trusts should undertake a review in order to refine the current process to address the issues outlined.

The review concludes that there is a need for more timely information from multiple perspectives to assess threats and more transparent data to monitor progress against high-level strategic objectives and international legal commitments. Further, there is a pressing need for the PSNI Chief Constable to operationalise his public commitment to public health policing. This could find legislative footing in a duty similar to the Serious Violence Duty in England and Wales.

IRC comment

We understand that this specific project was wound down in March 2023. We recognise the importance of projects being allowed to conclude and for lessons to be learnt and other approaches tried. But we also note the previous positive evaluations of this work and the difference that it was making for individuals. We see a continuing need for work to provide specific supports related to

	threats from paramilitaries. We welcome the additional work undertaken by the Programme and others to explore what more can be done to improve the response to threats to life and to ensure that consistent vital support is offered.
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Committal Reform Programme</b>
<b>Description</b>	Resource requirements to support planning, implementation and evaluation of the Committal Reform Programme.
<b>Funding</b>	£120k until March 2023
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victims receive effective help.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	<p>This funding supported the project management and progression of committal reform.</p> <p>The reform has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improved the experience for victims and witnesses of the criminal justice process;</li> <li>• removed the potential for victims and witnesses to be called to give evidence at the committal hearing for those cases against which the new provisions apply; and</li> <li>• reduced the stress faced by individuals by removing the requirement for giving evidence at the magistrates' court at committal.</li> </ul> <p>The justice system is also working to roll out phase two of the reform, whereby cases involving more serious offences will go directly to the Crown Court.</p>
<b>IRC comment</b>	<p>We welcome the abolition of preliminary investigations and mixed committals from October 2022, removing the potential need for victims to give oral evidence at both committal and then again at trial in new cases.</p> <p>We recognise the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on the court system, but given the significant benefits of direct committal (speeding up justice and improving the experience of vulnerable victims and witnesses) we recommend that momentum delivering on these reforms be maintained and where possible accelerated.</p>

*Other relevant activity:*

3.12 There is a wide range of organisations and people working well to contribute to keeping people safe. The Programme is adding value to this work, leveraging a focus on paramilitarism, and seeking to foster join-up. Keeping people safe is the core business

of the PSNI and through this last year they have continued to work to support individuals and communities through the actions of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force and others in the Crime Department, Local District Policing including Neighbourhood teams, Community Safety work, partnerships and engagement, and other efforts. In many areas keeping people safe is also supported by community safety forums and other local structures, some of which are assisted by the Communities in Transition programme. The PSNI is promoting early intervention and prevention, local problem solving, locality working and partnerships and collaboration through its strategic approach and organisational priorities.

- 3.13 Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) are local bodies made up of Councillors and independent people from each council area who work to make communities safer. They can also contribute significantly to tackling paramilitarism. Nine of the eleven PCSPs in Northern Ireland now specifically recognise the contribution that they can make to this work in their Action Plans, and we welcome this development. This year certain PCSPs have taken on a role in calling out paramilitary-affiliated criminality. We urge PCSPs to continue to ensure that their campaigns, projects and efforts reflect the contribution they can make to keeping people safe from paramilitarism.
- 3.14 Relevant statutory agencies are also part of PCSPs, and work on a range of community safety and safety-related issues in partnership. These include the NI Housing Executive, Youth Justice Agency, Probation Board NI, Education Authority, health and social care, NI Fire and Rescue Services as well as the PSNI. It is vital that partnership working is effective in order to meet the needs of individuals with complex needs, such as the good practice seen in multi-agency support hubs, through which vulnerable adults receive tailored support. Many of those same agencies sit together on the Community Safety Network, and its response group has brought together relevant agencies to coordinate and enhance inter-agency working in response to emerging situations during the year. The Programme plays an important role in these efforts.
- 3.15 Each of the above organisations also plays a key role in keeping people safe through core activities including promoting community cohesion as housing providers (in the case of the NIHE), enhancing the safety of vulnerable young people (the Education Authority's Youth Services), or preventing youth offending or re-offending (Youth Justice Agency) – and it is vital that learning and understanding from the Programme shape those activities. Tackling paramilitarism requires all of those engaged in public service to play their part, alongside broad societal support for this work.
- 3.16 Many small Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community groups and committed individuals also play a key role in supporting and keeping communities safe. Accredited restorative justice organisations contribute to this through mediating disputes, supporting delivery of community sentences, and seeking to address

problems of low-level crime and anti-social behaviour by attempting to mend the broken relationships between the victim, the offender and the community by promoting non-violent community responses. The broad range of people actively involved is a crucial ingredient to success.

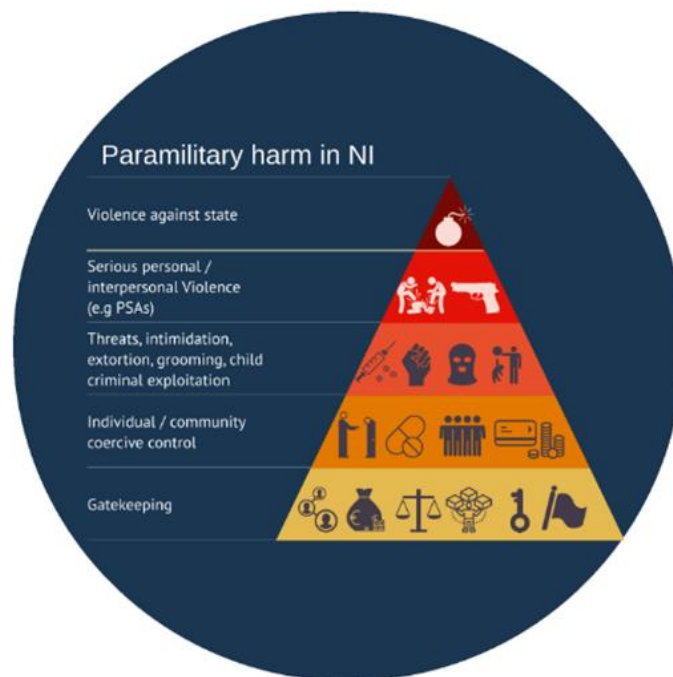
- 3.17 Victims of crime can be supported by a wide range of charitable and other organisations including Victim Support NI and specialist services for victims of domestic abuse, hate crime, sexual violence and abuse, as well as targeted support services for young people, people with disabilities and older people. The Programme is funding a specialist support service for victims of paramilitary style attacks (InSync), and we have recommended sharing of learning from that project with other victim support providers. We expect that there will be other learning from the programme that will also be of benefit to these organisations, and that embedding trauma-informed practice across the public sector will improve the level of support that victims receive.
- 3.18 Improving trust and confidence in the criminal justice system will be assisted by the Programme and its activities, but is primarily the responsibility of the main criminal justice organisations including the Department of Justice, PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), NI Prisons Service, NI Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, and others working in support of the justice system, as well as the judiciary and Chief Justice. Removing avoidable delay from the criminal justice system is one key aspect to improving confidence. We recommend that the Justice agencies continue to prioritise the removal of avoidable delay. Other work to improve confidence includes efforts to deepen understanding of the system and demystify how it works, protections and supports offered to witnesses and victims, and dedicated outreach endeavours; as well as showing consistency, fairness and professionalism of approach through service standards, amongst other things. We encourage a regular flow of information about progress and barriers in this work between the Programme and other activities, as that information will be useful to all those involved.
- 3.19 The NI Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) continues to fund projects in community settings aimed at preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime, using monies from the proceeds of crime. The budget for the scheme will be approximately £300k for 2022/23 and £600k for 2023/24. The Police Property Fund awards small grants to projects that engage with local police, contribute to community safety and/or confidence in police, and are aligned to a charitable purpose. To date it has awarded £320k to eligible projects across Northern Ireland. The Irish Government's Community Safety Innovation Fund (CSIF) was set up in 2022 to allow proceeds of crime to be directed into community projects to support community safety. Grants have been awarded under the fund to organisations or community groups that have innovative proposals to improve community safety and have not been able to access other sources of funding. Just over €3m worth of funding was allocated to 30 projects this year. These are valuable sources of community safety funding and it is also important



that communities experience the benefit of the proceeds of crime.

*Measuring progress:*

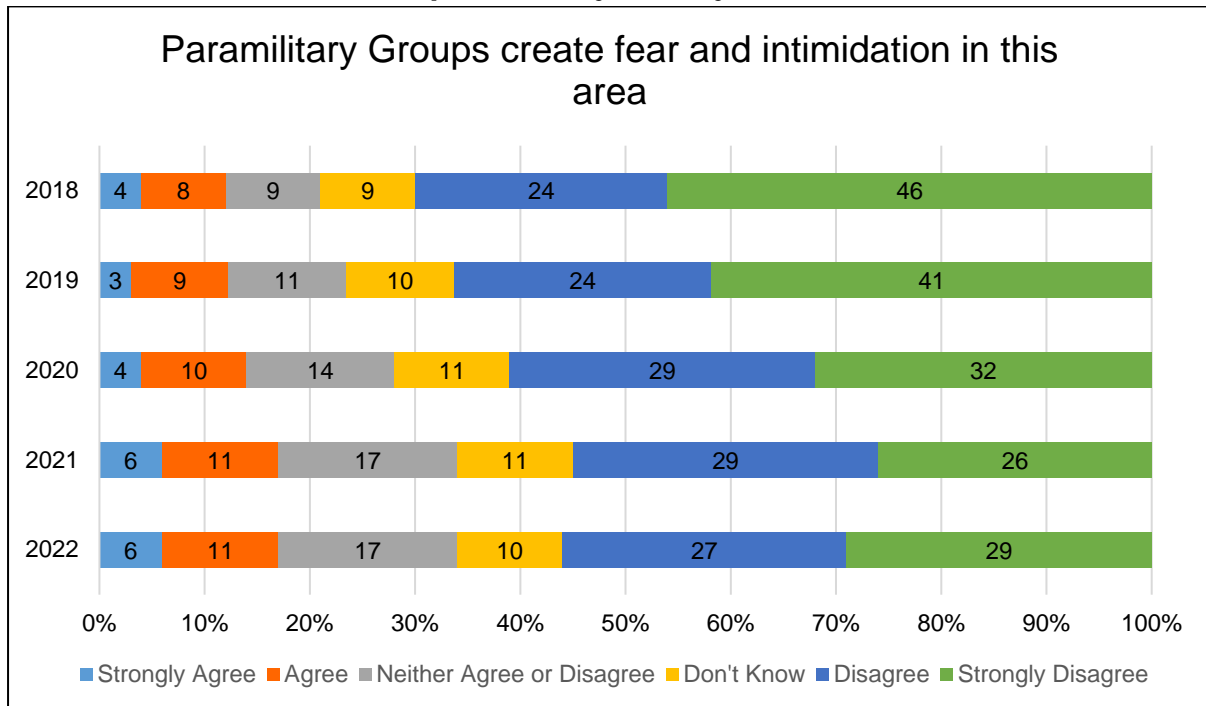
3.20 Measuring success in reducing paramilitary activity is not straightforward, especially as there is underreporting, linked to fear and intimidation, and quantifying hidden harms can be challenging. Nevertheless, the Programme has been producing increasingly detailed and useful evaluations, and has put a welcome focus on gathering the relevant information. A core message has been to ensure a better understanding of the hidden harms, and raising awareness of these.



