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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Independent Reporting Commission

PO Box 2352

Belfast

BT4 9EL

Email: enquiries@IRCommission.org

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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the Independent Reporting Commission's (IRC) Seventh Report. The Commission was established in 2017 to monitor progress towards ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, as mandated by an international treaty agreed by the UK and Irish Governments. The establishment of the IRC stemmed from the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement which aimed to address the complexities underlying the continuation of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, emphasising the importance of peace and political stability. The Agreement identified a key goal: the ending of paramilitary activity 'once and for all' and it is in that context that we frame our Reports. One of the IRC's primary functions is to analyse all dimensions of paramilitarism, what its nature is today, why it continues to exist more than 26 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the harm that it causes at many levels, and the best means by which it can be tackled and ended.

While our remit is to report annually to both governments and the Executive on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland, and measures to achieve that end, this year the publication of our report has been delayed so that it can be submitted to both the UK and Irish Government at the same time, so consequently this report is issuing in 2025, rather than late 2024 as we originally intended.

While it is without doubt that there has been real transformation in Northern Ireland over the last three decades, paramilitary groups continue to exist and exert coercive control over some communities. This coercive control can take many forms, including intimidation, financial extortion, sexual exploitation, creating communities where people are afraid to speak out, and stifling alternative voices and leadership.

We describe the situation in 2024 in terms of paramilitarism as 'mixed'. While there has been a decrease in shooting incidents and paramilitary style assaults, bombing incidents and casualties from paramilitary style shootings have remained consistent with previous years. Intimidation, coercive control, and threats linked to paramilitary groups continue to persist and remain a real concern. However, we are encouraged that in March 2024, the Northern Ireland-related Terrorism Threat Level was reduced from 'severe' to 'substantial'. We also note that with over 100 projects, the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime is having a real impact, and alongside the police and security forces disrupting criminal activity, all these measures are now having a tangible effect in communities where paramilitaries operate. A further worrying feature of the situation in 2024 was that there was a paramilitary element involved in a number of racist incidents related to immigration, according to the PSNI. As we have repeatedly cautioned, there are no grounds for complacency. Nevertheless, we believe that there are grounds for optimism that the goal of the Fresh Start Agreement of ending paramilitarism "once and for all" can still be achieved. The IRA and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires three decades ago were a turning point in the

overall effort to bring the Northern Ireland conflict to an end. They did not prove to be the end itself, but they could certainly be described as the beginning of the end. Given the transformation of society over the last three decades, there is a compelling rationale to redouble efforts to close out paramilitarism definitively and complete the journey started in 1994.

We acknowledge that paramilitarism in 2024 is complex. It encompasses a range of individuals: some use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality, some are involved for reasons related to various factors including socio-economic deprivation, adverse childhood experiences, poor educational and employment opportunities, addiction issues, mental health problems, peer pressure and the absence of positive role models, and some remain engaged in paramilitarism for political and identity reasons which reach back to the Troubles/conflict. We believe the nature of paramilitarism continues to evolve and while we acknowledge it is not the same as it was during the height of the Troubles/conflict, some features are similar to the past. In 2024, there have been shifting dynamics within both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups, including changes in leadership, reported splits, speculation about possible feuds, ongoing questions about whether actions were sanctioned by paramilitary leaders, various interpretations of larger gatherings of people, and increasing interactions with organised crime. We understand that these shifting dynamics can pose challenges for the PSNI and others in attributing responsibility for, or involvement in, certain actions. However, where there is paramilitary involvement in criminal activity, this must be called out and the harm it causes has to be named.

While policing and justice measures are key in bringing paramilitarism to an end, the PSNI inform us that they cannot arrest their way out of this problem. 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 conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today (such as deprivation and lack of educational opportunity). Both Tracks, which are inter-related, are vital in the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism.

Our Report advocates, as have previous Reports, for a third dimension to complement the Twin Track approach: an agreed formal process of Group Transition, involving direct engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves, in order to bring about their ending. Our analysis recognises that while law enforcement measures can frustrate and disrupt paramilitary activity, solely relying on those measures will not bring an end to paramilitarism. We recognise this is a complex and controversial recommendation, which is why in both our Fifth and Sixth Reports we proposed an intermediate step in the form of the appointment by the UK and Irish Governments of an Independent Person who would scope out and prepare the ground with various stakeholders for what a possible formal process of engagement and Group Transition might look like. We regard this as a vital step in the journey towards ending

paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. We believe that the time is right to bring a major focus on the question of Group Transition and to undertake an independent, time-bound exercise to scope out potential and explore what might be involved. We welcome the progress being made by the two Governments towards implementing our recommendation to appoint an Independent Person to carry out this scoping work. We wish to make clear that Group Transition is not a substitute for the Twin Track Approach to tackling paramilitarism. On the contrary, without the Twin Tracks of robust policing and criminal justice measures, and the sustained and determined support measures for the communities where the paramilitaries operate, Group Transition has little or no chance of success.

There are some signs that some partial dimension of Transition is already taking place organically and without a formal process. However, faster and more widespread progress is clearly desirable, and in our view, it is only through a full, formal process that a substantial impact is possible. In recognition of the fact that groups do not look the same as they did during the Troubles/conflict, it is important that the UK Government review the proscription regime to ensure that only those groups which currently meet the test remain proscribed, and that there is clear information and support for those applying for deproscription. We note that there have been repeated recommendations from successive Independent Reviewers of Terrorism Legislation that proscription should have a fixed term.

The current phase of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime will conclude at the end of March 2027. There are now over 100 projects and initiatives running under the aegis of the Programme, and their impact can be seen on a daily basis in communities where the paramilitaries operate. We have been out on the ground around Northern Ireland and have seen many examples of this work and have been very impressed by the real difference it is making in the lives of communities affected by paramilitarism. We have been particularly taken by what we have heard from young people participating in various initiatives of the Programme and the positive effect on their lives and prospects. We welcome the focus on paramilitarism in the new draft Programme for Government and the commitments that people will get the support they need at every stage of their lives by removing barriers to education and employment, to take action to address poverty, to improve access to services, and to take steps to help those who are struggling, especially in areas where inequality hits hardest or where issues like crime, poverty, addiction, poor mental health and other health challenges are most keenly felt. All of these factors are involved in the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism, are long-term in nature and require a sustained, comprehensive policy approach, together with the necessary investment.

It is vital that thorough consideration is given to what will come after the Programme ends in March 2027. We strongly recommend that some of the targeted paramilitary-focused work which the Programme has been responsible for should continue beyond 2027, while also ensuring that consideration is given to those elements of the work of tackling paramilitarism that could be integrated into mainstream policies. We believe

there will continue to be the need for central team to oversee this work, monitor progress, and build connections across the community and statutory sector, and for a collective, whole of government approach integrating paramilitarism into broader government policies and strategies, with training for public servants to raise awareness and promote a proactive approach. In our view, 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. Efforts to tackle paramilitarism beyond 2027 need to reflect the reality that this is a long-haul task which is part of the unfinished business of the peace process and must continue to build on the learning and progress of Phases One and Two of the Programme. The Executive and the two Governments must ensure that work to tackle paramilitarism continues to be given a high priority beyond 2027.

A key part of our analysis is that paramilitarism is connected to the wider political and societal landscape in Northern Ireland, and we note the changes to the UK and Irish Governments and their continued commitment to ending paramilitarism. We welcome the restoration of the Executive, bringing political leadership and stability, which will be key to tackling paramilitarism. Sustained political leadership and commitment will be key going forward and are essential for this task. We were encouraged that the joined-up, whole of government approach to tackling paramilitarism was sustained in 2024. The Sponsor Group continues to bring leaders from various organisations together to give priority to the Programme’s work, and it will have a central role going forward in the design of future work from 2027 onwards. With this in mind we recommend that the Sponsor Group continue to regularly review its membership to ensure that its representation is as comprehensive as it needs to be.

Our Report continues to highlight the importance of data and evidence in understanding the complexities of paramilitarism and shaping effective public policy and we welcome the continued public health approach within the Programme and the prioritisation of trauma informed approaches in 2024, which recognises the need for services and policies to connect with people who have experienced trauma and shaping services and delivery with this in mind. Section B contains various public domain statistics which are useful indicators of the situation in regards to paramilitarism, though we acknowledge that underreporting may be an issue and that statistics cannot fully appreciate the psychological anxiety and physical danger of vulnerable people living in communities where paramilitaries exert coercive control. It is troubling that 15% of the respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey agreed that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in their area. We also welcome the continued emphasis on new research and in Section B we highlight recent research on paramilitary coercive control and intimate partner violence.

Amongst our many engagements during 2024, we met with the leaders of the Prison Services in both jurisdictions and heard at first hand the continuing challenges posed for their work by ongoing paramilitarism, though we recognise that the populations of

paramilitary prisoners differ in size and composition in the two jurisdictions. We are encouraged by the strong level of co-operation between the two Services, and indeed feel it should be enhanced further. As we pointed out in our last Report, the situation of prisoners has been a key dimension of the conflict, and we believe that the ultimate resolution of the paramilitarism issue will require a particular focus on the matter. We accordingly wish to encourage the two Prison Services to build on the co-operation in place and to consider further enhancement of that co-operation in regard to paramilitarism.

Additionally, the Report touches on the legacy of the past, victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict, memorialisation, shared housing and integrated education, the role of women in tackling paramilitarism, and drugs and the link to paramilitary activity.

We sense there is momentum around tackling the unfinished business of the peace process and we urge a redoubling of efforts in 2025 so that that momentum can deliver the definitive ending of paramilitarism in all its forms. A particular responsibility rests with the two Governments and the political parties in the Executive and Assembly to provide the necessary leadership, impetus and resources required for the task.

SECTION A: OVERVIEW

Introduction

- 1.1 The Independent Reporting Commission (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 between the UK and Irish Governments, which reflects the terms of the Fresh Start Agreement concluded by the two Governments and the Northern Ireland (NI) parties in November 2015. The Fresh Start Agreement was the result of intensive discussions over the autumn of 2015 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”.¹ The IRC was established under the terms of the Agreement with the task of reporting on progress towards that goal. We report annually and this is our Seventh Report.
- 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 While our remit is to report annually to both governments and the Executive on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland, and measures to achieve that end, this year the publication of our report has been delayed so that it can be submitted to both the UK and Irish Government at the same time, and consequently this report is issuing in 2025, rather than late 2024 as originally intended.

Our Mandate and Methodology

- 1.4 The international treaty establishing the IRC sets out our mandate and prescribes 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.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80a8a5e5274a2e8ab516ce/A_Fresh_Start_-_The_Stormont_Agreement_and_Implementation_Plan_-_Final_Version_20_Nov_2015_for_PDF.pdf

The treaty describes the context of this reporting function as being aimed at “promoting progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland, and supporting long term peace and stability in society and stable and inclusive devolved Government in Northern Ireland”.