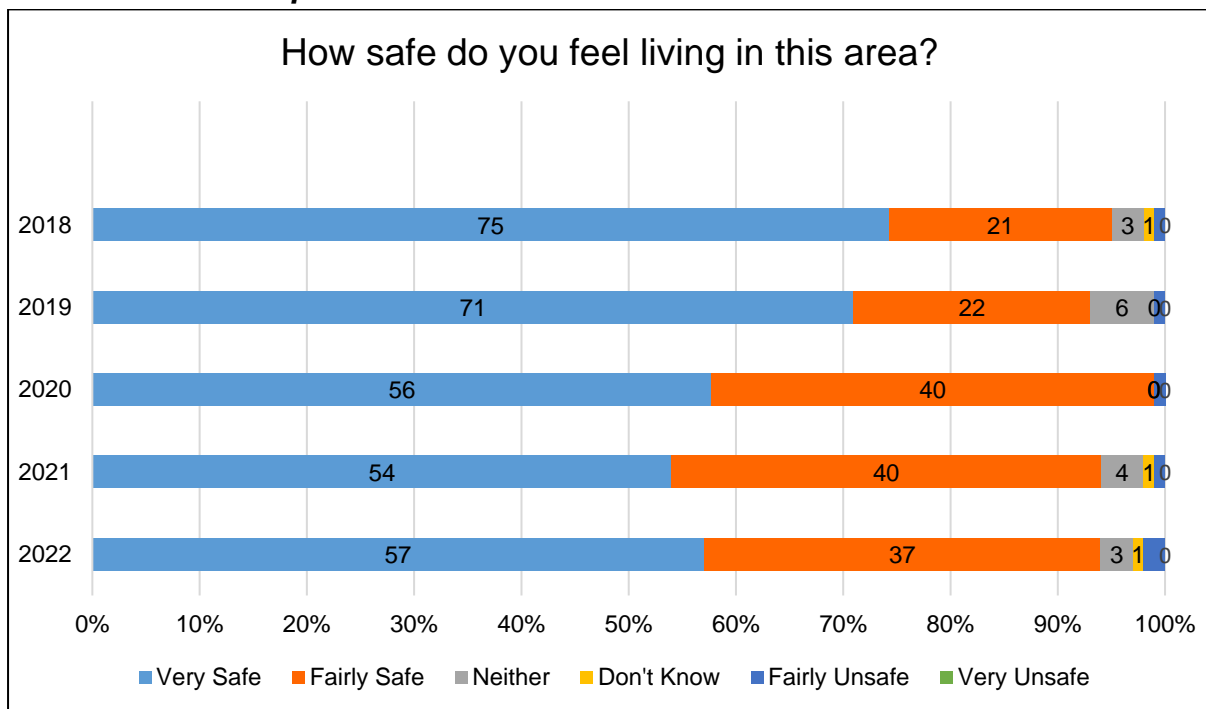
*Source: TPP*

3.21 With reference to population-level data, it is clear that further work is needed in relation to keeping people safe, both in terms of tackling paramilitarism and changing the macro context in which paramilitaries operate. People still experience paramilitary groups creating fear and intimidation in the area that they live in, not everyone feels safe in their area, and not everyone feels protected by the justice system. This can be seen in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey results which we set out in Section B, five of which form the indicators being used as measures of success for end benefits of the Programme. These are not trends and issues that the Programme alone can address, and do not take away from the good work that it is doing, but these figures serve to underline the importance of a macro, whole of system response to paramilitarism and issues associated with it.

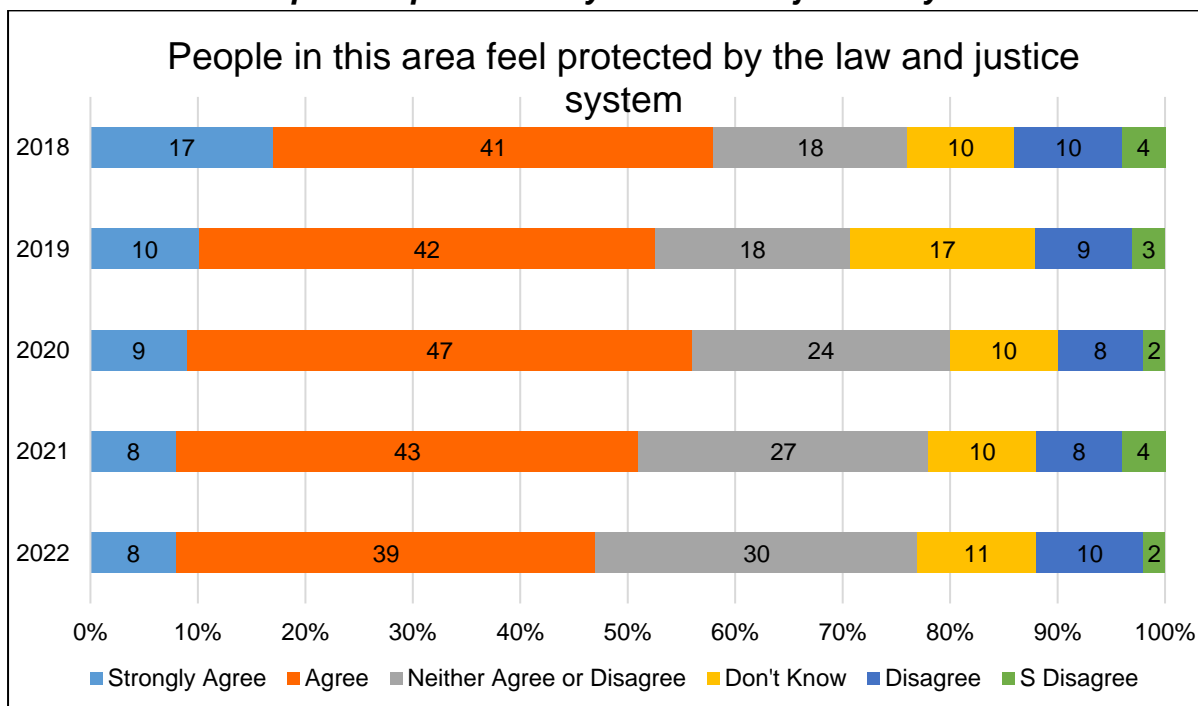
**End benefit 1: Reduction in paramilitary activity**



**End Benefit 2: People feel safe**



**End Benefit 3: People feel protected by the law and justice system**



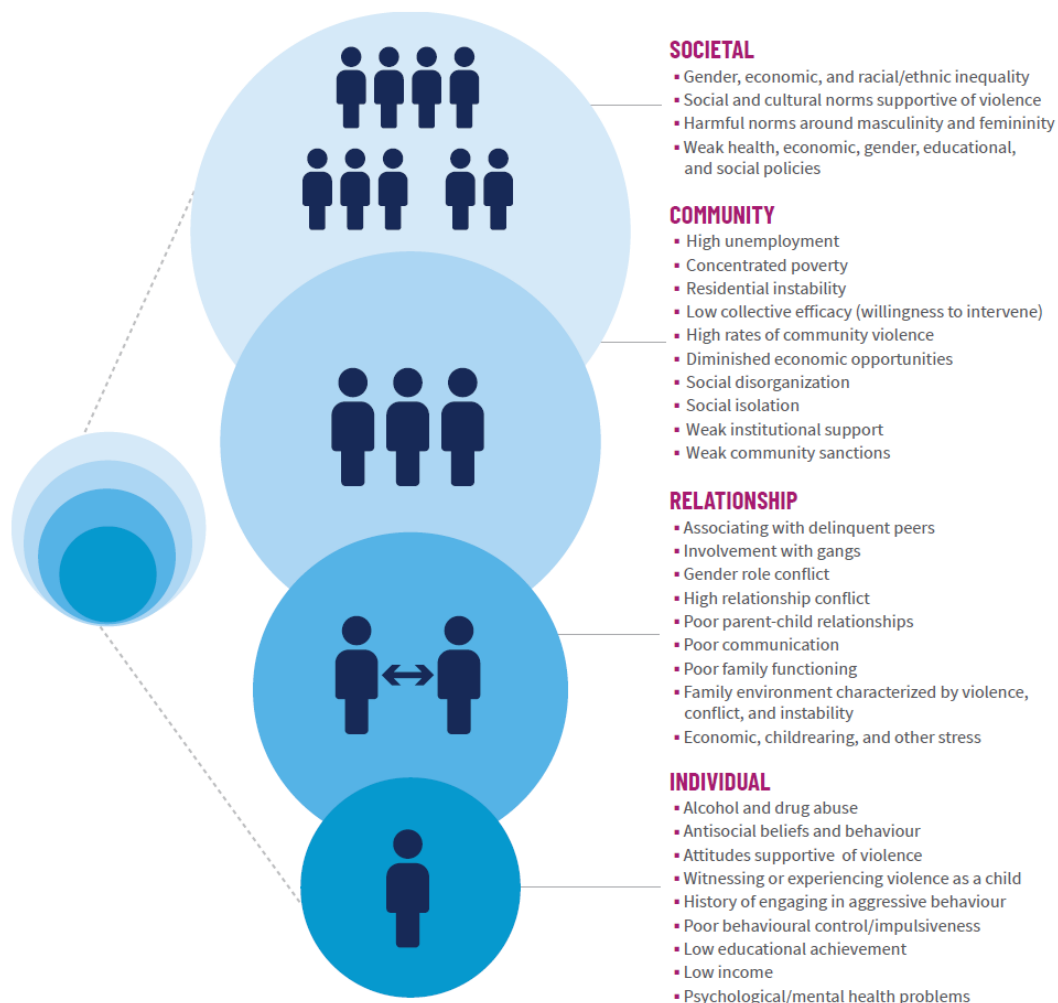
3.22 The Programme is seeking to effect change at a time when there is an exceptionally challenging macro-environment, including a cost of living crisis, the absence of an Executive at the time of writing, constrained public finances and many other issues we have already referred to. Various projects and interventions are delivering good results and change in people’s lives, and the type of societal change that is required and aimed for will take longer to realise. There is no room for complacency, and a continual focus on what is required from both outside the Programme and within, as well as collaborative efforts to address these, will be crucial to success.

**Protective Factors**

*Overview:*

3.23 The next benefit that the Programme is seeking to realise is increasing protective factors. Protective factors are characteristics or conditions of individuals, families, communities and societies that can mitigate risks that can threaten an individual’s development, limit future social and economic opportunities, and increase the likelihood of mental and physical health problems, criminal involvement, substance misuse, or exploitation or abuse<sup>54</sup>. The below diagram adapted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) illustrates the range of individual, relationship, community and societal risk and protective factors.

<sup>54</sup> Adapted from the Early Intervention Foundation <https://www.eif.org.uk/why-it-matters/what-is-early-intervention>



Examples of protective factors include social supports, healthy problem-solving and emotional regulation skills, self-efficacy, personal responsibility, lawfulness and openness to the future. By working to increase protective factors of at-risk people, the Programme's interventions are keeping them away from potential involvement in paramilitarism. Protective factors can be increased, enhanced or developed through support and mentoring. Work to increase the protective factors of prisoners and former prisoners is aimed at reducing the likelihood of reoffending and/or being recruited into (or back into) paramilitary groups, and promoting reintegration.

3.24 The Programme aligns work to improve and enhance protective factors with the end benefit of reduction in membership of paramilitary groups. Its intermediary benefits include:

- increase in individual protective factors;
- reduction in recidivism;
- improvement in front line workers' efficacy;
- increase in ex-prisoner (re)integration; and
- improvement in availability and visibility of exit routes.

Relevant Programme activity:

Project	<b>Youth Work</b>
Description	Targeted, bespoke youth work support in specific geographical areas and settings.
Funding	£1,912k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors; and</li> <li>• Reduction in public order issues.</li> </ul>
Summary update	<p>216 youth work programmes were delivered over 2022-2023. Approximately 2,500 young people participated in these.</p> <p>Work included:</p> <p><b>ENGAGE</b> - intensive, specialist outreach and mentoring working with young people at risk/being harmed by paramilitaries.</p> <p><b>RAPID</b> - agile responses during times of community tensions and social unrest.</p> <p><b>Supporting Youth through Engagement (SYTES)</b> - a partnership with PSNI in schools/communities to engage vulnerable young people from key areas. Aim: improve protective factors for those at risk of exclusion from school.</p> <p><b>Youth Voluntary Academy (YVA)</b> - lawfulness programme co-facilitated with PSNI and Youth Service with peer groups.</p> <p><b>CONNECT</b> - programme to place youth workers in Emergency Hospital Departments to support vulnerable young people and reduce the physical and social effects of paramilitary activity. This project works in partnership with PSNI. (The hospitals in this programme are Altnagelvin and Ulster/Dundonald.)</p> <p>The CONNECT project engaged with 140 young people in Altnagelvin and 80 at the Ulster; of these, 28 and 27 young people respectively were invited for follow-up and 18 and eight actual follow-ups took place. Issues coming up included mental health, self-harm, substance misuse, violent attack/assault and credible threat.</p> <p><b>Youth Implementation Action Group (YIAG)</b> - young people engaged to participate in PSNI/Independent Advisory Group (IAG) Mechanism for PSNI to consult and engage with young people on</p>

	<p>current policies that have an impact on their experience with policing.</p> <p><b>SPARK</b> - a youth work intervention and public health approach to safety and stability, and participation, that targets young people gathering in areas of heightened tension and contentious spaces such as bonfire sites and who are involved in behaviours that place them at risk. In 2022/23 a total of 22 programmes took place with 241 young people.</p> <p><b>Y-Box</b> - a co-produced, evidence-informed model for the prevention of youth violence among young people.</p> <p><b>Capacity building</b> - aims to put in place training programmes to build the capacity of Youth Workers and teachers in developing initiatives to deal with the effects of paramilitary activity.</p> <p>498 young people specific to Engage (Core, Peer &amp; Siblings) participated in the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29 Summer Diversionary Programmes;</li> <li>• 21 Lawfulness Programmes;</li> <li>• Nine Community Social Action Projects; and</li> <li>• 18 Outdoor Residentials</li> </ul> <p>These projects provide a range of youth work support in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, working directly with young people within communities who have been harmed by paramilitary gangs and/or those who are most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary activity. The Education Authority also provides capacity and capability training for schools and other organisations as part of this work.</p>
IRC comment	<p>The youth service continues to deliver critically important early intervention work and intensive support for young people at risk from paramilitaries, and important enabling work. They show great flexibility in responding to events on the ground and intervening quickly in areas experiencing particular tensions. We welcome their ability to reflect, adapt, innovate and stop what is not working and develop what does. The value of these interventions is being shown through detailed evaluation. We particularly note the reduction in the intent of young people to engage in violence at the end of their involvement in the ENGAGE programmes: from 43% to 3%. At a time of significant fiscal pressure and competing funding needs, it is vital that youth work continues to be</p>

	<p>appropriately funded since cutting these services is likely to have long-term impacts.</p> <p>We hope that work to evaluate the CONNECT programme and to refine the model will also help lead to its adoption in other hospitals' Emergency Departments, to provide similar supports in different geographical areas.</p> <p>We welcome the development of new work including gender-specific programmes around violence prevention, and look forward to the further implementation of the Y-Box model which enables enhanced awareness and supports difficult conversations with young people concerning exploitation, including child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation.</p> <p>We also welcome the EA's efforts to raise awareness and understanding of paramilitarism in schools and other contexts such as youth clubs and look forward to other schools availing of this opportunity, particularly in areas where paramilitaries operate.</p>
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Mid &amp; East Antrim Youth Support Hub</b>
<b>Description</b>	Geographically focused pilot testing need, efficacy and scalability of a youth workstream supporting intervention for young people up to the age of 25 who are at risk of paramilitary linked harm in the Mid & East Antrim Area. The project is delivered as a workstream of the Mid & East Antrim Support Hub.
<b>Funding</b>	£155k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors; and</li> <li>• Improvement in availability and visibility of exit routes.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	<p>25 young people had been referred to the Support Hub by the end of 2022/23. 41% of the young people have been victims of violent crime, with most incidents reported as random assaults.</p> <p>The Hub developed a well-defined action plan for all the young people which was in line with the presenting area of need. This ranged from progressing onward referrals for substance misuse programmes, support with housing, linking cohorts into services within their local community such as the YMCA and supporting cohorts to engage in education.</p> <p>There has been an increase in joint working between partner agencies through the hub which has led to increased information sharing to achieve the same outcomes and objectives. The</p>

	<p>support hub has supported children and families to improve their lives by promoting opportunities that will help children overcome barriers and fulfil their potential. Some key activities were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• referrals to voluntary and community sector partners, employability services, drug and alcohol services, housing support, and Trust Intensive Support Services which supported with substance use, mental health, employability and allowed for reflection on negative community activity; and</li> <li>• supported cohorts to engage in positive activities within the local community.</li> </ul> <p>The support hub has helped families to connect with resources within their communities. There was observed to be a notable reduction in cohorts of young people coming to the attention of PSNI after engagement in Mid &amp; East Antrim Youth Support Hub.</p>
IRC comment	<p>We welcome the development of this system to provide wraparound support to young people at risk of being involved with, influenced by or exploited by paramilitary groupings. The continued commitment, partnership approach and positive evaluation of this project are all to be commended. Addressing the complex deep-rooted issues that these young people, their families and communities experience (including addiction, self-harm, strained and challenging family relationships, domestic abuse and truancy) is critical, long-term work and this project is helping provide vital specific support to a small cohort of people. It is crucial that transformational work in these fields continues and is accelerated.</p> <p>We appreciate that the Mid &amp; East Antrim Youth Support Hub is only one model among several for providing tailored support. We encourage other Districts and relevant agencies, with the support of TPP and evaluation of this project, to assess how a consistent level of support to meet these needs is best achieved.</p>



Project	<b>WRAP project to improve educational underachievement</b>
Description	Wraparound, flexible education projects (WRAP) for children/young people at significant risk. Also focuses on influencing community attitudes to education and raising aspirations to increase protective factors and reduce risk.
Funding	£600k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors</li> </ul>
Summary update	<p>WRAP provides a wraparound, flexible education service to children and young people facing significant challenges in four geographical areas delivered by Greater Shantallow Area Partnership, Eastside Learning (East Belfast), Forward South Partnership (South Belfast) and 'THRiVE' collaboration in Rathcoole/Newtownabbey. 5,944 people (children, young people, parents and practitioners) were supported through this work in 2022/23.</p> <p>While seeking to address educational underattainment, the project is family-oriented, focusing on change in attitudes to self, education and future ambition. There is also a strong wellbeing focus, promoting resilience and self-efficacy. Influencing community attitudes to education and raising aspirations is key to reducing educational underachievement which, in turn, helps to address the prevalence and impact of paramilitary activity and organised crime.</p> <p>The project's objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide a range of needs-based education-in-the-community interventions enabling children and young people to reach their full potential in core skills of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and the broader areas of the curriculum; and</li> <li>• To provide emotional wellbeing support; helping children and young people to be ready to learn resulting in improved emotional self-regulation, improved behaviour and positive attitudes to education.</li> </ul> <p>Measures of success include: improvements in children, young people and parents' attitudes to self, education and outlook on the future.</p>
IRC comment	The WRAP project consists of collaborative place-based interventions that are having a positive impact on the lives of young participants and their families in four specific areas. It is a good example of upstream work in local areas to try and prevent harm before it happens. Through surveys and other evaluation work

there is good evidence of life and social skills development, the impact of parenting and family therapy, and positive change in aspirations for their own lives and for their community.

We welcome the related work of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement and their *A Fair Start* report. We believe that dealing comprehensively with educational underachievement is one key aspect of addressing root causes of residual paramilitarism as it provides young people with life-long skills and helps raise aspiration. We recognise the continued progress on the actions linked to the Fair Start Report, however we are concerned that this work may not reach its full potential without appropriate funding. We wrote to the Head of the Civil Service, relevant Permanent Secretaries and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland earlier this year to say that while we recognised that the current financial position is extremely difficult, we hoped that funding for prevention, tackling socio-economic need, and transformative change would continue to be priorities. As set out in our Reports, tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic challenges facing communities where paramilitaries mainly operate will require significant investment, continuing focus and sustained effort. We are concerned about the potential for cuts to have a significant and lasting impact on efforts to end paramilitarism once and for all. Both funding for core services and delivery through community and voluntary sector partners are important.

<b>Project</b>	<b>Trauma-Informed Practice</b>
<b>Funding</b>	£173k
<b>Summary update</b>	The Programme funds Safeguarding Board NI-led trauma-informed practice (TIP) work. Extensive trauma training (including on Adverse Childhood Experiences and the impact of trauma across the lifespan) is helping front line delivery partners manage complex challenges in new, innovative and more effective ways, and the team is now focused on supporting Safeguarding Board NI partner agencies to become trauma-informed organisations. Research has been commissioned to establish progress in developing trauma-informed practice across the sectors and an online ‘toolkit’ is being developed to support organisations.
<b>IRC comment</b>	We welcome the good progress being made promoting understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the importance of trauma-informed practice. Improving understanding and embedding this as standard practice will help deliver change

	<p>and improvement in public service for a range of agencies who support the public. This is vital systems change and an approach that is particularly important in NI's post-conflict context. We encourage all departments and agencies to embrace trauma-informed practice, embed it in corporate plans and to instil a culture shaped by it.</p> <p>We also recommend that an incoming Executive commit to it in their Programme for Government and give consideration to introducing legislation to support it as has happened in Scotland. Understanding the complex needs of people and communities and delivering the required services in a manner tailored to meet them will go some way to narrowing the gap that paramilitaries occupy, as part of addressing the socio-economic conditions linked to paramilitarism.</p>
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Aspire</b>
<b>Description</b>	The Aspire project provides targeted support for marginalised young men who are most susceptible to paramilitary/criminal influence.
<b>Funding</b>	£1,568k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors;</li> <li>• Reduction in recidivism; and</li> <li>• Increase in ex-prisoner reintegration.</li> </ul>
	<p>Aspire is a project targeting men aged between 16 and 30 who are most susceptible to paramilitary/criminal influence. It aims to prevent and reduce offending and enable those young men to develop their full capacity, to resist negative influences and reintegrate to the community.</p> <p>It provides a mentoring programme for men leaving prison and for those in the first 16 weeks of community sentence; and community-based interventions for clients not subject to statutory supervision. For those who have complex needs, the aim is to provide the extra support needed to assist with addiction, mental health issues, family relationships, housing, medical care, employment and benefits and so on, and to provide the coping skills for life outside of custody. 93% of service users reflected in exit questionnaires that the support provided by the Aspire Project has helped them resist negative influences with the community.</p>

	The Aspire Programme works closely with other organisations including NIACRO and ASCERT, and a restorative approach is embedded to support clients' needs.
IRC comment	<p>The ASPIRE programme continues to provide much needed support for particular service users with complex needs. The programme has improved outcomes for its service users and the benefit is seen both in the data and case studies. It is important that the Probation Board continue to refine this model and to capture what has been learnt with this cohort of clients so that it can be applied to its other clients, including those with similar risk factors over the age of 30.</p> <p>Access to housing was a repeated concern and points to a wider issue which needs ongoing multi-agency attention. Similarly, access to health supports and employment for those leaving prison require ongoing development. A finding of research with the service users is that despite exposure to a range of harms, there was a lack of trauma screening and assessment or mental health supports for these young people<sup>55</sup>. ASPIRE is providing those relevant supports, however there is an important question for the system around why these needs were not identified and met earlier, before these young men entered the criminal justice system.</p>

<b>Project</b>	<b>Engage</b>
<b>Description</b>	A dedicated resource (Engage) supports women who have offended and helps those making the transition from custody into local communities. Working with women both in custody and in the community, the programme focuses on building resilience and equipping women with the skills and learning to withstand paramilitary influence when they exit the criminal justice system.
<b>Funding</b>	£97k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors;</li> <li>• Reduction in recidivism; and</li> <li>• Increase in ex-prisoner reintegration.</li> </ul>