1.5 We have made clear in all our Reports that we are not an operational body and do not provide detailed security, threat or status assessments of the various paramilitary groupings. That is a matter for the police and security services. This has led to criticism of our role in some quarters, who have called for us to be in effect a successor body to the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC, 2004-2011), whose primary function was to “monitor any continuing activity by paramilitary groups” and “assess whether the leaderships of such organisations are directing such incidents”². However, as we have pointed out before, quite simply, this is not the mandate we were given.

1.6 Our mandate at the IRC is based on a series of documents agreed in 2015/2016, as follows:

- the Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015;
- the Report of the Three Person Fresh Start Panel on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in NI of May 2016;
- and, based on the Recommendations of the Panel, an Action Plan (the “Executive Action Plan”) adopted by the Executive in July 2016, leading to the establishment of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, now known as the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (hereafter referred to as “EPPOC” or “the Programme”).

In these initiatives, a wider, more comprehensive approach was decided upon for tackling paramilitarism, which combined policing and justice responses with a wide range of measures aimed at addressing the systemic socio-economic challenges besetting communities where the paramilitaries mainly operate.

1.7 We have quoted in previous Reports 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, and we do so again here, as we believe it 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

² <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c6b6240f0b62aff6c18a3/1149.pdf>

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 to the Executive Action Plan 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”³.

- 1.8 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 human rights, legal, policy, community activist, public sector, conflict resolution and other professional backgrounds. We continue to believe that this broad, holistic approach to tackling and ending paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is the correct one, and in this Report we will be elaborating further why that is the case.
- 1.9 All that said, we have stressed throughout our Reports that policing and criminal justice responses are essential to the successful tackling and ending of paramilitarism. For that reason, in carrying out our mandate as the IRC, we place great store by the briefings on the broad security situation relating to paramilitarism that we receive regularly from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the UK Security Service and An Garda Síochána, together with the relevant agencies overseeing the criminal justice system in both jurisdictions. In our reporting, therefore, we provide a general outline of the security situation based on these briefings, without going into specific detail on the status of individual paramilitary groupings, the latter being a matter for the relevant police and security services.
- 1.10 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 and invite others to do the same if there are issues they wish to draw to our attention⁴.

³

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

⁴ Our email address is enquiries@IRCommission.org and our postal address is PO Box 2352, Belfast BT4 9EL.

- 1.11 In particular, we are grateful to the groups and individuals who have experienced violence, threats, coercive control and intimidation for sharing their experiences with us. We have made clear in all our Reports our deeply held view that it is victims who have been the most impacted by paramilitaries, and we will continue to engage with them as we take forward our work. We repeat our profound sense that for them paramilitarism is not a distant concept that they hear about in the media, but in many cases is a continuing reality that permeates their daily lives.
- 1.12 We have referred in previous Reports to those we have termed “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 it is an essential part of the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism, and a vital complement to the tasks being undertaken by the Statutory Bodies. We take the opportunity in this Report to reiterate again our admiration for the people and groups involved in such, often unsung, work and our gratitude to them, both for what they do and the insights they provide to us as they continue this critical mission.
- 1.13 We are grateful to both Governments, the Executive, the Assembly, the NI political parties, and to the various Departments and 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 Prison Service, the Probation Board, the Education Authority, local councils, the Housing Executive and others. Our particular thanks to the Programme Team which co-ordinates the Programme and its Sponsor Group. We recognise the dedication, professionalism and commitment they bring to the task. We also wish to thank the representatives of relevant offices of the Irish Government with whom we met in 2024, An Garda Síochána and the Irish Prison Service, recognising the importance of the cross-border dimension of addressing paramilitarism. We are especially grateful to the various NGOs and community-based organisations delivering critical work in communities on a daily basis. We express particular thanks to colleagues in our Joint Secretariat for their dedication, professionalism and hard work in support of our deliberations.

The Format of our Report

- 1.14 Our Report, in line with previous Reports, 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 which illustrates the level and impact of paramilitary activity in 2023/24, building on the baselines we set out in our First and Second Reports.

- Section C, Implementation of Measures, contains a detailed report on progress in implementing the Plan and the Programme, including some specific examples of success.
- In Section D, we summarise Recommendations made in this Report and consider progress against Recommendations made last year.

1.15 We construct our Reports as standalone documents on the basis that each Report, while focusing primarily on the year under review, should be a comprehensive, standalone overview of what is happening in terms of addressing continued paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today. Given that the core focus remains the same, there is inevitably overlap between our Reports as we continue to build on work undertaken in previous years. This Seventh Report, therefore, while focusing significantly on activity in 2024, 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.

Our Analysis

1.16 As a reporting body, with no operational role, a primary function of ours is to provide good analysis on all dimensions of paramilitarism – on what its nature is today, why it continues to exist more than 26 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the harm that it causes at many levels, and the best means by which it can be tackled and ended. 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 arising from the Fresh Start Agreement process and we hope that our Reports encapsulate that comprehensively. Furthermore, we follow both public sector and community-led efforts which are relevant to the goal. We 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) there are gaps that continue to exist in the effort.

1.17 We have already set out above how our mandate is different to previous initiatives, based on the new approach to tackling and ending paramilitarism heralded in the Fresh Start Agreement and the actions that have stemmed from it. As indicated, what particularly marks out this difference of approach 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 inside a wider, more holistic approach that includes tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic issues facing communities specifically where paramilitary control is a factor.

1.18 In our various Reports, we have been consistent in our analysis that paramilitarism today involves a complex landscape comprising different categories of people, and that addressing it requires the addressing of all dimensions of that landscape. We have described how at one end of the landscape there are undoubtedly individuals

and groups who use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality, such as murder, violence, assault, extortion, drug dealing, threats, trade in counterfeit goods, money laundering, illegal money lending, sexual exploitation, racist and sectarian intimidation, and other illegal activities. We understand that for some 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 certainly acknowledge that this is a reprehensible dimension of the paramilitarism issue. It causes real and devastating harm to individuals and communities and needs to be addressed robustly. However, in our view, to see paramilitarism as only that is an incomplete analysis.

- 1.19 We also acknowledge that the nature of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today continues to evolve. Put simply, it is not the same as it was at the height of the Troubles/conflict, in terms of scale or nature. However, it continues to persist, demonstrating some features that are similar to the past and some that are different. Many experts we have spoken with in 2024, for instance, have observed the increasing interaction between some paramilitaries and Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in the drugs trade. Indeed, one of the features of the overall landscape is the increasing impact of these OCGs in areas in Northern Ireland where paramilitary groups have traditionally operated. Some paramilitary groups – or individuals within them – have links to organised crime; some operate akin to organised crime groups.
- 1.20 Another dimension of the evolving nature of paramilitarism is shifting dynamics among both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups, including changes in leadership figures and structures. In 2024, some of the more visible manifestations of these shifting group dynamics included reported incidents of splits, speculation about the possibility of feuds, ongoing questions about whether certain actions were sanctioned by the leaders of paramilitary groups, and contrasting interpretations of motivations behind larger gatherings of people. These shifting dynamics can pose challenges for PSNI and others in attributing responsibility for, or involvement with, certain actions to paramilitary groups. This extends to criminal activities. Where there is paramilitary involvement, this must be called out and the harm it causes has to be named. However, there is a level of nuance and complexity involved which must also be recognised – for example, where someone involved in criminality may have links to a paramilitary group but is acting of their own volition.
- 1.21 We repeat in this Report that there are others who maintain an involvement in paramilitarism today for very different reasons. The rationale for their involvement is related to various factors including socio-economic deprivation, adverse childhood experiences, poor educational and employment opportunities, addiction issues, mental health problems, 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 not a means to exit the group easily. Some contribute funds or pay a membership fee. Some not currently active in the organisations could be asked to play a role in the future.

- 1.22 Additionally, 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 roots in history. We are aware that this category also contains people, including at leadership level in some of the groups, who articulate a wish to see paramilitarism ended.
- 1.23 Taking an overall view, what is clear to us after many years working together on the Commission, is that in addressing paramilitarism, a great deal rests on the underlying analysis that one brings to the equation. 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 as well – factors which include a continuing connection to the conflict that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was seeking to address, and therefore a dimension of the political – then an additional set of conclusions follows.
- 1.24 In arguing this latter point, we at the same time reiterate our view, strongly held, that paramilitarism in all its dimensions has no place in Northern Ireland. However, the complete ending of paramilitarism is going to require addressing the political, social and economic complexity described above.
- 1.25 Flowing from that point is another key part of our analysis – namely that ongoing paramilitarism is connected in some form to the wider political and societal landscape in Northern Ireland. In that regard, there have been particular developments in 2024 which have the potential to play an important role in the ending of paramilitarism. Firstly, there have been changes to the UK and Irish Governments in the course of the year and we welcome the fact that both new Administrations are continuing to focus on the task of ending paramilitarism. Our analysis is that this task is part of what we call “the unfinished business of the peace process” and that a particular onus in terms of the mission of ending paramilitarism falls to the two Governments. We will continue our engagement in that regard and have more to say on that throughout this Report.
- 1.26 A particular responsibility for the tackling and ending of paramilitarism also rests with the political parties in Northern Ireland. The restoration of the Executive and Assembly in 2024 is also key in terms of its implications for addressing paramilitarism in all its dimensions. We have made clear in all our Reports the importance of political leadership and stability and consequently, it was regrettable that the Executive and Assembly were in suspension for a large part of the almost eight years of our existence as a Commission. The resulting instability has undoubtedly hampered efforts tackling and ending paramilitarism. The return of Stormont, in addition to the ongoing work of the two Governments, should be a further enabling factor in ensuring a sustained effort by the First Minister Michelle O’Neill, deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly, and

Minister of Justice Naomi Long, and we will continue our discussions with them and other members of the Executive and Assembly on how ending paramilitarism can best be achieved.

- 1.27 A further wider contextual factor affecting efforts to tackle and end paramilitarism is the constrained financial reality within which Departments, agencies and organisations are operating. This makes the work of delivering meaningful change and progress even more challenging, as people are focusing on core service delivery. In our view, 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. We will return to this key point throughout our Report.
- 1.28 We continue, therefore, to 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 conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today, such as deprivation and lack of educational opportunity. Both Tracks, which are inter-related, are vital in the task of tackling paramilitarism.
- 1.29 In our more recent Reports and having regard to the wider political and contextual point, 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 their ending. We have developed this suggestion because in our view, to paraphrase from other contexts, “it is not possible to arrest your way out of the problem”. However unpalatable this may be to many; it is our view that the ending of paramilitary organisations has to involve voluntary action by the groups themselves.
- 1.30 We acknowledge that this is a complex and controversial proposition. For that reason, we proposed in our Fifth and Sixth Reports an intermediate step in the form of the appointment by the two Governments of an Independent Person, who would scope out and prepare the ground with various stakeholders for what a possible formal process of engagement and Group Transition might look like. Since we first recommended this intermediate step in our Fifth Report, there has been considerable discussion of this proposal, both in the public sphere and at ministerial level including at meetings of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. We welcome this level of debate, and we have followed the discussions and listened to the analysis with great interest. We have always acknowledged that such a process would carry certain risks, but we remain convinced that the greater risk would be in not progressing this important work to scope and prepare the ground, given the continuing existence of the groups and their structures. We regard the appointment of an Independent Person as a vital step in the journey towards completing the goal of ending paramilitarism in

Northern Ireland “once and for all”, and we urge the two Governments to progress the implementation of this recommendation as soon as possible.