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<sup>55</sup> The Pains of Paramilitarism: The Latent Criminogenic Effects of Exposure to Paramilitary Violence among Young Men in a Post-Conflict Society <https://www.endingtheharm.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Programme-Research-Series-Paper-No.-6-The-Pains-of-Paramilitarism.pdf>

	<p>The project engaged 145 women. Activities ranged from one-to-one work, sessional work and ongoing group work. Demand for the service is high.</p> <p>Evaluation is showing that participants are achieving their primary goal and feel an improvement in their emotional health since receiving support. Participants report increased confidence, reduced alcohol and drug use, and improved employability skills.</p>
	<p>This work is important in helping women to transition back into their communities, supporting them to address barriers to growth and development, while reconnecting with their own lives and aspirations.</p> <p>This is another example of project that will have valuable learning to share with others providing similar services, and we encourage the sharing of best practice and evaluation, and for the Probation Board, Prisons Service, Department of Justice and others to explore what can be learnt from it.</p>

<b>Project</b>	<b>Enhancing the learning and wellbeing outcomes of people in separation</b>
<b>Description</b>	To deliver a new curriculum of learning and training opportunities to support better outcomes for prisoners in separation.
<b>Funding</b>	£130k until March 2023
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in recidivism;</li> <li>• Increase in ex-prisoner (re)integration; and</li> <li>• Improvement in availability and visibility of exit routes.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	Learning and skills provision, in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College, was supported by the Programme in 2022/23 to improve readiness for employment on release. Courses included Catering, Barbering, Irish, Business Administration, Art, Information and Communications Technology, Food Safety, Health & Safety in the Workplace, Essential Skills Numeracy and Enterprise & Employability, all of which are accredited. 18 people were engaged in learning and skills in 2022/23.
<b>IRC comment</b>	We welcome the NI Prison Service's ongoing commitment to equitable provision of training and learning opportunities and constructive activity for those in the separated regime. We acknowledge the challenge and pressure of dealing with the rise in the overall prison population. We see learning and development as important components of the prison experience, as skills training and work readiness are crucially important to efforts to

prepare prisoners for reintegration into society and provide people with opportunities that should make them more resilient against reoffending and re-engaging with paramilitary groups. We note that the Programme has not funded learning and development this financial year and that it has been funded from the core Justice budget.

*Other relevant activity:*

- 3.25 The benefits realisation process is an approach that is cognisant of the need for a whole of system contribution, and one of its strengths is that it recognises the role of many other activities and work, and the interdependencies between them. Increasing protective factors can happen in many contexts, including childcare and early years settings, schools, after-schools provision, family-based programmes, statutory youth services, community and voluntary sector-led youth work, social care, prisons and young offender institutions, antenatal classes, and in the community. For adults it can also happen through community social networks, projects, specialist supports (e.g. drug and alcohol addiction services), health services and informally.
- 3.26 Relevant other policies and work in the NI context include delivery of the Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030, schools and early years provision, youth work (in a wide range of contexts and using various delivery models), specialist support services, the work of the NI Prison Service and Probation Board, and community-based supports. The Executive's *Making Life Better* framework provides a strategic direction across Government for relevant health and wellbeing issues including giving every child the best start in life, equipping people throughout life, empowering healthy living, empowering communities, and developing collaboration. Providing these important supports and fostering healthy environments is crucial to supporting individuals, families and communities to flourish, and so are key dependencies of the protective factors work.
- 3.27 More recent strategies such as the mental health strategy and substance use strategy<sup>56</sup> will also help individuals with specific needs that can at times be exploited by paramilitary-linked criminals. The substance use harm strategy *Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery* specifically recognises the link to paramilitarism: "People with alcohol and drug problems are also some of the most vulnerable and excluded people within our communities and society. They can experience stigma, and discrimination, from others in their communities, from the media and from all of society. In particular, they are at risk of violence from some paramilitary and vigilante groups, which can further stigmatise them and make them less likely to come forward for treatment and support. This is unacceptable and has to change." This kind of acknowledgement of

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-strategy-2021-2031> and <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/substance-use-strategy-2021-31>

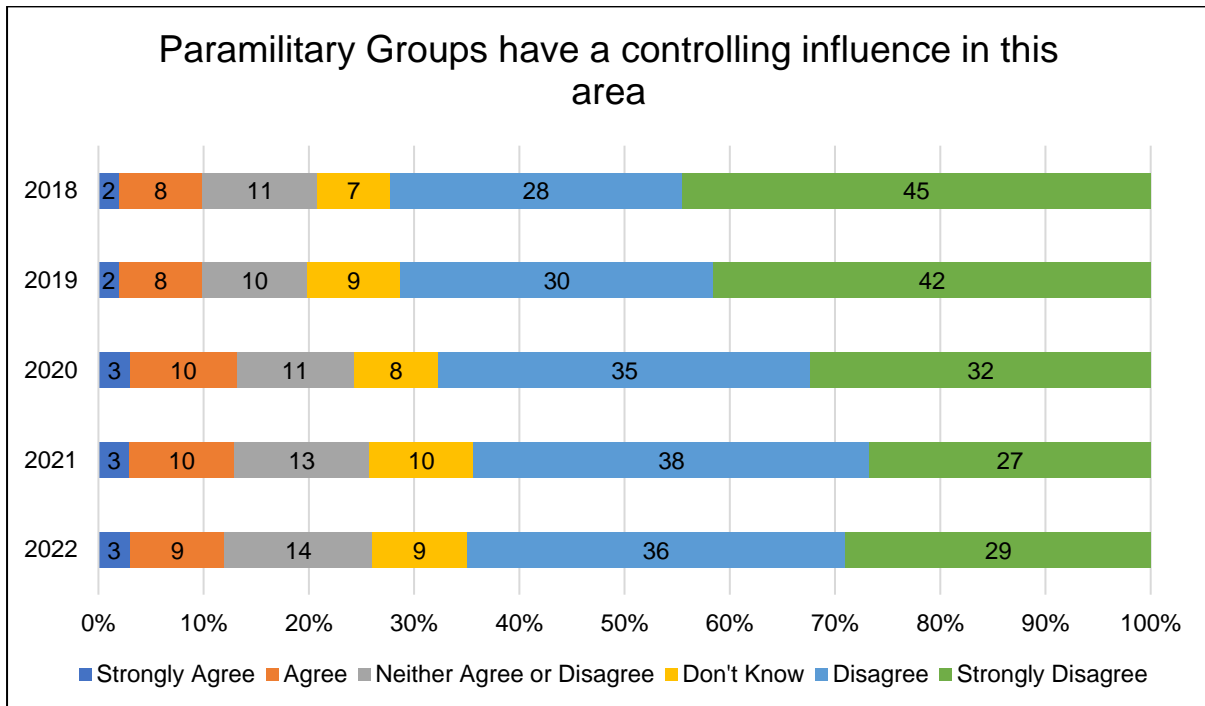
a paramilitary dimension in public policy is exactly what we would like to see in a whole of systems approach to ending paramilitarism.

- 3.28 Other publicly and philanthropically funded initiatives relevant to this work include the International Fund for Ireland's work with at-risk young people, community youth work, PEACE IV shared spaces projects, good relations work, ex-prisoner support groups and any public-facing service which could provide or arrange support for a person living with trauma, complex needs and/or reduced social supports.
- 3.29 The learning from the Programme around trauma-informed practice, the needs of young men and women, common issues faced by people engaged with the criminal justice sector, effective interventions for diversion, and supporting and strengthening individuals' protective factors should continue to be shared and shared even more broadly, to ensure that these valuable insights are put to best use.
- 3.30 Criminal justice agencies do vital work to reduce reoffending and recidivism and to promote reintegration, through programmes preparing prisoners for release, addressing negative behaviours, offering learning and development and skills training as well as preparing supports for their return to community (such as housing and work coaching) and providing supports during periods on license. They are supported in those endeavours by key community and voluntary sector services. Work to monitor and supervise terrorist offenders also continues.
- 3.31 Also linked to protective factors are broader physical environment and socio-economic conditions. Efforts to improve availability of suitable housing, provide safe spaces, offer educational opportunities, raise aspiration and provide pathways to employment and prosperity, develop family support structures, and address other socio-economic factors which can play a part in the continuance of paramilitarism should all be leveraged to play their part in the transformational change required to bring about an end to paramilitary activity once and for all. We will consider community supports and resilience (which are critically linked to protective factors and safety) further in the next Section.

*Measuring progress:*

- 3.32 This benefit is linked to the level of membership of paramilitary groups. The NILT asks people whether paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in the area that the respondent lives in. There has been a consistent proportion of people responding that they do. Change in this domain will take time and it is important that the Programme continues to gather data that deepens understanding of progress being made both locally and across NI.

### End benefit 5:



## Community Resilience

### Overview:

3.33 The work that this end benefit is seeking to deliver is enhancing the resilience of communities that are vulnerable to paramilitarism. The Programme has collaborated with a group of academic and community experts to define community resilience as the collective ability of a community or society to respond to change, ongoing adversity and risk. Community resilience involves a range of elements including social capital, community activism, access to resources and decision makers, levels of educational attainment, culture and the wider socio-economic context. In developing their approach to measuring progress, those involved have articulated three broad areas for change:

- 1. Mobilise Resources:** Increase community resilience by increasing local capacity to mobilise resources and expertise to address issues relating to paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime through getting more people involved, tapping into existing support services, enhancing community infrastructure and increasing local skills and expertise.
- 2. Leverage social networks:** Increase community resilience by building social capital, strengthening relationships within communities, between/among communities, and between communities and statutory agencies to enable collective action to address issues relating to paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime.



**3. Give people a say:** Increase resilience by involving people in decisions that affect their lives, increase community voice – giving more people, particularly marginalised voices, a say in what happens in their area and increasing hope for the future and belief that change is possible.

3.34 We see increasing community capacity as a vital aspect of tackling paramilitarism – communities need the support, confidence, relationships and skills to tackle local issues and problems, and ultimately to reject paramilitarism.

3.35 The Programme has identified the following intermediate benefits:

- get more people involved;
- tap into existing support services;
- increase local skills and expertise;
- enhance community infrastructure;
- strengthen local networks;
- connect with resource and influence;
- increase community voice;
- increase hope and belief in capacity for change; and
- improvement in relations between PSNI and communities.

*Relevant Programme activity:*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Developing women in the community</b>
<b>Description</b>	Provides trauma-informed training/support to women of all ages to become involved in transformational community development, take on roles within their communities and increase community resilience to paramilitary influence. Includes family support aimed at influencing participants/their family members to make positive life choices. Signposting support for domestic abuse, mental health, anti-social behaviour, substance misuse, offending, parenting skills, educational needs, adverse childhood experiences, and finance/budgeting.
<b>Funding</b>	£407k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors;</li> <li>• Get more people involved;</li> <li>• Increase in local skill and expertise</li> <li>• Attitude to change; and</li> <li>• Tap into existing support services.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	This project aims to provide women with the skills, knowledge, confidence and support they need to become influencers and to take on roles such as leadership and decision making in their

	<p>communities. It is open to women of all ages and is delivered within the community in areas where paramilitary influence is prevalent. The project also provides the opportunity for participants to volunteer within their community and to develop and deliver a small programme.</p> <p>262 women were supported directly through this work in 2022/23. Multi-annual funding has allowed the projects to run in the following areas most recently: Ards, Coleraine, Macedon, Court &amp; Oldpark, Black Mountain, Derry City and Strabane District Council (The Moor, Waterside, Sperrin, Foyle and Ballyarnett District Electoral Areas), and Titanic.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>We welcome the continued development and contribution of the Developing Women in the Community Programme. The impact of the Programme sees women becoming empowered and developing as leaders in their communities, local groups and support networks being established, and local community infrastructure growing and so contributing to community resilience increasing. We were heartened to hear about the value communities see in these projects, with waiting lists for future rounds and earlier groups of women providing mentoring to the new participants.</p> <p>This programme continues to be necessary to ensure women reach their full potential within communities and is part of wider programme efforts to challenge paramilitary control, in that it supports the transformation of areas where paramilitaries operate. These are good examples of local organisations working within a framework to tailor projects to be as effective as possible in their local area, reflecting on their knowledge of the area and its community assets and needs.</p> <p>These types of projects require longer term funding, as short-term funding prohibits this and other similar projects from providing sustained support to empower community leaders. We recommend that funding be provided for a longer period, to allow the project teams to focus less on the funding cycle and more on the critical work that they do. We talk further about funding in the Overview.</p>

<b>Project</b>	<b>Communities in Transition</b>
<b>Description</b>	Sustains efforts to build capacity and support in communities which are traditionally most affected by paramilitary activity and coercive control.
<b>Funding</b>	£10m over three years
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in individual protective factors;</li> <li>• Improvement in front line workers' efficacy;</li> <li>• Improvement in relationships between the PSNI and communities;</li> <li>• Increase in ex-prisoner (re)integration;</li> <li>• Get more people involved;</li> <li>• Strengthen local networks;</li> <li>• Increase local skills and expertise;</li> <li>• Attitude to change;</li> <li>• Connect with resources and influence;</li> <li>• Get help from other communities;</li> <li>• Increase in community voice; and</li> <li>• Tap into existing support services.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	<p>The work of the Communities in Transition (CiT) programme has focused on seven key themes identified through community consultation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community Safety and Policing;</li> <li>2. Addressing the needs of young people;</li> <li>3. Health and Wellbeing;</li> <li>4. Environment and Culture;</li> <li>5. Community Development Issues;</li> <li>6. Restorative Justice and Restorative Practice; and</li> <li>7. Personal Transition.</li> </ol> <p>In 2022/23 CiT included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5,617 registered participants (in sustained activity);</li> <li>• 35 social action projects;</li> <li>• 332 people involved in social actions or volunteering;</li> <li>• 299 community events;</li> <li>• 15,169 attendees at community events;</li> <li>• 509 organisations working collaboratively through CiT;</li> <li>• 1,345 service users availing of support services;</li> <li>• 5,284 mentoring or one-on-one services;</li> <li>• 174 people involved in community forums and steering groups;</li> <li>• 64 community forums or networks created or enhanced;</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 167 community forum or steering group meetings;</li> <li>• 163 organisations supported to develop their capacity; and</li> <li>• 761 ex-prisoners supported through this contract since contract commencement.</li> </ul> <p>In addition there were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5,350 participants in training activities;</li> <li>• 370 people in work placements;</li> <li>• 447 training activities; and</li> <li>• 74 learning exchanges and study visits.</li> </ul> <p>Over 30 projects fall under the CiT umbrella and these are locally tailored initiatives, delivered in eight areas. Each initiative reflects the unique needs of its area. It operates in Ardoyne, Carrickfergus, Derry/Londonderry, East Belfast, Larne, Lurgan, New Lodge, North Down, Shankill and West Belfast.</p>
IRC comment	<p>There is a large amount of varied and valuable work ongoing under CiT. We welcome the difference these are making, whether supporting new community safety conversations, resourcing communities with restorative approaches to mediating conflict, helping to tackle socioeconomic need in these areas through health and wellbeing efforts, using the arts and other creative methods to change the narrative about areas, raising the aspirations of young people, de-romanticising the conflict/Troubles, supporting ex-prisoners and their families, or supporting new community voices. The research carried out in the CiT areas (some of which is set out in Section B) provides significant food for thought. These findings will be of use to all those working in these areas, not just those attached to the Programme.</p> <p>Discussions are already taking place as to what the next phase of the TPP should look like, and this provides a timely opportunity for CiT to also consider its objectives, approach and projects. We understand that consultations are underway on how CiT has delivered and believe these reflections will provide useful input for agreeing a future direction for CiT. Having now built a solid foundation, and given the likely constraints on funds post-2024, these endeavours must focus on the most effective ways to effect measurable change, whilst recognising that this is long-term work and so change will be incremental. Developing the community environment in areas in which paramilitaries have operated is crucial work, and a holistic response should continue to be taken,</p>

	reflecting the full gamut of issues and socio-economic needs that contribute to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today.
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<b>Project</b>	<b>Fresh Start in the Community</b>
<b>Description</b>	<p>These projects promote lawfulness and active citizenship to individuals, and build capacity and relations within communities.</p> <p>Fresh Start Through Sport uses engagement through sport for those on the edges of the youth justice system who are vulnerable to paramilitary harm and influence (partners are the Irish Football Association (IFA), Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA), Ulster Rugby, Belfast Giants).</p> <p>The Fresh Start in the Community pilot projects work with hard-to-reach/at-risk young people, their parents/carers and those in the community to address issues like anti-social behaviour to develop community ownership and capacity building.</p>
<b>Funding</b>	£500k
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased opportunities for disaffected young people;</li> <li>• Reduction in overall recorded crime rate; and</li> <li>• Clear pathways to available support services.</li> </ul>
<b>Summary update</b>	<p>98 young people completed Fresh Start Through Sport programmes in East Belfast, Newtownards, Lurgan, and Derry &amp; Strabane. The majority of participants reported that they developed new knowledge and skills over the course of the programme, and many expressed aspirations to further their education and training following the completion of the programme, as well as an improved future orientation. Participants self-reported an improvement in their orientation towards specific PSNI officers and the PSNI more generally, and interviews with PSNI officers indicated improved relationships with young people in their local communities on completion of the programme. Most participants said they would continue their involvement in sport and volunteering.</p> <p>In 2022/23, 19 people in North Antrim completed the Education in Community Development Practice Diploma. The course provides theory and best practice support to those who are actively working and volunteering in their communities.</p> <p>The Ballyarnett Community Safety and Development project had 45 participating young people and families involved, who received support to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors</p>

	<p>through work with a dedicated support worker. Over 1,000 local people took part in and/or directly benefitted from the work, including through community workshops particularly focused around hotspots for anti-community, bonfire sites, and at the scenes of recent unrest.</p> <p>The Creggan Community Inclusion &amp; Cohesion project is designed to increase the level of youth/Community programmes and activities in the Creggan area.</p> <p>The Strengthening Futures, Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership project is a community-based education and active citizenship project aimed at young adults who feel disconnected from their communities and that their voices are not being heard, who have been drawn into street disturbances, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol use and who have been or are in danger of being recruited by paramilitary organisations. In 2022/23 the project had over 300 young people involved in training, 107 families and 400 people involved in a family support project, over 200 people involved in community relations training, and 93 people engaged in cross-community and inter-community activity.</p>
IRC comment	<p>The Fresh Start Through Sport programme continued to operate in the last year and to help bring about beneficial change in attitudes, skills, aspirations and change in relationships between the PSNI and young people.</p> <p>The Fresh Start in the Community pilot projects continue to provide support to communities that struggle with anti-social behaviour and are vulnerable to paramilitary influence. Many are doing valuable work with families and it will be useful for learning, reflections and results from these projects to be shared with other family support providers, so that the positive results experienced in these pilots can improve service delivery in other areas as well.</p>

<b>Project</b>	<b>PSNI Community Safety and Community Engagement</b>
<b>Description</b>	<p>Develop PSNI capacity to reduce violence/harm through long-term prevention.</p> <p>Targeted proactive/reactive interventions to test/refine approaches around locality-based working.</p> <p>Diversionary activity at a community level and targeted interventions to enhance problem solving, engagement and visibility of policing.</p>

	Identifying critical success factors that deliver effective joint locality-based working.
Funding	£250k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement in front line work efficacy;</li> <li>• Improvement in relations between the PSNI and communities;</li> <li>• Victims receive effective help; and</li> <li>• Improvement in availability and visibility of exit routes.</li> </ul>
Summary update	<p>Over 700 young people and approximately 40 adults participated in a range of projects throughout the financial year.</p> <p>PSNI have invested in a range of small-scale projects which enable officers to engage with people in the community, partnering with community organisations to create opportunities for police officers to be seen in a different light. Many of these projects were working with young people, frequently those who might be considered at risk of anti-social behaviour or criminality. These projects often involved sports, recreational trips, educational and cultural trips, personalisation of police officers and educational sessions particularly around drugs. Qualitative assessments have been undertaken to identify lessons learnt, and one project saw a measurable reduction in anti-social behaviour in a local area where a project was run.</p> <p>These projects aim to incorporate educational sessions on topics most likely to impact young people and place them at risk to paramilitary influence. Topics covered included drugs, cybercrime, coercive control, mental health and wellbeing. Many of the projects have been sport-based, offering positive options for safe spaces and role models as well as having a positive impact on mental wellbeing and general health.</p> <p>The programme focused heavily on increasing confidence in policing through building rapport between young people and Neighbourhood officers and encouraging participation in a new sport. Police listened to young people's concerns around matters affecting them, and officers were then able to engage on topics including drugs, impact of anti-social behaviour and poor life choices, online/digital safety, and coercive control from paramilitary groupings.</p> <p>The PSNI also funded two reimagining projects of previously paramilitary murals in Antrim &amp; Newtownabbey. Local officers worked closely with communities and partners to reimagine murals</p>

	<p>in the Monkstown and New Mossley areas. There are a range of benefits to this type of work including: increased positivity in community messaging, promoting normalisation, positive mental health and wellbeing, bringing everyone in the community together and increasing civic pride.</p> <p>Problem solving continues to play a major role in the locality-based approach, with local officers working alongside communities to address issues that are of concern to them. They want to encourage community empowerment and ensure communities adapt to taking on an internal locus of control to decide what they want to do for themselves. There was extensive problem-solving training in addition to funded projects.</p>
IRC comment	<p>This specific funding stream is important as it helps the PSNI to respond flexibly to community needs and emerging priorities, working in partnership with experienced delivery partners. It supports improved PSNI visibility in particular areas and the projects can help to respond to identified need and help reduce risk of issues worsening. The funding has supported good diversionary programmes which have a real impact on young people likely to be harmed by paramilitaries, with the aim of changing mindsets and breaking the cycle. We welcome the PSNI's commitment to sharing best practice and learning from these initiatives, and to supporting all Districts in problem-solving and developing toolkits and resources to further support policing with the community.</p>

*Other relevant activity:*

- 3.36 The Programme's targeted work to build community resilience is only one part of broader efforts to enhance community life. We see these endeavours as vitally linked to narrowing the space that paramilitaries can occupy in communities presently.
- 3.37 The ambitions of the Department for Communities' *Building Inclusive Communities Strategy* are very relevant to increasing community resilience, and we encourage efforts to ensure that its goals of supporting people, building communities and shaping places are implemented in such a way that they play a full part in addressing the socio-economic conditions linked to continuing paramilitarism. We also note the potential of the current review of *People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* to provide an updated strategy to help address poverty, social exclusion and deprivation, taking a place-based approach. We see these types of structural issues as intrinsically linked to tackling paramilitarism; they will overlap with Programme efforts to enhance protective factors and increase community resilience. Work to complete the Urban Villages programme is similarly contributing to enhanced community resilience. Work



to develop an anti-poverty strategy must also recognise the links between poverty, deprivation and paramilitarism. These efforts should be complementary, mutually informing each other, and seek to help to shape and grow communities particularly as they transition from paramilitary influence.