- 1.31 In closing out these preliminary remarks on our overall analysis, there is one further contextual factor to point to in 2024 that we believe has particular relevance to the mission of ending paramilitarism. That is the fact that 2024 marked the 30th anniversary of the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires. We see that as of significance for obvious reasons. The ceasefires three decades ago were a turning point in the overall effort to bring the Northern Ireland conflict to an end. They did not prove to be the end itself, but they could certainly be described as the beginning of the end. Given the transformation of society over the last three decades there is a compelling rationale to redouble efforts to close out paramilitarism definitively and complete the journey started in 1994.
- 1.32 Based on that overall analysis, the remainder of this Section of our Report is dedicated to our 2024 observations, findings, comments and Recommendations including for beyond 2027.

Observation and Findings in regard to 2024

Broad Picture 2024

- 1.33 **As has been the case in several of our recent Reports, we again characterise the past year as “mixed” in terms of the paramilitarism landscape. Data covering the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 shows a decrease in the number of shooting incidents and casualties of paramilitary style assaults compared to the previous year, while the number of bombing incidents and number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings were similar to the previous two years. Paramilitary-linked intimidation, coercive control and threats continue to be issues. All this activity shows that paramilitarism remains ongoing in Northern Ireland and is a real concern. That said, we were encouraged that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was able to announce in March that the Northern Ireland-related Terrorism Threat Level in NI was being reduced from “Severe” to “Substantial”. The latter still constitutes a worrying condition, but it is noteworthy that the trajectory is in the right direction. Moreover, there continues to be evidence that, as we reported in 2023, the combined efforts of the various initiatives and projects under the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, across both Tracks, is having a real impact. It is clear that individually, collectively and cumulatively, the measures involved are having a tangible effect in communities where the paramilitaries operate. This judgement applies both to the work of the police and security services in disrupting the criminal activities of the paramilitary groups, and also in terms of what is happening in relation to support and prevention in communities. However, as we have repeatedly cautioned, there are no grounds for complacency and that remains the central message. A**

further worrying feature of the situation in 2024 was that there was a paramilitary element involved in a number of racist incidents related to immigration, according to the PSNI. Thirty years after the ceasefires, paramilitarism regrettably remains a serious issue for Northern Ireland, and while much good work is being done in addressing that reality, more is required. In particular, we urge the Governments, the Executive and Assembly to continue to ensure that a sustained and dedicated focus is maintained on the task and the resources required are assigned to the full. We believe that, on that basis, together with an initiative to scope and prepare the ground for Group Transition to disbandment, there are grounds for optimism that the goal of the Fresh Start Agreement of ending paramilitarism “once and for all” can still be achieved.

General Commentary on 2024

- 1.34 In the following paragraphs we provide some general commentary on a range of developments and events relating to paramilitarism during 2024. We also include comments on the question of Group Transition and a range of other issues relating to paramilitarism.
- 1.35 We have mentioned in the Analysis Section above some of the wider, contextual developments in 2024 and their impact on efforts to tackle and end paramilitarism. We will comment further on those here. We believe that the installation of new UK and Irish Governments, together with the restoration of the Executive and Assembly at Stormont, means that there is potential now for new momentum, including in terms of addressing paramilitarism, and we wish to see that opportunity availed of to the full. This includes progressing the appointment of an Independent Person to scope out the potential for a formal engagement with paramilitary groups to bring about Group Transition and what that might look like.
- 1.36 We urge the two Governments, especially the UK Government, given their particular responsibilities, to ensure sufficient resources continue to be applied to the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism, notwithstanding the constraints around the public purse more generally. As we state throughout this Report, continuing paramilitarism has a deep-seated impact, not just on the communities directly affected by paramilitary groups on a daily basis, but on wider Northern Ireland society for the reasons we set out below. We will return to specific aspects of the resourcing issue later.
- 1.37 As a deeper understanding of the nature and pathology of paramilitarism in the modern era has been developed over the years of the Programme, including through the bespoke research it has commissioned, it has reinforced that there is a need for a combination of tailored activity specifically addressing paramilitarism, alongside effective integration and scaling up of this work through mainstream services and policies. The two effectively go hand in hand.
- 1.38 For example, the relationship between the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (the PCTF) and Neighbourhood Policing is a case in point. The former is a specialised initiative

specifically aimed at tackling and disrupting the criminal activity of paramilitary groups. On the other hand, the PSNI's approach to Neighbourhood Policing is critical to the delivery of a high quality policing service to the entire community. From the perspective of effectively addressing paramilitarism, both must work in tandem. While much good work is being done by the PCTF and by Neighbourhood Policing teams in the areas in question, we are extremely concerned that the budgetary cutbacks affecting the PSNI is having a negative impact on the ability of Neighbourhood Policing to effectively deal with paramilitarism currently as we will show when referring to Policing and Justice later in the report.

- 1.39 Regarding our broader point that bespoke work in addressing paramilitarism and mainstream policies go hand in hand, we would ask that particular consideration be given to this balance in considering future efforts to deal with paramilitarism following the conclusion of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime at the end of March 2027. This future work is necessary and important, and in a subsequent section below of this Overview, we provide some further specific comments and suggestions in that regard.
- 1.40 Turning to the specifics of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, we reported in 2023 that there was increasing evidence that the Programme, which was put in place in response to the Action Plan adopted by the Executive in 2016, was having a notable impact across its various measures. The Programme's aim is "safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control", and its work includes measures to keep people safe, build up protective factors, and increase community resilience. The measures involved required time to bed down, in particular those activities that involved cross-agency and cross-Departmental working. In 2024, we are pleased to report that that trajectory of progress has continued apace. There are now over 100 projects and initiatives running under the aegis of the Programme, and individually, and particularly collectively and cumulatively, their impact can be seen on a daily basis in communities where the paramilitaries operate. We have been out on the ground around Northern Ireland during the year and have seen many examples of this work and have been very impressed by the real difference it is making in the lives of communities affected by paramilitarism. We have been particularly taken by what we have heard from young people participating in various initiatives of the Programme and the positive effect on their lives and prospects of the support they are receiving. That was precisely the intent of the Programme and it is very encouraging to see what it means in practice.
- 1.41 We provide material below highlighting examples of this good practice in terms of the Programme and its impact. We take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of all involved, both on the part of those co-ordinating the Programme in the Department of Justice, together with their colleagues in the Executive Office and other relevant Departments and Statutory Agencies, including in the Policing and Criminal Justice Systems, and also the community-based organisations delivering the projects and measures in local communities. We were impressed with the commitment we found.

We learned a lot from our engagement with the many people involved, which reinforced the complex nature of the work in question and how essential it is that there is the closest possible co-ordination between those involved in the Programme to maximise its impact.

- 1.42 On that question of joined-up and whole of government working, we were encouraged that in 2024 the focus on this approach was strongly maintained. In that regard, we attach particular importance to the work of the Sponsor Group, which is chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and plays an important role by bringing together leadership figures in the various organisations involved in the Programme's implementation. The Sponsor Group will have a central role in the design of future work after the conclusion of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime in March 2027 and finding the balance between maintaining a targeted approach to tackling paramilitarism and projects which can be scaled-up and mainstreamed. We therefore **recommend that the Sponsor Group look again at its membership to ensure that its representation is as comprehensive as it needs to be, giving consideration to important work being done by organisations such as the Probation Board.**
- 1.43 In terms of the involvement of the broader Executive in the efforts to address paramilitarism, we note the publication in September of the draft of a new Programme for Government. We included a Recommendation in our Sixth Report that any new Programme for Government should include a continued focus on tackling paramilitarism. We are pleased that the Draft Programme for Government does include such a focus and acknowledge this as a significant development in itself. The challenge now will be turning intent into action. Reaching agreement on what the measure of success will be and tracking improvement in the light of a much deeper understanding of paramilitary harm, and indeed the nature of paramilitarism overall, will be of high importance. We look forward to continued discussion with the Executive, Assembly, the Sponsor Group and the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Team on this. Much of the commentary in our Report is highly relevant in that regard – in particular, on the need to continue with the joined-up, whole of government approach to tackling paramilitarism, which tallies with the overall ethos of the draft Programme for Government.
- 1.44 We have remarked in previous Reports that a key feature of Phase Two of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime has been a strong focus on data and evidence. We welcome that this approach was continued in 2024, given that sound public policy is best founded on good data and evidence. We also strongly welcome the emphasis on bespoke new research on aspects of the Programme to share learning. Over the last two Reports we have included some important new findings emerging from this research, and note how the pace and quality of that research has increased in 2024. In Section B we spotlight some recent research by Aisling Swaine on paramilitarism and gender-based coercive control. We also welcome the Programme's continued focus on a public health approach: a

methodology which treats an issue 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. We also look very favourably on the growing prioritisation of trauma informed approaches during 2024, recognising that services and policies will connect with people who have experienced trauma, particularly given Northern Ireland's history and the continuing impact of paramilitarism, and so shaping delivery and design of provision with this in mind. Being innovative and continuously evolving was a key design feature of the original Executive Action Plan, based on the Independent Three-Person Panel Report in 2016, and we are encouraged that that philosophy is being maintained in the implementation of the Programme.

- 1.45 Evidence of how the continued existence of paramilitarism exacerbates and intersects with other issues was apparent in 2024 during disturbances connected to anti-immigration protests. The PSNI indicated that there was a paramilitary element to these, although not that they were paramilitarily organised or orchestrated. We have referred in all our Reports to the continued coercive control exercised by paramilitary groups over the communities where they operate. We saw more evidence of this in 2024 in the data from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive which shows that the number of households presenting as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation increased from 124 to 160 from 2022/23 to 2023/24, and the number of households accepted for that same reason increased from 194 to 214 in the same period. Those figures only provide a snapshot of intimidation, and we are mindful of the life-changing effect of paramilitary threats forcing people to leave an area. Coercive control can take many forms, including intimidation, financial extortion, sexual exploitation, creating an environment where people are afraid to speak out, and stifling alternative voices and leadership. We remain convinced that the continued existence of the structures and infrastructure of paramilitarism in itself constitutes a risk, not just for the communities most affected, but for the whole of Northern Ireland in the way those structures can be used to mobilise and organise groups of people. We have also commented in the past about the inter-connection between paramilitarism and racist and sectarian intimidation. The events of 2024 underscore the dangers of that inter-connection.
- 1.46 We have made clear in previous Reports that paramilitary-related harm does not exist in a vacuum. It sits within a varied landscape of criminal activity which requires a "shared ecosystem response". This includes serious and organised crime, national security threats, far-right extremism, hate crime, domestic abuse, violence against women and girls, and community and individual vulnerabilities and resilience. It also has a cross-border dimension. The shared ecosystem addressing these multiple threats involves different officials and organisations with varying responsibilities, and a range of structures seeking to bring these together.