- 3.38 A notable development this year is work to launch “test and learn” pilot projects to improve Government’s approach to assessing and meeting local need and enhancing public sector collaboration in particular localities. This kind of innovation is very important, as the Programme seeks to empower local communities and as Government seeks to be more effective in how it provides the resources needed to affect meaningful change on a local basis. Given the vital role of the community and voluntary sector in local communities, the Department for Communities’ review of the policy and funding frameworks for voluntary and community sector support is also an important linked piece of work.
- 3.39 PEACE Plus work will also be relevant to this benefit, as many of its themes (such as building peaceful and thriving communities, delivering socio-economic regeneration and transformation, empowering and investing in young people, healthy and inclusive communities, and others) will help to enhance community resilience. Those delivering projects, and those overseeing the work, should be cognisant of how they could contribute to tackling paramilitarism.
- 3.40 The UK Government’s Levelling Up Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund can also make a significant contribution, if delivered in a way that recognises the potential they can make to efforts to end paramilitarism, whether investing in infrastructure, town centre regeneration, programmes designed to support communities or places, or people and skills enhancement. We welcome the efforts by the UK Government through the Sponsor Group to map these opportunities, and encourage a deepening of connections, ensuring that all Departments and teams operating in Northern Ireland are working to ensure that what they are supporting and delivering locally helps further this goal.
- 3.41 Efforts to tackle sectarianism, to promote good relations and to build united communities are also linked to community resilience, as they seek to remove barriers, deepen connections and transform society. There are many other opportunities to help achieve this transformation, through the Department for Economy’s 10X Economy vision, local area development plans, regional growth strategies, community plans, and infrastructure and economic growth planning. We welcome the Programme Team’s work to encourage that join-up. Those opportunities must be taken to contribute to tackling paramilitarism as well – whether that is targeted support for job schemes in relevant areas, reimaging or in other ways regenerating areas historically associated with paramilitary control, or providing greater opportunities for people economically and socially.

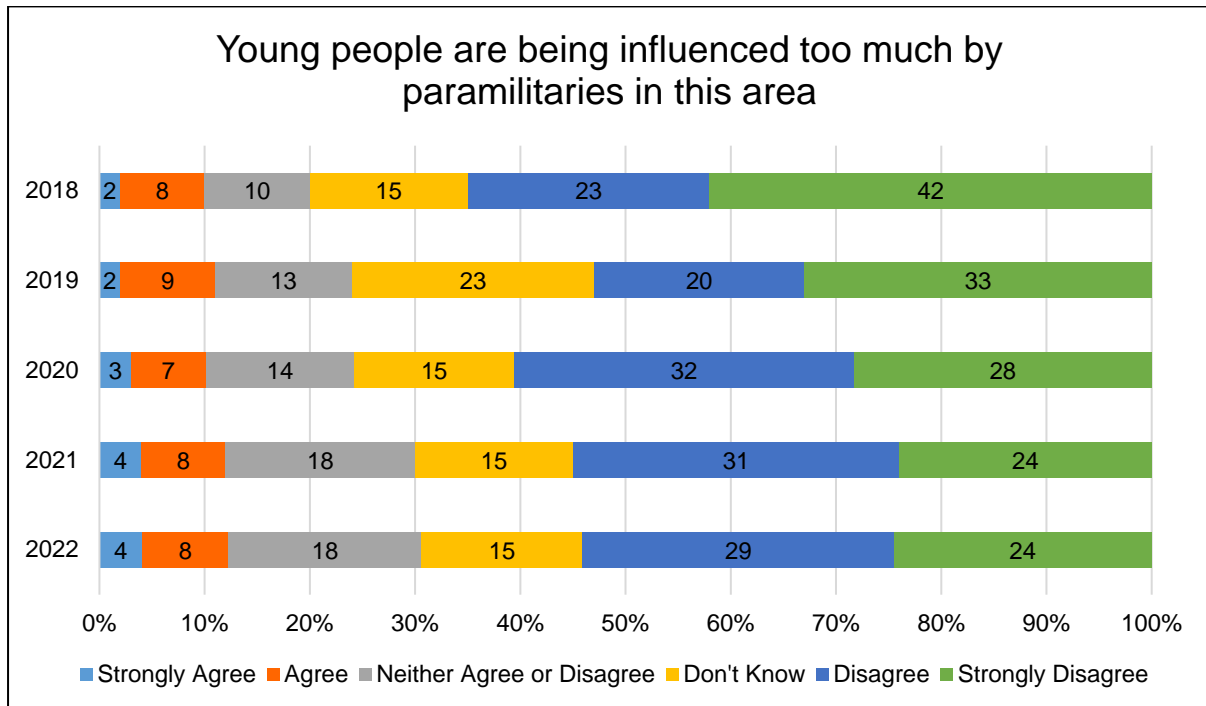
3.42 There is a challenge to the whole public sector in the framing of the community resilience benefit. Two key elements of it are: a) seeking to support communities to tap into existing support services, and b) connecting people and communities with resources and influence. These both require public services which are open and responsive to communities who need their support. This is also true of the Programme's protective factors benefit of improvement in front line workers' efficacy. Achieving these goals will be helped by the rollout of trauma-informed practice and its widespread adoption; similarly encouraging restorative approaches in different contexts will be helpful. We know that public service is an area where great professionalism often abounds, but a spirit of continuous improvement and recognition of particular need in certain communities are essential to developing the resilience of communities and to supporting them effectively in the journey as they transition away from paramilitary influence. We encourage the Programme and whole of system to continue to champion this.

3.43 Community investment and support by funders such as the International Fund for Ireland, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Community Foundation NI, National Lottery Community Fund, Social Change Initiative and Co-Operation Ireland (to name but a few) will also contribute to raising community resilience, which only serves to highlight again the importance of strong networks and connections to ensure that efforts are coordinated, maximum benefit is gained, and that best practice is shared and learnt from on a structured and continuing basis.

*Measuring progress:*

3.44 Measuring progress in building community resilience will undoubtedly be complex and success will look different in different areas. It is therefore important that a relevant evidence base, and appropriate measures, continue to be developed. The NILT question linked to progress in this area is perceptions of whether young people are influenced too much by paramilitaries in this area. We encourage the Programme and delivery partners to continue to refine their measures of success in this area and to evaluate change against them.

**End benefit 4:**



3.45 The Programme has continued to promote a wider societal conversation about tackling paramilitarism through its Ending the Harm campaign. This has recently seen a further phase launched, seeking to highlight the harm caused by illegal moneylending. Audience research showed that after seeing the campaign materials, 90% of respondents agreed that paramilitary gangs/illegal money lenders exploit people and hold them forever in their debt. We believe that this is an important piece of work. We encourage further innovation around ways to seek to change attitudes towards paramilitarism both through the Programme and through other means.

**Actions from the Executive Action Plan against which we believe further progress is necessary or desirable**

3.46 In our Fifth Report we identified Actions we considered to be complete or largely complete from the original Action Plan, under the headings of each Benefits Realisation Group. Given the wide ranging progress against many of them, and as we are in the third year of delivery of Phase Two, we have not relisted every Action and presented progress against it. Instead we have reviewed progress under the different benefits headings and in this Section we highlight Actions from the original Executive Action Plan where we believe further progress is required.

<b>Further work required:</b>	<b>Organised crime legislation</b>
<b>Comment</b>	We believe that there would be significant benefit in the NI Executive and Assembly urgently progressing organised crime legislation, like that available in other jurisdictions, so that offences of directing serious organised crime and participating in serious organised crime and aggravation by connection with serious organised crime are available to deal with paramilitary-linked criminality. We understand that work to prepare draft legislation is ongoing, following a public consultation.

<b>Further work required:</b>	<b>Removing avoidable delay; bail and sentencing</b>
<b>Comment</b>	<p>The criminal justice system in NI sadly continues to be slower than in other jurisdictions and the speed of justice impacts on other decisions such as bail and time served of sentences, which has an impact on public confidence in the rule of law. It is vital that work on these various issues is prioritised by all criminal justice partners.</p> <p>A number of key inspection and audit reports have touched on these issues in the past year. The Criminal Justice Inspection Report <i>The operation of bail and remand</i> recommended that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bail legislation should be consulted upon, to provide greater certainty and consistency to bail law while also providing an opportunity for wider engagement and consultation on possible legislative change;</li> <li>• the Department of Justice and the Police Service of Northern Ireland should develop an options paper for police bail to include the use of time limits, scrutiny arrangements and enhanced protections for victims and witnesses; and</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the associated need to find a way for more remand prisoners to participate in prison-based behaviour programmes should be a priority in the context of rehabilitation and resettlement. Those convicted and released ‘time served’ missed opportunities to meaningfully address their offending behaviour and reduce risks of reoffending.<sup>57</sup></li> </ul> <p>It is vital that the criminal justice system is effective and commands public trust and confidence. We encourage continued efforts to reform and enhance it.</p>
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<b>Further work required:</b>	<b>A dedicated restorative justice fund and Centre of Restorative Excellence</b>
<b>Comment</b>	We welcome the work done by the independent panel looking at the restorative justice protocol and work to be done by a restorative justice interim protocol lead to develop standards and begin to support the development of justice elements of a Centre of Restorative Excellence. The Programme is making £73k funding available for that work this financial year. Appropriate resources should be made available to restorative justice work, to ensure that its value and professional approach are appropriately recognised and NI can continue to make use of this valuable resource and to lead practice development in this field.

<b>Further work required:</b>	<b>Removing barriers to employment for ex-prisoners, as well as improving access to financial services (including lending and insurance), adoption, and travel</b>
<b>Comment</b>	<p>Further work is required to remove barriers to employment for ex-prisoners including amending the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, as recommended by the Ex Prisoner Review Group. Similarly, further work is needed to address issues faced by ex-prisoners and their families, including barriers to travel.</p> <p>The Ex-Prisoner working group should continue to raise relevant issues and to work with Departments to develop solutions. Work through the Communities in Transition ex-prisoners work stream will also be relevant.</p>

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.cjini.org/getattachment/65877a4e-3b5b-4319-9684-513d0d4ea542/report.aspx>

Further work required:	<b>Improve the educational and employment prospects of children and young people in deprived communities, focusing particularly on those who are at greatest risk of educational under attainment</b>
Comment	As set out in paragraph 1.49, we support a strategic view of education and support both innovative work being done and the wider ambitions of <i>A Fair Start</i> . This requires appropriate funding as well as continuing prioritisation if its ambitious goals are to be achieved, which we see as critically linked to tackling paramilitarism.

Further work required:	<b>Independent Review of the separated regime in prisons</b>
Comment	We recognise that this is a politically challenging recommendation and welcome the sensitive and pragmatic approach being taken to the management of the separated regime by both the NI Prison Service and those who support them in that work such as the Independent Assessment Team. This important work must continue and the possibility of a review should remain open for consideration in the future.

Further work required:	<b>Accelerate and build on the Executive's existing good relations strategy to measurably reduce segregation in education and housing and set ambitious targets and milestones to achieve measurable progress as quickly as possible</b>
Comment	The ongoing review of the T:BUC Strategy represents an opportunity for the Executive to significantly increase its ambition in respect of reducing segregation in education and housing, and to harness Good Relations work across the Executive to play its part in tackling paramilitarism where that work overlaps or intersects. We encourage bold targets given the potential for this work to deliver important societal change.

Further work required:	<b>The Executive and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Policing Board, should review their protocols for engaging with representatives of paramilitary groups. This change in approach should also apply to other public community bodies and public representatives.</b>
Comment	We understand that the Programme has been considering the wider issues here. We recognise that engagement with paramilitary groups continues to be a sensitive issue. In the Overview, we refer to the need for a formal, structured process of engagement to bring about disbandment of the groups.

## Fresh Start Actions owned by the UK and Irish Governments and not yet completed

3.47 In this Section, we comment further on commitments made by the UK and Irish Governments. We continue to ask the Governments for updates on these matters, as we still consider them important to ongoing and future efforts to tackle paramilitarism.

<b>B14</b>	<b>The UK and Irish Governments should consider a mechanism being put in place for a limited period to deal with any future decommissioning of residual weapons or material.</b>
Action Plan commitment (2016)	If there is a need identified for a decommissioning mechanism, both the Government of Ireland and the Government of the UK have advised that they will consult to consider this recommendation.
Lead responsibility	The UK and Irish Governments
Updates received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i> The NIO continues to keep the need for such a mechanism under review through engagement with other partners and in the context of progress on the NI Executive's work to tackle paramilitarism.</p> <p><i>Irish Government update:</i> The Irish Government will continue to keep this commitment under review in accordance with the wider policy aim of transitioning groups away from violence.</p>
IRC comment	We welcome the ongoing willingness of the two Governments to keep the need for any such process under review.

<b>C3</b>	<b>The UK and Irish Governments should review the legislation relating to paramilitary groups (e.g. the Terrorism Act 2000) to ensure that it remains in step with the transitioning status of groups in NI.</b>
Action Plan commitment (2016)	The Government of the UK and the Government of Ireland have advised that they continue to keep relevant legislation under review to ensure its effectiveness.
Lead responsibility	Northern Ireland Office, the Executive, Department of Justice
Updates received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i> The NIO continues to keep under review UK legislation to ensure it remains effective in supporting NI Executive-led efforts to tackle</p>

paramilitarism. This includes engagement with the NI Executive and other partners on the role of UK legislation in tackling terrorism in Northern Ireland, as well as the role of devolved legislation in challenging paramilitary and organised crime groups.

The IRC will be aware from our previous updates of the working group which was established in 2021 to consider potential practical and legal measures that could be taken to reduce the number of non-jury trials and identify the indicators that could be used to determine when the Northern Ireland-specific non-jury trial provisions contained in the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 would no longer be necessary. The working group engaged with the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security Act and contributed to the evidence base which the Secretary of State carefully considered before deciding to extend the provisions for a further two years.

The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference has given consideration to the IRC's recommendations on potential mechanisms to support the transition of paramilitary groups to disbandment. The Conference agreed to continue close co-operation on this issue and we will continue to review relevant legislation in line with this.

*Irish Government update:*

The Irish Government continues to keep relevant legislation under review to ensure its effectiveness. An Independent Review Group was established in February 2021 to examine all aspects of the Offences Against the State Acts, having regard to the current threat posed by domestic/international terrorism and organised crime, the duty to deliver a fair and effective criminal justice system to ensure the protection of communities and the security of the State and Ireland's obligations in relation to Constitutional and ECHR rights and international law. The Group reported in May 2023. Its majority report recommended the repeal of the Offences Against the State Acts and their replacement with a bespoke modern legislative framework, including a new non-jury court. The recommendations are currently the subject of a consultation process across Government.

IRC comment

We welcome the commitment of both the UK Government and the Irish Government to keep relevant legislation under review.



C5	<b>The UK Government should resource the NCA and HMRC to appropriately prioritise intensive work to tackle all organised crime linked to paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.</b>
Action Plan commitment (2016)	The UK Government supports efforts to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland by providing £25 million of funding through the Fresh Start Agreement to help ensure that the relevant agencies are appropriately resourced to fulfil that commitment.
Lead responsibility	UK Government
Update received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>UK Government funding supports the NCA and HMRC to continue to operate successfully in NI and the NCA's most recent annual report outlines a number of successes in NI. In addition to the work of the NCA and HMRC in NI, UKG funding has supported ongoing work by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) and over the period from April 2022 to March 2023, the PCTF made 32 disruptions, 75 arrests, charged/reported 101 people and conducted 197 searches. The PCTF seized drugs with a street value of £754,438, along with 47 weapons, and six explosive devices.</p> <p>By comparison, 2022/23 saw a significant increase in activity across the PSNI's Organised Crime Branch as a whole compared to 2021/22. The numbers of persons charged or reported increased by 16%, the number of searches conducted increased by 55%, drug seizure incidents increased by 40%, the number of disruptions against Organised Crime Groups increased by 30% and the number of frustrations<sup>58</sup> increased by 115%.</p> <p>The UK Government is committed to supporting the NI Executive in tackling the issue of paramilitarism, terrorism and organised crime. In the Spring Budget, the Chancellor confirmed up to a further £3m of funding to extend the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme in 2024-25 to strengthen community resilience to paramilitarism. This is in addition to the c.£5m previously committed for 2024-25 through the last spending review.</p>

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<sup>58</sup> Frustrations include planned activity which prevents Organised Crime Groups from carrying out criminal activity; the arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one or more group member(s) (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence; or seizure of assets on one occasion.

IRC comment	We welcome the funding that the UK Government is extending to the Programme. As we noted above, a collaborative approach to law enforcement has increased the organised crime investigative capacity for tackling the harms caused by paramilitarism, and whilst we recognise the very challenging fiscal environment, it is vital that these sorts of investigations continue to receive appropriate priority into the future.
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C8	<b>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.</b>
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Action Plan commitment (2016)	<p>The Executive supports this recommendation and affirms its commitment to continue and build upon existing efforts in this area. The Secretary of State, Justice Minister and Chief Constable meet regularly to discuss the threat and our combined strategic response. Within the Executive, the Justice Minister chairs the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), bringing together law enforcement agencies to provide a multi-agency partnership that also includes civil society and the business community.</p> <p>Under the Fresh Start Agreement, a cross-jurisdictional Joint Agency Task Force was established in December 2015 to enhance efforts to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime and paramilitary activity. On a North/South basis, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Justice and Equality meet at least twice a year under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Agreement on co-operation on criminal justice matters.</p> <p>The Government of Ireland has also restated its commitment to tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime, and its full support for the work of the cross-border Joint Agency Task Force established under the Fresh Start Agreement.</p>
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Lead responsibility	UK Government, NI Executive, Government of Ireland and law enforcement agencies in both jurisdictions.
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Update received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>While the response to the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is the responsibility of the UK Government, and the response to wider paramilitary activity and organised crime is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive, these problems are deeply connected and need to be addressed in the round to bring a</p>
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	<p>sustainable end to the threat and harm they pose to communities in Northern Ireland. None of these threats can be dealt with sustainably in isolation. A whole of system response is required.</p> <p>A number of mechanisms are in place to help ensure there is close coordination on both policy and delivery. The NIO participates at senior official level in the Sponsor Group for the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme, and also participates at working level in the range of coordination meetings supporting delivery of the Programme, including benefits realisation groups. The Secretary of State and senior officials meet regularly with the Chief Constable on matters of interest. UK Government and Irish Government officials regularly discuss shared security challenges.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>The join-up between the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Office and the various agencies in tackling the “shared ecosystem” of organised crime, paramilitary crime and national security in line with commitments contained within the Fresh Start Agreement continues to good effect. As with all of this work, collaboration and effective joined-up working are crucial to success, and we urge all those involved to continue to focus on threat, risk and harm caused and how problems can be addressed in partnership.</p>

<p>D3</p>	<p><b>Agreement on a way forward for dealing with the past should be reached as soon as possible and the agreed mechanisms should be completed in a time-limited period.</b></p>
<p>Action Plan commitment (2016)</p>	<p>There remains a need to resolve the outstanding issues relating to the past. The Executive, the UK Government and the Irish Government are reflecting on how to achieve this.</p>
<p>Lead responsibility</p>	<p>UK and Irish Governments</p>
<p>Updates received</p>	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>The UK Government introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill in May 2022, providing a framework to deliver effective legacy mechanisms while complying with our international obligations. The Bill became law following Royal Assent on 18 September.</p> <p>The legislation will establish an Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) to conduct reviews into Troubles-related deaths and serious injury, with the primary objective of providing information to families, and victims and</p>

survivors. The ICRIR will have all the necessary powers to conduct criminal investigations as part of any review.

The UK Government recognises that some aspects of the legislation are uncomfortable, but in order to provide greater information, accountability and acknowledgement to victims and families, we must do things differently, being realistic about what we can best deliver for families over a quarter of a century after the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

A significant package of UK Government amendments to strengthen the legislation have been adopted, providing assurance regarding compliance with our international obligations, enhancing the independence of the ICRIR, providing a greater focus on the interests of victims and families, and strengthening provisions related to the immunity process.

Now that the legislation has become law, the ICRIR, led by Sir Declan Morgan as Chief Commissioner, should be provided with sufficient time to establish itself and demonstrate its effectiveness.

*Irish Government update:*

The Irish Government remains committed to working with the UK Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland to address the painful legacy of the Troubles. It has been the consistent position of the Government that the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement framework remains the basis for a way forward on legacy matters.

This commitment was solidified with the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 2019 which facilitates further co-operation with the Legacy institutions under the Stormont House Agreement as well as providing for co-operation on Legacy Inquests being undertaken by the Northern Ireland Coroner. The Irish Government has since passed further instruments to facilitate the sharing of information to assist ongoing legacy reviews and processes in Northern Ireland. The government has also prepared legislation to give effect to the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR). However, the passage of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act into law on 18 September 2023 was a unilateral move by the UK Government away from the collective approach agreed in Stormont House.

	<p>The Irish Government was clear in its opposition to the UK Legacy Bill throughout its passage through Westminster and raised these concerns with the UK Government at every available opportunity. Those concerns include, but are not limited to, the independence and powers of the Commission, the status of the 'reviews' proposed in the Bill, and, fundamentally, the immunity provisions. Overall, we are concerned that the legislation is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights and other international human rights obligations.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>As we noted in the Overview, while Legacy of the Past is not part of our mandate at the IRC, we have stated in each Report that it is a relevant contextual factor that has an impact on any Process of Group Transition and efforts to tackle paramilitarism. We have identified co-operation with legacy bodies as one of the possible steps in a formal Group Transition process (in paragraph 1.127), and we note the positions of the Irish and UK Governments on dealing with the past.</p>

## SECTION D

In this Section, we summarise Recommendations made in this report and consider progress against Recommendations made last year.

### Part 1: Recommendations 2023

#### 1. **New Programme for Government which commits to tackling paramilitarism and sets ambitious economic and social policy goals.**

We recommend an ambitious new Programme for Government: this should both restate a collective commitment to tackling paramilitarism and set ambitious economic and social policy goals, including for education, which will help to address the socio-economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism.

#### 2. **Strengthening and deepening efforts to tackle paramilitarism beyond Phase Two of the Programme**

Given that Phase Two of the Programme comes to an end in March 2025, we encourage a wide conversation about how we can strengthen and deepen efforts to tackle paramilitarism. We see this as including the critical role played by a dedicated team which supports targeted interventions, links in with wider relevant activities, and raises awareness. A lot of good work has been delivered and there is much more to be done. In considering what comes next, it is important an extensive and inclusive discussion takes place which includes the two Governments, the NI parties, those involved in the Programme, the communities most affected, and Northern Ireland society as a whole about how progress can best be maintained and accelerated, in order to bring about the goal of ending paramilitarism once and for all. We are certain that, despite the pressures from other priorities, this is not a moment to cut back on the effort, but rather one involving a redoubling of determination to see the task through.

#### 3. **Problem-solving justice**

We welcome the problem-solving approach taken by many Justice and community organisations to their work. Examples include the PSNI engaging in problem-solving with local communities to address issues of concern, a pilot substance misuse and addiction court, and multi-agency support hubs. These approaches seem to offer opportunities to more effectively address vulnerabilities and other issues which can lead to contact with the criminal justice system, criminality, or in certain cases paramilitarism. While recognising efforts which are already underway across the justice system, we recommend that the Department of Justice explore what more can be done to avail of the possibilities offered by this approach, and that the Sponsor Group consider what support it can give to join-up and innovation in this field.

#### **4. Supporting communities worst affected by the cost-of-living crisis**

The effect of the cost-of-living crisis is disproportionately felt in those communities already struggling in socio-economic terms. Those are also the communities where paramilitary influence tends to be at its strongest. When economic difficulties arise, people in these communities are more likely to be exposed to paramilitary influence, thus further deepening the grip of the latter in those communities. We therefore urge the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to give special consideration to the needs of communities where paramilitaries mainly operate in addressing the cost-of-living crisis in Northern Ireland.