- 1.47 In that shared response, co-operation between the UK and Irish Governments, and the Northern Ireland Executive, at political, official and operational levels, has been a vital component, based on the conclusions of the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015. During 2024, further progress was made in that work via meetings of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, regular meetings between the two Justice Ministers from both jurisdictions and their officials, and the Joint Agency Task Force comprising the PSNI, An Garda Síochána, the Revenue Commissioners and HMRC. Having a cross-border operational role, the Task Force works to bring a “concerted and enhanced effort to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime and to bring to justice those involved in it”⁵. The Northern Ireland Office has policy responsibility for Northern Ireland Related Terrorism in NI, is a member of the Sponsor Group, and leads other relevant work. MI5’s role is to identify, investigate and work with partners to disrupt national security threats. As noted above, the Programme’s Sponsor Group is providing senior leadership and fostering joined-up working across Departments playing their part in tackling paramilitarism. Security Interface Meetings bring together the Secretary of State for NI, the NI Justice Minister and the Chief Constable to discuss issues of shared and overlapping concern, including paramilitarism.
- 1.48 We commend this joined-up approach and the ongoing commitment of all involved to sustained co-operation, given the central role that plays in the mission to end paramilitarism.
- 1.49 Tackling paramilitarism also overlaps and intersects with wider community safety activity in NI; another feature of the shared ecosystem. As such, we were struck by the recent Criminal Justice Inspection NI (CJINI) report into community safety and its recommendation that the Department of Justice lead the creation of a new community safety vision, strategy and action plan for delivery in NI⁶. We agree that mapping community safety structures operating across NI and creating an overview of purpose, membership, funding arrangements, governance and outcomes would help to provide clarity. PSNI are not solely responsible for community safety; other partners are key including health and social services, housing, education, local councils, probation, political representatives and voluntary and community organisations and these same partners play a role in tackling paramilitarism. We have seen how these groups can come together around specific problems – such as in multi-agency support hubs, supporting the most vulnerable – and it is vital that there is a clear basis for ongoing co-operation, further encouragement of joint working and a framework for everyone to play their part in community safety and tackling paramilitarism. In such a complex set of intersecting structures, there is always potential for both overlap and gaps to develop. Given this, and the continually evolving threat landscape, we encourage the UK Government and NI Executive – along with operational and other partners such as the PSNI, councils, Education Authority, NI Housing Executive, and health and social

⁵ Fresh Start Agreement paragraph 3.2

⁶ <https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports/2024/Jan-Mar/Community-Safety-and-Local-Policing-Inspection>

care authorities – to conduct a rapid review of whether the structures and processes in place appropriately foster collaborative working, whilst navigating complex boundaries. In our Fourth Report, we encouraged the Executive to look at the Serious Violence Duty which at the time was being legislated for in England and Wales and has now been brought into law as part of the Police, Crime and Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. This legislation ensures relevant services work together to share information and allows them to target interventions through partnership structures and to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence in local communities. We encourage the Executive to consider what lessons can be learnt from the implementation of this approach in England and Wales.

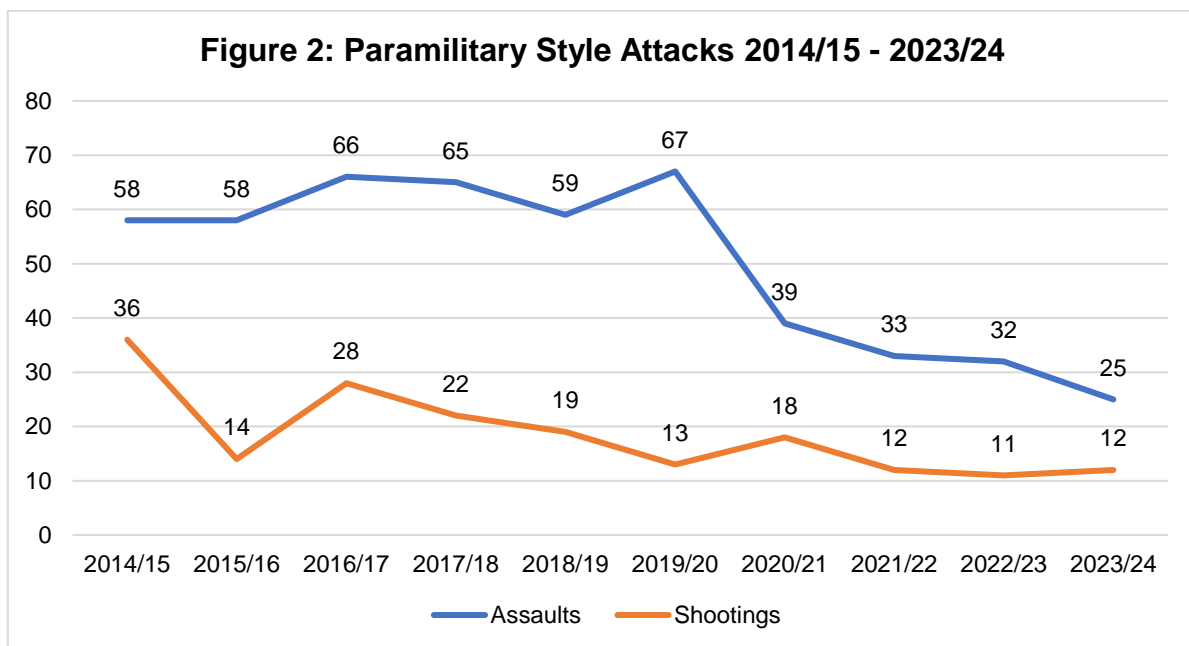
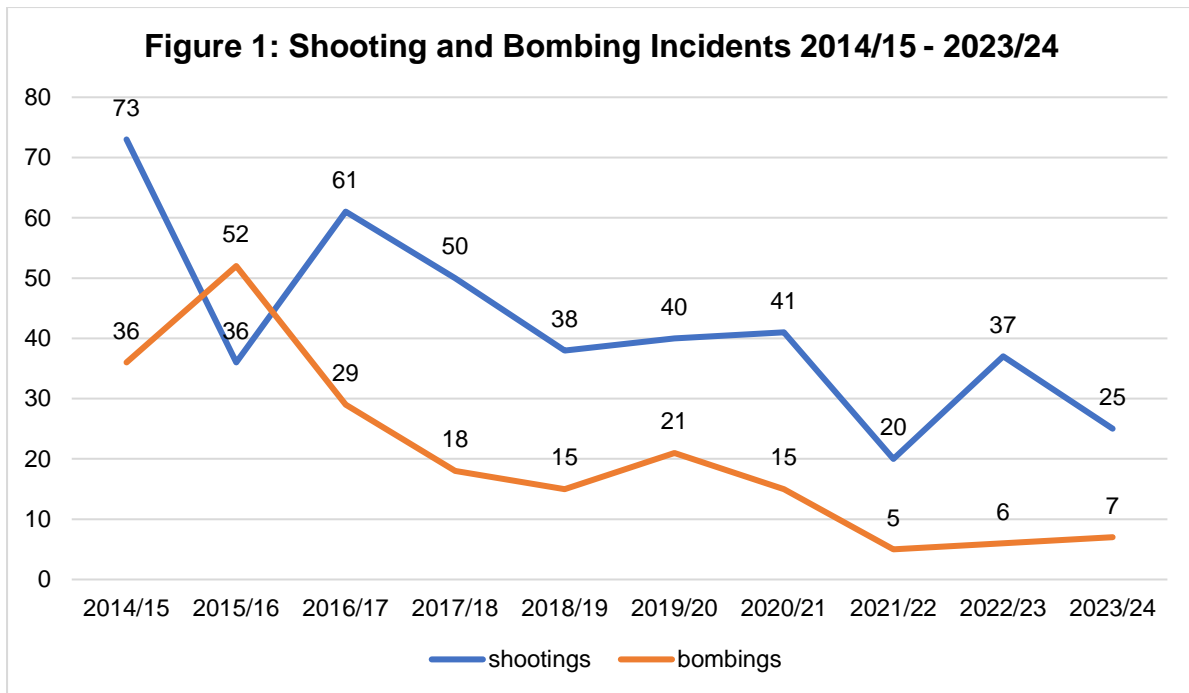
- 1.50 We also met with the leaderships of the Prison Services in both jurisdictions in 2024 and heard at first hand the continuing challenges posed for their work by ongoing paramilitarism, though we recognise that the populations of paramilitary prisoners differ in size and composition in the two jurisdictions. We are encouraged by the strong level of co-operation between the two Services, and indeed feel it should be enhanced further. As we pointed out in our last Report, the situation of prisoners has been a key dimension of the conflict, and we believe that the ultimate resolution of the paramilitarism issue will require a particular focus on the matter. We accordingly wish to encourage the two Prison Services to build on the co-operation in place and to consider further enhancement of that co-operation in regard to paramilitarism.
- 1.51 We welcome the publication of the Report of the House of Commons' Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in 2024 on the effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland. We were grateful for the opportunity to have discussions with the Committee during its deliberations and were encouraged that some of the points we made were reflected in their Report. We were particularly encouraged that the Report included a focus on Group Transition which made an important contribution to the discussion.
- 1.52 The work of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and also the ongoing interest of the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in the Houses of the Oireachtas in Dublin, help ensure a continued informed public focus on the issue of paramilitarism. We have noted in our Reports that public attention and an informed societal debate are essential if paramilitarism is to be ended, as is the wish of the vast majority of people on both islands. We reiterate in this Report the importance of that debate. In that regard, we noted the launches of a number of interesting publications in 2024 around the issue of paramilitarism. We welcome the continued focus by academics, policymakers and other front line staff on various aspects of the paramilitarism issue, on the basis that they all serve to deepen public understanding of what remains a persistent challenge for Northern Ireland society.
- 1.53 We appreciate that this is not an easy debate. Listening to, and reading, public commentary about the issue again over the past year, it is very clear that there is little patience among the wider public for the reality that paramilitarism continues in

existence today, more than 30 years after the ceasefires and more than 26 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We share that impatience. However, we also know that simply expressing frustration and impatience with what is undoubtedly an unacceptable situation is not sufficient in itself to bring about its end. We revert to our analysis as set out above that, however unpalatable, paramilitarism is a complex phenomenon which remains deeply embedded in many communities throughout Northern Ireland. Moreover, it is our view that one of the complexities involved is that, while communities suffer from the coercive control of paramilitary organisations, it is also the case that these organisations are in many cases part of the community and not “other” – those involved can be family, neighbours and friends – and that in certain circumstances some in the community look to these organisations for “solutions” to local issues. Levels of support can vary. Addressing that coercive control and ending that kind of role in communities is a multi-faceted, complex task that will require sustained, integrated interventions across many bodies and entities.

- 1.54 There is also a political, ideological dimension to the issue of paramilitarism today which needs to be acknowledged in respect of Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups alike. Work to tackle and end paramilitarism must reflect this dimension, including the issue of engagement with the groups with a view to Group Transition. Just as it was not possible to bring about a comprehensive Agreement more than 26 years ago without engagement with those connected to the paramilitary groups at that time, so in our view it is not possible to bring about a complete ending today without a formal process.

Snapshot of relevant data

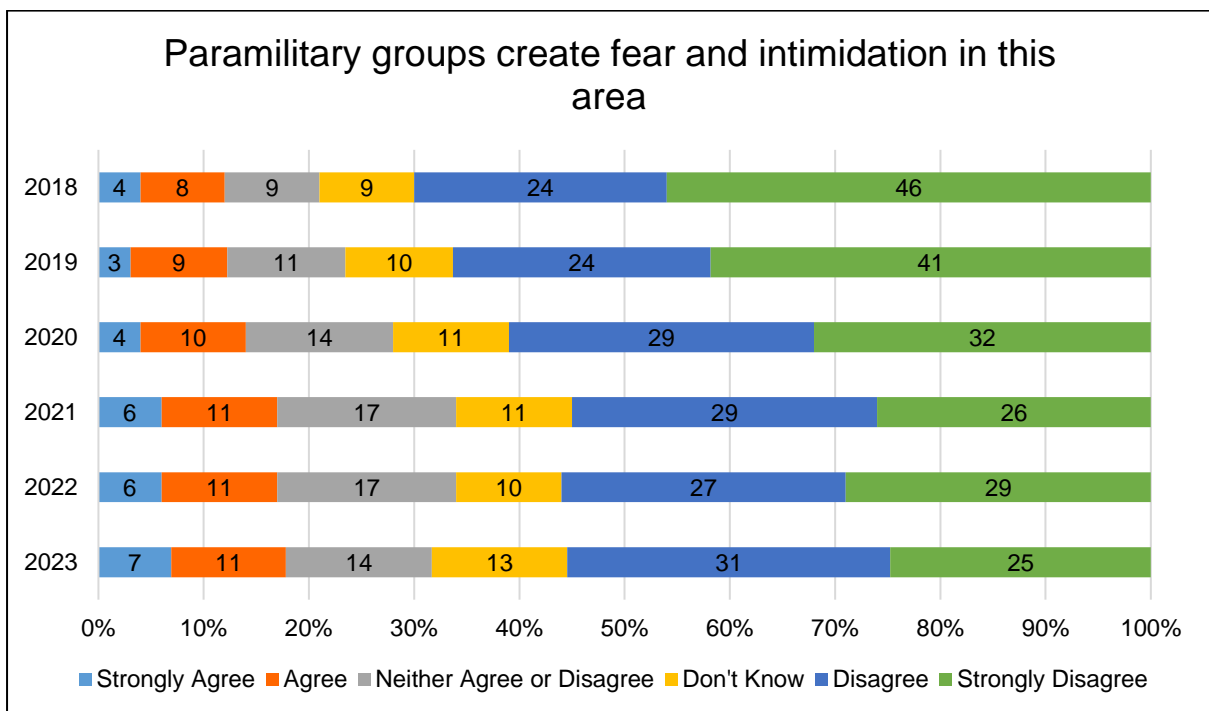
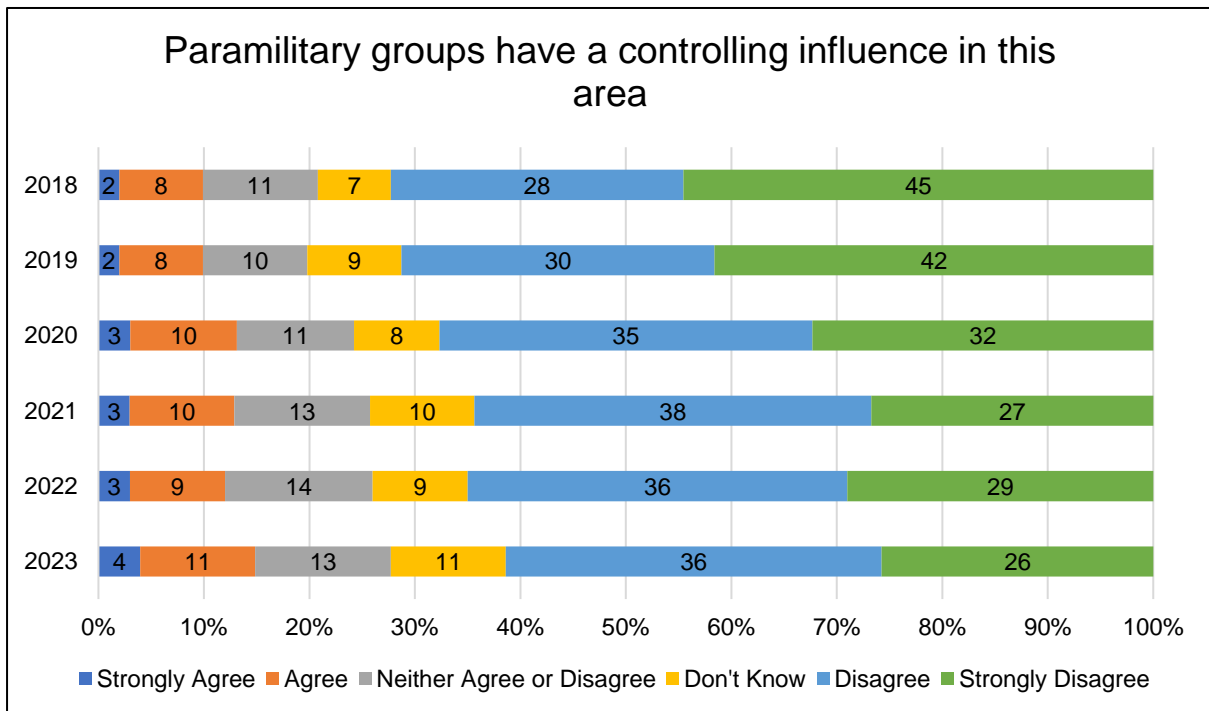
- 1.55 We conclude this Section of the Overview with a snapshot of some relevant data gathered in 2024. In reviewing progress made it is important to consider a wide range of indicators. We consider additional data and input in Section B of the Report. There was a decrease in the number of shooting incidents and the number of casualties of paramilitary style assaults compared to the previous year, while the number of bombing incidents and the number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings were similar to the previous two years.



1.56 The data is limited given that paramilitary-linked criminality is often underreported. However, we can gain some insight into community experiences from the results of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, which are used by the Programme to measure progress at population level. 15% of respondents to the 2023 NILT survey believed that paramilitaries had a controlling influence in their area, compared with 12% in 2022, which roughly equates to 220,215 of the population of NI⁷. 27% believe

⁷ The data results are representative of adult population to a margin of error of +/- 2.8% at 95% confidence. 15% is the value of respondents who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in this area”.

that paramilitaries contribute to crime, drug dealing and anti-social behaviour in their area.



Developments in the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime 2024 – More Detailed Look

1.57 We turn now to more detail regarding developments in the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime and relevant linked work in 2024. We do so

through the lens of a “Twin Track Approach”, Track One being policing/justice responses and Track Two the tackling of deep-rooted socio-economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today. We have found this a useful lens to reflect the duality of approach agreed at the time of Fresh Start: both a robust law enforcement response and addressing the socio-economic issues connected to continuing paramilitary activity are required to tackle paramilitarism. We are clear that these tracks can’t work separately and must be connected; we believe that a whole of government approach is vital and see partnership working as key to success.

Track One – Policing and Law Enforcement

- 1.58 We have repeatedly made clear throughout our Reports, that while a broader, comprehensive approach is required in tackling and ending paramilitarism, a set of strong policing and criminal justice responses is fundamental to the task.

Policing

- 1.59 Turning first to the policing dimension of Track One, the PCTF is a joint endeavour by the PSNI, HMRC (UK tax authority) and the National Crime Agency funded by the Programme and it has continued to show strong results in terms of arrests, disruptions and seeing its work progress to charges and convictions. This vital collaboration occurs not just within the PCTF but throughout those agencies which all play important roles in addressing paramilitary-linked criminality, both separately and together. We have been impressed by the efforts of teams to use their experience and collaboration within the PCTF to leverage and inform activity across the wider organisation, thus strengthening the overall response. Significant seizure of assets and other enforcement action sends a clear message to communities and to those in groups involved in criminality that crime will not be tolerated. It is vital that all the relevant agencies give tackling paramilitary-related criminality the priority that it needs, particularly recognising the impact that coercive control and fear has on communities and individuals.
- 1.60 Turning to specifics, the PCTF continues to make significant inroads seizing assets and proceeds of crime, arresting suspects and disrupting paramilitary-linked criminality, including drug dealing. In the period November 2017 to 30 June 2024, the PCTF conducted 1,169 searches, recovered almost £6.35 million of controlled drugs, seized 409 weapons and firearms, made 492 arrests, charged or reported 543 people for prosecution, seized over £1.1 million of cash and over £2.36 million worth of property, issued almost £1.9 million in Property Recovery Orders and prevented almost £50 million (£49,635,405) in revenue loss. We encourage the PCTF to continue with their efforts to ensure that the full impact of enforcement actions is understood by others involved in tackling paramilitarism, as part of collective working to continually refresh understanding of the nature and prevalence of paramilitary-linked criminality. We understand from community engagement that the work of the PCTF is encouraging individuals and groups to reconsider their criminal activities.

- 1.61 Other policing teams also have important roles to play in tackling paramilitarism, including the wider Organised Crime Branch, the Terrorism Investigation Unit, and specialists such as the Tactical Support Group. It is important that this work is not seen as the purview of the PCTF alone, and we welcome Programme and PSNI efforts to share learning and experience across the organisation.

Neighbourhood Policing and Locality Working

- 1.62 We have stressed through all our Reports our view that Neighbourhood Policing is vital to effectively dealing with paramilitarism. When police and communities are in partnership – based on mutual trust and respectful relationships – police and communities can most effectively play their respective roles in keeping people safe and undertaking collective problem solving. We welcome the Chief Constable’s commitment that “Community policing is the bedrock of the PSNI”.