### **Part 2: Recommendations 2022**

#### **1. A Process for Paramilitary Group Transition**

We continue to make the case for the two Governments, the NI parties and civic society to give urgent consideration to a comprehensive process of Group Transition. We welcome the discussions which have taken place since our last Report about the role for an Independent Person, including at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. We have had constructive conversations on this topic with various stakeholders, and we have followed discussions and analysis of the recommendation in the public sphere with interest. We appreciate the engagement to date with the two governments to discuss our recommendation, and we urge them to progress the implementation of this recommendation as soon as possible. Whilst undoubtedly such a process would carry certain risks, we consider that the greater risk would be in not progressing this important work given the continuing existence of the groups and their structures.

#### **2. Sponsor Group to deepen focus on collaborative working**

As the Sponsor Group has become further embedded this year, we are pleased with the commitment it demonstrates to ensuring that there is a leadership focus in each of the member-organisations, both on sustained implementation of particular elements of the Programme, but also critically on working in the closest collaboration with the other partner organisations. In addition, the group is making linkages between and beyond the Programme and other Executive initiatives. The ending of paramilitarism will only be achieved through this kind of dedicated, holistic and collaborative approach by all the key stakeholders, and we commend how the group has developed over the past year. We understand that Departments and agencies continue to face competing priorities, and we urge that a sustained focus remains on the critical task of tackling paramilitarism. We note that considerable thought is being given to the next Phase of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme at this time, and we have made a recommendation that a wider conversation take place about how we can strengthen and deepen efforts to tackle paramilitarism, including the critical role which can be played by a

dedicated, specialist team. The leadership and strategic vision of the Sponsor Group will be essential to this conversation.

### **3. Prioritise the introduction of organised crime legislation**

We continue to believe that organised crime legislation like that used in other jurisdictions would be a valuable tool for the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. The Department of Justice has consulted on creating new offences of directing serious organised crime and participating in serious organised crime, as well as making serious organised crime an aggravating factor for the purposes of determining sentences. Draft legislation is being prepared, but changing the law would require a functioning Government and legislature. We urge the Government to prioritise this legislation, which would add to the range of offences that those involved with paramilitary-affiliated criminality could face.

### **4. Financial support for tackling paramilitarism to be maintained to the full**

Earlier this year, we wrote to the Head of the Civil Service, relevant Permanent Secretaries and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to say that while we recognised that the current financial position is extremely difficult, we hoped that funding for prevention, tackling socio-economic need, and transformative change would continue to be priorities. As set out in our Reports, tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic challenges facing communities where paramilitaries mainly operate will require significant investment, continuing focus and sustained effort. We are concerned about the potential for budget cuts to have a significant and lasting impact on efforts to end paramilitarism once and for all. Both funding for core services and for delivery through community and voluntary sector partners are important. The challenging financial context makes the work of delivering meaningful change and progress even more challenging, as people are focusing on core service delivery. At this time, when conversations are taking place about what should come after Phase Two of the Programme, we reiterate our call that the funding secured for the Fresh Start initiatives on tackling paramilitarism should be maintained by both the UK Government and the NI Executive, and should be given a high priority in what we acknowledge is a very challenging current fiscal climate. This targeted support must also be underpinned by a cross-departmental commitment to ambitious strategies to tackle socio-economic issues which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today. Adequate funding for the PSNI is also critical in ensuring that they can continue to deliver an effective policing service, including their vital contribution to tackling paramilitarism.

### **5. Further embedding of the public health approach**

We welcome the Programme's continuing commitment to the public health approach, which has been maintained and strengthened in 2023. In particular, the strong focus on gathering data and evidence, complemented by the research which has been specially commissioned on important issues such as child criminal exploitation and threat-to-life cases, brings a number of benefits. It allows the



Programme to critically evaluate interventions to ensure that they are contributing to the shared goal of ending paramilitarism once and for all, to refine approaches and interventions, and to share learning to inform wider policy and practice.

#### **6. Deepening of the multi-agency and collaborative approaches**

We welcome the joined-up and collaborative approach at the heart of Phase Two of the Programme. The existence and work of the Sponsor Group alone sends a clear message about the importance of collaboration, and this is also reflected in the various working-level structures which carry out and enable the projects within the Programme. The Programme Team supports and enables much of this work, and is already working in partnership to identify opportunities to further their goals and to support mutually beneficial work, such as the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and review of the People and Places Strategy. We welcome all of these efforts and hope that new multi-agency initiatives will continue to be trialled, and, where they produce good results, reinforced and embedded, with lessons-learned shared among practitioners, policymakers and frontline organisations. We believe there remains scope for further collaboration to tackle cross-cutting issues related to paramilitarism, and this requires further embedding of a concerted Whole of Government, whole of system approach.

## **APPENDIX A: EXTRACTS FROM FRESH START AGREEMENT**

17 November 2015

### **Section A: Ending Paramilitarism and Tackling Organised Crime**

#### **Statement of Principles**

- 2.1 There has been huge progress in recent years in helping transform society in Northern Ireland. However it is clear that there is work that still remains to be done in completing this transition.
- 2.5 All the parties to this Agreement remain fully dedicated to each and all of these principles and further commit to:
- work collectively to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;
  - support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and support all efforts to uphold it;
  - challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;
  - call for, and work together to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;
  - challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;
  - support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism; and
  - accept no authority, direction or control on our political activities other than our democratic mandate alongside our own personal and party judgment.

#### **Monitoring and Implementation**

- 5.1 A four member international body including persons of international standing will be established by the UK and Irish Governments. The UK Government and the Irish Government will nominate one member each and the Executive shall nominate two members. The body will:
- report annually on progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with NI (or on such further occasions as required);
  - report on the implementation of the relevant measures of the three administrations; and
  - consult the UK Government and relevant law enforcement agencies, the Irish Government and relevant law enforcement agencies and, in Northern Ireland, the Executive, PSNI, statutory agencies, local councils, communities and civic society organisations.
- 5.2 The reports of the body will inform future Executive Programme for Government priorities and commitments through to 2021.

## **Section D: UK Government Financial Support**

### **Tackling Continued Paramilitary Activity**

- 8.2 The UK Government will provide an additional £25 million over five years to tackle continuing paramilitary activity. The UK Government funding will only be released after the Executive has agreed a strategy to address continuing paramilitary activity.
- 8.3 The NI Executive will match the UK Government's additional funding to tackle continuing paramilitary activity.

Full text available at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/479116/A Fresh Start - The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan - Final Version 20 Nov 2015 for PDF.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/479116/A_Fresh_Start_-_The_Stormont_Agreement_and_Implementation_Plan_-_Final_Version_20_Nov_2015_for_PDF.pdf)

## APPENDIX B: LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
Action Plan	The Executive's Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime
Assembly	The Northern Ireland (Legislative) Assembly
BIIGC	British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference
BRG	Benefits Realisation Group
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
CiT	Communities in Transition
DOJ	Department of Justice
EA	Education Authority
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ED	Emergency Department
FICT	Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition
HMRC	His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (UK Tax Authority)
ICRIR	Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Retrieval
IMC	Independent Monitoring Commission
IFA	Irish Football Association
IRC	Independent Reporting Commission
JATF	Joint Agency Task Force
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NCA	National Crime Agency
NI	Northern Ireland
NIACRO	Charitable company formerly known as the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NILT	Northern Ireland Life and Times
NIO	Northern Ireland Office

NIPS	Northern Ireland Prison Service
OCTF	Organised Crime Task Force
PACE	Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989
Panel Report	Fresh Start Panel Report
PCSP	Policing and Community Safety Partnership
PCTF	Paramilitary Crime Task Force
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
Programme Team	Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme Team
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RED Programme	Reducing Educational Disadvantage Programme
TACT	Terrorism Act 2000
T:BUC	Together: Building a United Community
TIP	Trauma-Informed Practice
The (NI) Executive	Northern Ireland Executive
WHO	World Health Organisation
YLTS	Young Life and Time Survey

## **APPENDIX C: BIOGRAPHIES**

### **John McBurney**

John McBurney is an experienced solicitor practising in Northern Ireland. He qualified in 1979 and has significant experience in major litigation, commercial transactions, conveyancing and estate management. He has supported victims and survivors of the Troubles in his legal work. John was one of three persons tasked by the First and deputy First Ministers in December 2015 to make recommendations for a strategy to disband paramilitary groups and was subsequently nominated to the Commission by the Executive to report on progress towards that goal. In March 2023, John was appointed an independent member of a DUP-appointed consultation group/panel to report on views about the Windsor Framework.

### **Monica McWilliams**

Monica McWilliams is an academic and former politician. She is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast and the University of Michigan, and was Professor of Women's Studies and Social Policy at Ulster University where she holds the position of Emeritus Professor. She co-founded the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and led its negotiating team in the multi-party talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. She was elected to the legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland from 1998 – 2003. She was Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission from 2005 – 2011 and a former Chairperson of Interpeace. Monica was one of three persons tasked by the First and Deputy First Ministers in December 2015 to make recommendations for a strategy to disband paramilitary groups and was subsequently nominated to the Commission by the Executive to report on progress towards that goal. Monica works with a number of charities: she is a Trustee for David Ervine Foundation (for disadvantaged children) and the John and Pat Hume Foundation (for peaceful change), and is patron of WAVE Trauma Centre (for people affected by the Troubles/conflict in Northern Ireland). Monica sits on the Governance Board of Operation Kenova. She published a book entitled *Stand Up, Speak Out: My Life Working for Women's Rights, Peace and Equality in Northern Ireland and Beyond*, and she contributes to capacity building work with women in a range of countries. She continues to engage in events, and working groups, at home and abroad on matters relating to equality and rights, legacy, the future of Northern Ireland and to support peace and reconciliation. Monica was nominated to the Commission by the Executive.

### **Tim O'Connor**

Tim O'Connor is a native of Kilkeedy in West Limerick. After a two-year stint as a teacher he joined the Civil Service in Dublin in 1974, moving to the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1979. Most of his time there was spent working on the Northern Ireland Peace Process and he was part of the Irish Government Negotiating Team for the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. He was the inaugural Southern Joint Secretary

of the North/South Ministerial Council, based in Armagh, from 1999 to 2005. He has also served terms as Director of the Africa Unit and of the Human Rights Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs. His foreign postings included the Embassies of Ireland in Bonn and Washington DC, and from 2005-2007 he served as the Consul General of Ireland in New York, USA. Tim served as Secretary General to President Mary McAleese at Áras an Uachtaráin from 2007 to 2010. Since retiring from the Civil Service in 2010 he has been dividing his time between his own advisory business and voluntary work, both in the public sector and with NGOs. In 2020, he chaired the Implementation Advisory Group for the directly elected mayor with executive functions for Limerick City and County, and he is interim Chair of Discover Limerick (a Designated Activity Company wholly owned by Limerick City and County Council. From February 2019 to February 2021, Tim was Chairman of the Golf Ireland Transition Board. He is a member of the Board of GOAL, the international humanitarian assistance NGO. Tim was nominated to the Commission by the Irish Government.

### **Mitchell B. Reiss**

Mitchell B. Reiss is a former United States Special Envoy for Northern Ireland with the rank of Ambassador. He was also the Director of Policy Planning at the State Department and has worked at the National Security Council. Outside of government, he has been a Partner in the Brunswick Group, helping lead their geopolitical risk practice, President and CEO of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Virginia and President of Washington College in Maryland. Mitchell is on the Board of the International Churchill Society (dedicated to preserving the legacy of Sir Winston Churchill), and has published widely on national security issues. He consults in the United States and globally on higher education and historic sites. Mitchell was nominated to the Commission by the UK Government.

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