- 1.63 Both the PSNI and communities are frustrated by the temporary redeployment of neighbourhood officers from their duties to other assignments, and the resourcing issues connected to this challenge must be addressed by the NI Executive and UK Government as a matter of urgency. We see good pockets of neighbourhood policing, where dedication, creativity and effective partnerships have unlocked real progress. It is essential that this progress is not lost, and that this standard continues to be the goal across all Districts.

- 1.64 A related concern we also hear in communities is around consistency of personnel when it comes to police officers in areas. We recognise that officers are moved for various reasons. We understand the challenge that this poses for PSNI, but we believe that there would be merit in PSNI looking at what more can be done to address this concern that a relationship is built and then an individual soon moves on.

Problem-Solving Approach

- 1.65 The PSNI has continued to champion a problem-solving approach to justice. We welcome their commitment to problem-solving champions in each District, their work to resource teams and respond agilely to issues, and their efforts to celebrate success such as the problem-solving awards. The PSNI is funded by the Programme to deliver a range of community safety initiatives, and these are vital, as they allow partners to quickly collaborate on an issue, plan a response and deliver in a timely fashion.

Stop and Search

- 1.66 We continue to hear concerns raised by communities about the use and frequency of all stop and search powers⁸, the timing and locations of actions such as searches and arrests and the impact this can have on families and communities, leading to

⁸ As also reflected in the 2023 Independent Reviewer Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act report https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6707e0c2366f494ab2e7b6ab/E03213039_IRJSA_Report_2024_Web_Accessible_2_.pdf

allegations and perceptions that one community is policed in a different way from another. We acknowledge that the PSNI is working hard to continue to build community confidence in its approach and we welcome specific assurances given about these various matters in recent years, as well as their engagement with bodies such as the Policing Board.

Collaborative Working

1.67 In our Reports, we have placed particular focus on the importance of close co-operation between the police and stakeholders in other parts of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime. In our meetings with the PSNI in 2024, we were encouraged by its renewed commitment to such strategic and operational participation in collaborative working with other stakeholders – for example on the Sponsor Group and also at local level through the support hubs. Operation Conexus is a good case in point. Through this, the PSNI is seeking to take a localised approach to preventing harm and trauma caused by paramilitary activity in local communities by joining up law enforcement actions and promoting a holistic, system-wide approach, including partnership with community. It is funded by the Programme and has had a promising start. We understand it has been particularly successful in Mid and East Antrim and is being rolled out in other areas.

1.68 As we have continuously stressed, 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 the commitment of the senior leadership team at the PSNI, under the Chief Constable, to this approach. They themselves have made clear to us repeatedly that policing alone – though a vital component – cannot resolve the paramilitarism issue by itself. We appreciate that they have engaged fully in the collaborative working model.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs)

1.69 We welcome the fact that nine of 11 PCSPs across NI now name tackling paramilitarism as part of their plans and are working to address linked issues such as anti-social behaviour, criminality, addiction, vulnerability and local need. We would like to see measurable targets for progress set in each District. Measuring progress will look different in each District because of issues particular to areas, but there would be merit in the discussion itself, and this could also prompt further exploration of the best measures of progress in this field.

Track One – Criminal Justice Aspects

1.70 Coupled with policing, an effective criminal justice response is the other key dimension of Track One of the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism. In the following paragraphs, we take a more detailed look at this response. In brief, some of the core necessary elements in that regard can be summarised as follows:

- court cases progressing through the criminal justice system without avoidable delay,
- bail decisions being taken and explained which strike an appropriate balance between relevant human rights, and give the public confidence,
- appropriate sentences being given (and explained), striking the right balance when it comes to punishment, protection of the public, deterrence, rehabilitation and reparation,
- restorative approaches being used where that is possible and appropriate,
- a prison experience with a focus on preparation for rehabilitation, and
- preparation for release and effective supervision of offenders to promote resettlement and rehabilitation of individuals who have historically been caught up in paramilitarism and/or are at risk of future involvement.

In our view, other agencies have a similarly vital part to play in fostering safer communities and ensuring that communities have tools, resources and the support to flourish.

Asset recovery

1.71 The total value of proceeds of crime seized in Northern Ireland has increased over the last five years: in 2018/19, £1.1m was seized and in 2023/24, that rose to £5.6m. That figure includes cash seizures, which rose from £1.6m in 2022/23 to £2.3m in 2023/24, as well as seizures through account freezing orders, which also rose from £0.8m in 2022/23 to £3.2m in 2023/24, quadrupling in value. While forfeiture orders continue to be used, there was a year-on-year decrease in the number of orders made (105 in 2023/24 compared to 118 in 2022/23) and in the value of the proceeds of crime recovered (£1.1m in 2023/24 compared with £1.4m in 2022/23). Confiscation and restraint orders remain part of the law enforcement toolbox and continue to be used. Through the local Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS), proceeds of crime obtained through Confiscation Orders are reinvested into projects aimed at tackling crime and reducing the fear of crime in communities. We continue to encourage the Department of Justice and the UK Government to progress work so that assets recovered in NI are invested directly in local communities. In Ireland, the Community Safety Innovation Fund was set up in 2022 to allow proceeds of crime to be directed into community projects to support community safety. We note with approval that this Fund was allocated €3.75 million for 2024 and €4 million for 2025 to support the development of community safety initiatives. The UK Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS) strengthens law enforcement’s capability to disrupt criminal activity by providing agencies with a share of assets recovered. We welcome the focus that has been brought to bear on the finances of paramilitary-linked criminality and encourage the NCA, HMRC and PSNI to continue this approach⁹.

Organised crime legislation

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/asset-recovery-statistics>

1.72 The Department of Justice has consulted on organised crime legislative proposals and has been developing new organised crime offences and enhanced measures to disrupt criminality. We understand that these provisions have been drafted and will be formally added as amendments to the Justice Bill which Minister of Justice Naomi Long brought to the Assembly in September 2024. We welcome this progress: the creation of new offences offers new tools for law enforcement to more effectively target and tackle organised crime. Notwithstanding the need for appropriate legislative scrutiny, we encourage the early adoption of this Bill as it should help to deliver appropriate sentencing for those harming communities through organised criminality and should support efforts to draw clearer distinctions between paramilitary-linked criminality and those paramilitaries seeking to move on.

Sentencing

1.73 It is important for confidence in the criminal justice system that members of the public have faith in the sentences passed on offenders and view them as appropriate and proportionate. It is concerning that in response to a question about sentencing in the last NILT survey, 56% of respondents felt that sentences were generally too lenient. We therefore welcome that the Chief Justice has continued to prioritise enhancing the public's understanding of criminal justice, particularly the sentencing process. This work also includes judicial training on sentencing principles and sentencing remarks to include how victim personal statements are communicated. The Chief Justice's Sentencing Group should continue to keep the question of whether there would be value in additional guidance for cases involving paramilitary-linked criminality under review. We encourage the Chief Justice, in conjunction with the Judicial Studies Board, to explore whether additional training might be of benefit for judges as they handle challenging cases with paramilitary dimensions, building on training already given to Crown Court judges on terrorism offences. It is notable too that the Substance Misuse Court in Belfast is now embedded on a permanent basis. This innovative problem-solving approach to justice aims to provide additional supports to tackle addiction issues, stabilise lives, and change mindsets to help reduce the risk of reoffending. The Chief Justice continues to champion problem-solving justice initiatives, such as the establishment of the Domestic Abuse Contest Court in Laganside, which makes use of the Remote Evidence Centre in Belfast to support the victims of domestic abuse, and we look forward to seeing additional creative strategies going forward.

Removing avoidable delay

1.74 The Criminal Justice Board has a Speeding Up Justice programme of work aimed at reducing avoidable delays in the criminal justice system. We are concerned that delays in the criminal justice system – and associated challenges around bail – coupled with the impact of restricted resource allocations are undermining the good work begun by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to engender greater trust and confidence in the public sector, including the criminal justice system.

- 1.75 We see a role for everyone – politicians, communities, civic society, faith leaders and those in the criminal justice system, such as police, judges, probation officers, prison staff, prosecutors, lawyers and others – to work to further enhance trust and confidence in the system, and to deliver a system which sees justice being done.
- 1.76 Examples of innovation in this space have included a no file decision pilot whereby PSNI can close files if a senior officer decides that the evidential test has not been met, to help focus prosecutor and police investigative time on cases that most need it.
- 1.77 In 2023/24, the average (median) time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date that the offence was reported was 190 days. This is a decrease of 7.8% from the median of 206 days taken in 2022-23 and is the lowest median time recorded since 2019-20. However, the median time taken for a charge case to be dealt with at Crown Court was 551 days, a decrease of 1.8% from 2022-23 (561 days), but the second highest in the last five years. This is the case even though the Crown Court is operating at increased capacity, indicating the severe pressure the system as a whole is under.¹⁰ Work to effectively speed up justice is crucial.

Bail

- 1.78 We also hear concerns about bail arrangements. While we recognise that some community concerns are related to delays in the system, we also hear concerns about the proximity of victims and witnesses to bail addresses of those accused of paramilitary-linked crimes, which once again highlights the fact that paramilitaries are embedded and live within the communities where they cause harm. We are aware that people charged with serious paramilitary offences can be quickly back in communities, and there are fears linked to potential non-compliance with bail conditions. We fully appreciate the complexities of balancing competing human rights obligations in the context of bail decisions, and ultimately judges must make difficult judgement calls balancing the need to protect victims, witnesses and the public with a defendant's rights to a fair trial and their case being dealt with within a reasonable timeframe. To ensure public confidence in the bail regime, and to support its objectives, we note the recommendation of CJINI that the DoJ consult on bail arrangements for Northern Ireland, promoting a societal conversation about its objectives, parameters and working¹¹. We welcome the continuing commitment to problem-solving, such as High Court bail days being changed so that prisoners are not released at the weekend when they are more likely to struggle with accommodation and accessing benefits.

¹⁰ [https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/2024-09/Opening of Legal Year Speech - 5 September 2024 FINAL.pdf](https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/2024-09/Opening_of_Legal_Year_Speech_-_5_September_2024_FINAL.pdf)

¹¹ <https://www.cjini.org/getattachment/65877a4e-3b5b-4319-9684-513d0d4ea542/report.aspx> p16 in particular

Prisons

- 1.79 The NI prison population continues to increase: the average daily prison population rose by 11.4% during 2023/24 to reach 1,877, while 36.5% of that population is on remand¹². This increase, alongside an aging prison population with high levels of social care and mental health needs, prisoners who are not originally from Northern Ireland, staffing pressures, and constrained resources, is impacting the NI Prison Service's (NIPS) ability to deliver constructive activity, to fully prepare prisoners for release and reintegration, and to run a rehabilitative regime. It is also concerning to hear of impact on delivery of the Prisoner Development Model, which focuses on resettlement and reoffending, including addressing offending behaviour, maintaining family contact, gaining skills and qualifications to help access employment, together with practical assistance and support with housing, finance and debt, health and addictions¹³. Furthermore, it is regrettable that resource constraints within the Department of Health have stalled work to support improved health (including mental health) within the justice system. We welcome the collaborative approach to implementing various health strategies such as Mental Health and Substance Use Strategies which will have an impact on those in the criminal justice sector¹⁴. While these support mechanisms are essential for all prisoners, they are also vital for those who have committed a paramilitary-related crime to help ensure that on release from prison, individuals have had the opportunity to access rehabilitation supports and are more resilient to paramilitary control and less likely to be drawn into further paramilitary-related offending. The NIPS needs support if it is to fulfil its purpose of "making the community safer by supporting and challenging people to change".
- 1.80 In 2023/24, 36.5% of the total NI prison population were being held on remand¹⁵, representing a significantly higher proportion than in England and Wales (20%)¹⁶, Scotland (23%)¹⁷, or Ireland (19%)¹⁸. Of those on remand in NI prisons, 2.3% had been on remand two years or more, 7.7% had been on remand for more than one year but less than two, and 14.6% had been held for over six months but less than a year. We understand that a Working Group on Remand, chaired by the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, is progressing work such as developing a prospective bail support pilot for women through a (soon to be established) multi-agency group; enhancing the availability and use of management information on bail and remand; and exploring the range of electronic monitoring technologies available

¹² <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/Northern-Ireland-Prison-Population-2023-24.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/2023-24%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20Prison%20Service.pdf>

¹⁴ *ibid* footnote 13

¹⁵ *ibid* footnote 12

¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/672366d046aa392ce3565542/OMSQ_Q2_2024.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-prison-population-statistics-2023-24/>

¹⁸ https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/30-September-2024.pdf

to support individuals in the community whilst maintaining public safety.¹⁹ These possible measures should be fully investigated and those which show potential should be further pursued.

- 1.81 We welcome the NIPS's commitment to rehabilitation, resettlement and developing a strategic approach to the use of restorative practice, and we note that Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison achieved top ratings following an independent inspection in November 2024 which found that most prisoners were taking part in training, education and work opportunities. We acknowledge the important contribution of those such as the Independent Assessment Team who support the functioning of the separated regime (for certain Republican and Loyalist prisoners) and encourage a continuing dialogue to that end. We welcome the pragmatic and sensitive approach being taken by the NI Prison Service and encourage them to continue in that vein. Although the Programme no longer funds learning and development in the separated regime, it is vital that equitable provision of training and learning opportunities and constructive activity is sustained.

Monitoring of terrorist related offenders

- 1.82 Multi-agency review arrangements (MARA) continue to operate to support the effective management of the risks posed by terrorist-related offenders. The statutory guidance for the scheme (which was published in September 2021) commits to a review after three years of operation and it will be important that this work identifies any lessons to be learnt and informs future delivery.

Probation

- 1.83 The Programme has continued to support the Probation Board-led Aspire project, which works with those marginalised young men who are most susceptible to paramilitary/criminal influence and, therefore, most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary or criminal activity. It aims to help them develop alternative coping mechanisms and increase their resilience. The Programme also funds Engage: a dedicated resource to support women who have offended and help them to make the transition back into local communities. This project works with women both in custody and in the community to build resilience and equip them with the skills and learning to withstand paramilitary influence when they exit the criminal justice system. Having met people who have benefited from these supports, we note its positive impact on those with complex needs. Similar supports are delivered by voluntary and community sector partners to young men who are not in the criminal justice system but who have similar risk factors. This vital work should be maintained.

¹⁹ <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=399599>

Restorative work

1.84 The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime has continued to fund some restorative practice, which we see as crucial to increasing community skills and resilience and fostering new approaches to problem solving. Restorative training has continued in a wide range of contexts, and we see ongoing value in this. The Prison Service is considering the adoption of a restorative strategy, the PSNI is piloting restorative interventions as part of Community Resolution Notices (CRN), and Probation Board NI and accredited restorative justice organisations are making progress introducing restorative justice in the custody, resettlement and reintegration stages. Victim Support NI continues to deliver training to both statutory and non-statutory organisations and individuals and the Communities in Transition STARS Programme continues its good work. An Interim Protocol Lead has been working to implement the revised 2023 Protocol for community-based restorative justice organisations and is seeking to enhance the use of restorative justice throughout the criminal justice system. The work towards establishing a Centre of Restorative Excellence also forms part of this. Whilst welcoming these developments the amount of time taken to date is regrettable. Other Departments alongside Justice should now support this initiative, as restorative practice is also key to the work of education, housing and local communities. It is noted that the Department of Education supports Restorative Practice in schools (through “A Fair Start” funding) via a team in the Education Authority. As new organisations become involved, and further schemes are developed, the community sector including accredited restorative justice organisations, needs to be adequately funded to deliver these specialist services.

Victims of crime

1.85 Work to improve the experiences of victims and witnesses of crime within the criminal justice system has continued, including raising awareness of the NI Victim and Witness Charters²⁰. Justice agencies must continue to explore what more can be done to provide witnesses with the confidence to come forward and give evidence about paramilitary-related criminality.

Hate crime

1.86 Race-related hate incidents increased from 1,221 to 1,353 in 2023/24, and it is widely accepted that underreporting of such incidents continues to be an issue²¹. Although not all race-related hate incidents and crime are paramilitary-linked, there can be a paramilitary element involved. For example, the PSNI have indicated that there was a paramilitary element to some of the August 2024 hate crimes and incidents, and NGOs have highlighted the connection between hate crime and paramilitarism. The Programme is reviewing how paramilitary-linked threats are dealt with, and this should include racist motivations. Following Judge Marrinan’s review of hate crime in

²⁰ https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/2023-24%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%20-%20Department%20of%20Justice_0.pdf

²¹ <https://www.psnipolice.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics>

Northern Ireland, DOJ continues to progress this work and we urge them to continue to prioritise this vital area, alongside efforts by The Executive Office to promote racial equality.

Resourcing the Policing and Criminal Justice system

- 1.87 We have stressed a number of times in this Overview the importance of resourcing in tackling paramilitarism. In that regard, the challenge of adequate resourcing for the justice system has continued to be of concern. In the 2024/25 NI Executive budget, the Justice Department received 78% of its resource requirement (the lowest percentage of all Departments)²². In real terms the Justice budget has decreased 1.9% in the period 2019-20 to 2022-23²³. The Justice Minister and the heads of all the Statutory Agencies in the Justice system have expressed serious concern that lack of resource is inhibiting the ability to deliver vital services. This has an impact on the speed of justice, ability to investigate crime, responses to disorder, and delivering a fully rehabilitative prison regime and probation services. Having set out how crucial an effective justice system is in terms of tackling paramilitarism, we highlight here the urgency of addressing the current budgetary challenges facing the police, prison, probation and prosecution systems.

Track Two – addressing systemic socio-economic issues

- 1.88 We noted above the wide range of projects underway through Track Two of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime – responses aimed at addressing the socio-economic challenges facing individuals and families in communities where the paramilitaries operate, challenges which potentially make them vulnerable to paramilitary influence and control. We have seen increasing evidence of the positive impact of the Programme’s work in supporting vulnerable individuals, families and communities and strengthening their resilience in being able to resist paramilitary influence. In our last Report, in this section of the Overview, we included examples of projects and initiatives making a difference in that regard and in this Report we include a number of updates from 2024 which constitute interventions which deserve to be highlighted. We had the benefit in several cases of direct conversations with those using these services and hearing at first hand the difference they were making to them. In each case, we were very taken by the powerful testimony we heard. Fuller details on these and other Track Two projects are contained in Section C of this Report.

²² <https://www.nifiscalcouncil.org/files/nifiscalcouncil/documents/2024-05/NI%20Executive%27s%202024-25%20Budget%20-%20an%20assessment%20-%20web%20version%2014.05.24.pdf> based on Departmental bids against a defined baseline.

²³ <https://www.nifiscalcouncil.org/files/nifiscalcouncil/documents/2023-04/The%20NIO%27s%202022-23%20Budget%20for%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%20web%20version%20-%20revised%2028%20April%20%28v2%29.pdf>

- 1.89 We continue to believe that success in the mission of tackling paramilitarism can only be achieved if the social and economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today are comprehensively addressed. Links between poverty, deprivation, disadvantage, lack of opportunity, aspiration, hope, and vulnerability are well established in research and literature, and are echoed in evaluations being carried out by the Programme.
- 1.90 We see good examples of collaboration, positive impact, learning being shared (such as through the action research projects, workshops and publications), and efforts to encourage wider societal conversations, for example through a recent series of videos. Much of the work is seeking to increase protective factors that help to shield individuals from risk, and increase community resilience more broadly.
- 1.91 The Education Authority (EA) provides a range of **youth work support** in targeted geographical areas, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector. Most of the work is supporting those most at risk or who have been exposed to violence, as well as building capacity among teachers, youth workers and others to play their part in responding to paramilitarism. The CONNECT programme places youth workers in hospital Emergency Departments to support vulnerable young people at a ‘reachable moment’ and reduce the physical and social effects of paramilitary activity. It engaged 1,416 young people in hospitals last year, with 60 service users receiving longer-term, ongoing support as they transitioned out of Emergency Departments and back into the community²⁴. ENGAGE area youth workers are deployed in areas of need to work directly with young people within communities who have been harmed by paramilitary groups and/or those who are most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary activity. Evaluations show that through the outreach, mentoring and group work, the youth service and its partners have enhanced protective factors and the work has led to a significant reduction in risk taking behaviours, particularly propensity to violence. The EA also works in partnership with PSNI and has developed gender-specific resources for the prevention of youth violence.
- 1.92 There are eight **Developing Women in the Community projects** providing training and support to women of all ages, equipping them with the skills, knowledge and confidence to become (further) involved, or take on an even greater leadership role, in transformational community development and helping to support their communities, as part of wider efforts to end paramilitary activities. The different work in different areas helped to build trust and informal support networks, renewed energy for action-planning for community development, and helped normalise engaging the PSNI and Statutory Agencies. Gendered experiences of paramilitarism have traditionally been less well researched and it is to be welcomed that this work is increasing awareness and deepening understanding of the coercive control that exists when the abuse is

²⁴ <https://www.endingtheharm.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CONNECT-Report.pdf> December 2022 to December 2023.

perpetrated by those belonging (or claiming allegiance) to paramilitary groups. The recently published Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls is also key and needs to be adequately resourced to tackle this problem which manifests itself in Northern Ireland in a unique way. This learning should also inform work reviewing the approach to community resilience and development, community sector funding and area regeneration.

1.93 The **InSync project** has continued to work with individuals living with trauma from paramilitary violence, receiving support to stabilise their situations and start to rebuild their lives. They had 73 clients last year. An important learning has been about how critical it is to foster stability for individuals living chaotic lifestyles, to help them engage effectively with counselling. Mentoring has been crucial to that. Service users have been supported to help deal with drug misuse, debt, low self-esteem, opportunities for training and employment, access to benefits, housing and more stable family relationships. Lessons from this project should assist those working on the current mental health strategy, as well as informing the approach taken to commissioning and providing mental health supports.

1.94 The **Communities in Transition** project continues its work to build capacity, confidence and resilience in eight areas where there has been a history of paramilitary activity and coercive control. When individuals living in CiT areas were asked what issues made their communities vulnerable to paramilitarism, the latest figures available in September 2024 found:

- 77%: mental health and addictions;
- 73%: lack of education/aspiration of young people leaving them vulnerable to paramilitary recruitment;
- 51%: exploitation (including monetary and sexual exploitation and the sexual and/or criminal exploitation of children); and
- 15%: displays of community control through display of paramilitary murals, flags, symbols.

Ambitious initiatives are intended to “support individuals and groups to play a part in the transition of their communities into ones where paramilitary activity no longer plays a role”. The work is tailored to each area which is an essential feature of the projects.

1.95 Some examples of excellent work being funded by CiT include:

- efforts to improve the physical landscape - including the reimaging of murals and replacing graffiti - and other arts and creative projects such as producing videos and installations to give a more positive image of the community. By removing symbols associated with paramilitary control, challenging the ‘normality’ of paramilitary displays and promoting a more positive sense of community identity, this work is playing an important part in changing the conditions linked to continuing paramilitarism;

- improving community safety through the development of local community safety forums and partnerships involving residents in areas where there has traditionally been lower trust and confidence in police and other statutory services. This work is helping to change attitudes and cultural norms and foster better relationships in places where historically some people turned to paramilitaries for ‘problem solving’;
- providing meaningful alternatives when people face financial issues which might lead them to turn to illegal paramilitary moneylenders, for example, facilitating school uniform swaps, seed funding for social supermarkets, and money management support;
- targeted work with at-risk young people to prepare them for employment, boosting their skills, confidence, motivation and (re)connecting them with their local communities. This promotes alternative opportunities and pathways. Similar work is also undertaken with ex-prisoners;
- a range of initiatives to provide mental health support for individuals in areas vulnerable to coercive control (including people with links to paramilitary groups) such as counselling and growing new support networks, as well as community health initiatives responding to topical issues in areas, for example growth in issues with certain drugs and addiction. In addition to benefits for individuals, these efforts can contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma;
- growing the use of restorative practices in additional settings through training and mentoring to equip residents, community workers, statutory organisations, teachers, and others to contribute towards creating a more restorative society by repairing harm and restoring broken relationships and reducing any perceived ‘role’ for paramilitaries in communities.

Beyond 2027 – Comments and Recommendations

1.96 We understand that considerable planning work is being undertaken by the Programme Team, the Sponsor Group and the Executive on the future approach to tackling paramilitarism as the Programme will finish in March 2027. We are clear, as are the Executive, that more work will be required beyond then and in this Section of the Report we set out our thoughts on the continuing needs. We have reflected to date on the need for a balance between:

- specific interventions that are particularly tailored to address the characteristics of paramilitarism and its impact on communities, and
- activities which address elements of paramilitarism but are best delivered within broader mainstream public services under Department, council and agency policies to maximise their reach and impact.

For example, we see a need for both specific supports for young people at risk of being drawn into paramilitary gangs and/or being harmed by them, and for universal training in topics such as child criminal exploitation and trauma informed practice for teachers, social workers, youth workers and other professionals who are in direct

contact with young people and for clear pathways for them to refer those young people when there are concerns that they are either vulnerable to or already being exploited by paramilitaries. Both specific interventions and a transformative reshaping of public services are crucial to the mission of ending paramilitarism. A primary objective that should shape work planning for delivery beyond 2027 must be expanding the collective approach to tackling paramilitarism, growing further buy-in and fostering additional partnerships between Departments, agencies and the community and voluntary sector.

- 1.97 Before the inception of the Programme, there were not such clear examples of good, targeted work being done to tackle paramilitarism nor such a coordinated approach. We have commented throughout this Report on the impact that this focused, targeted approach is having in addressing the many challenges posed by continuing paramilitarism. It is clear, including from what we have been reporting, that there is tangible evidence that initiatives instituted and being supported by the Programme are playing a positive role in changing communities, growing protective factors of individuals, keeping people safe and addressing risk factors. It is vital that this progress – both in terms of focus and outcomes delivered – is not lost. The momentum and valuable existing work must be built upon, and reach and impact should be further increased.
- 1.98 A key need is a central team overseeing collective efforts to tackle paramilitarism, tracking work being done, building connections across the community and statutory sector, commissioning research, analysing the latest trends and developments, and helping others to spot opportunities and design work to respond to that. To ensure that such a team has the ability to support innovation, and has buy-in from relevant partners, we see merit in it being able to seed fund new initiatives and perhaps co-fund mainstream work. This team could also encourage a strategic response to the issue of paramilitarism as a whole. Consideration could also be given to how that team could best contribute to crisis response to paramilitary-related incidents, whether that meant helping to lead, co-ordinate or oversee the response.
- 1.99 On their own the current pilot projects and measures are not sufficient. They are limited to small cohorts, operate in certain areas and are often time-limited. This is not intended as a criticism: a programme is a temporary structure that supports innovation and provides value in addition to existing work by testing novel approaches. Piloting and developing these projects has been vital, and the difference made in lives has been transformational in many instances. We continue to see a case for additional investment in targeted projects and enhanced universal service delivery in areas where paramilitaries have been historically active (for example providing additional youth support, enhancing skills training, improving built environments and dealing with deprivation). NI Executive Departments with relevant programmes, strategies, legal obligations and expertise (such as the Children’s Services Co-operation Act, Strategies for Building Inclusive Communities, housing policy, A Fair Start, adult restorative justice, victim support and organised crime) need to play an increasing part

in expanding the efforts: learning from what has been tested and embedding that into everyday work, as well as identifying ongoing work that can contribute to this mission.

- 1.100 As we move towards a next stage for all of this work, it will be vital that the right balance continues to be struck between dedicated work, linking in with wider work to ensure it plays a full part in delivering change, and ensuring the maximum collaboration between those activities. We appreciate that this has been the approach of the Programme Team and the Sponsor Group through Phase Two, with the various structures and approaches promoting joined-up working. We reiterate our endorsement of such a collective, whole of government approach and would welcome seeing it enhanced beyond 2027. The Programme structures have been working to support project delivery and they are beginning to influence wider strategic ambitions. These next two years will provide an opportunity to embed and upscale efforts, drive further progress across the whole system, and develop an enhanced mechanism to evaluate whole of government efforts. Just as EPPOC has piloted and championed benefits realisation as a means to bring together interested parties and measure progress, so we believe innovation in this space could reap significant results.
- 1.101 Given this necessary whole of government approach, it is our view that when government policies are being developed and updated, consideration should routinely be given to how that work can contribute to tackling paramilitarism. This includes areas such as refreshing the Good Relations Programme, Together: Building a United Community, and Urban Villages, which are all mentioned in the draft Programme for Government, as well as policy development in areas such as poverty, economic productivity, prosperity, neighbourhood renewal and regeneration, housing, infrastructure, the community and voluntary sector, educational disadvantage, skills, community safety, and health and wellbeing. Given the cross-cutting and inter-connected nature of these issues, **we recommend training be developed for all public servants that raises awareness of paramilitarism, describes current work and gives officials tools to consider how strategies and policies can play a part in addressing paramilitarism. We also encourage the Executive to explore introducing requirements on Departments to map the contributions and opportunities for mainstream policies to play their part in tackling paramilitarism, and to monitor delivery so that the contribution can be tracked.** These approaches seem to us to be firmly in line with the Executive's commitment to peace, to "make sure that everyone feels the benefit of a growing economy, improved environment, and a fairer society".
- 1.102 Lasting change will only be achieved when we also see significant progress in linked social issues. The draft Programme for Government is a positive start, and we welcome that the Recommendation we made in our Sixth Report about committing to tackling paramilitarism in the Programme for Government has been followed through. Nevertheless, the wider point we made in that Report about setting ambitious economic and social policy goals remains relevant. There is a significant opportunity for the restored Executive to create the socio-economic conditions which will help to

break the pull of paramilitaries, or those claiming to operate under their banner. There are some welcome commitments in the draft Programme for Government, including that people will get the support they need at every stage of their lives by removing barriers to education and employment, taking action to address poverty, and improving access to services, and that steps will be taken to help those who are struggling, especially in areas where inequality hits hardest or where issues like crime, poverty, addiction, poor mental health and other health challenges are most keenly felt. All of these factors are in play in the task of tackling and ending paramilitarism. It is also clear that they are long-term in their nature and that a sustained, comprehensive policy approach, together with the necessary investment, will be required.

1.103 Sustained political leadership and efforts to tackle paramilitarism from every quarter are vital to address this complex and challenging issue. This is true at a political and strategic level, as well as in local constituencies. Politicians have an ability and a responsibility to exert a positive influence and to encourage those within their communities to eschew violence and embrace non-violent and exclusively peaceful and democratic means of resolving disputes and advocating for communities.

1.104 The level of ambition for, and resources committed to, tackling paramilitarism needs to be further increased. There are opportunities across many sectors:

- All those supporting children and young people need to have training and access to supports and systems and to be familiar with procedures to enable them to help young people at risk of paramilitary harm. Work is ongoing to build additional structures and pathways to support young people who have been victims of child criminal exploitation, building on the systems for child protection in NI. The Education Authority has been doing work in schools to raise awareness of paramilitarism and developed a targeted response to signs of vulnerability. There is a good level of ambition and progress here, but consistency needs to be achieved across NI, and time is of the essence.
- Collaborative work of law enforcement agencies, particularly PSNI, HMRC, and NCA, as well as MI5 where relevant, must continue and be further enhanced. So too the cross-border dimension must continue to be well managed.
- The approach to future mainstream funding for women's projects in paramilitary-affected areas should always be cognisant of the impact of paramilitarism and the vital role that women play in communities and throughout society, including bringing about everyday peace, positive change and transformation. We particularly welcome the commitments in the draft Programme for Government about early intervention and prevention of violence against women and girls, and it is vital that there is appropriate join-up with this work, not least given the potential connections between coercive control in women's relationships and wider community-based paramilitary controls.
- There should be consistent support for offenders (across housing, employment, healthcare) to seek to reduce recidivism and promote reintegration on release. The NI Prison Service is clear that "rehabilitation and resettlement must be at the heart of our work", and the NI Probation Board is similarly committed to

rehabilitation, reintegration and reducing reoffending, and so must be supported as they seek to deliver that in a challenging fiscal and operating environment. Work is also required to remove barriers for former prisoners and their families including limitations on travel, access to financial services, and adoption.

- Trauma and mental health services, and those who can guide and signpost individuals into them, should be well informed about the possible manifestations of paramilitary-linked trauma and trained in responding to it. Awareness of the impact of trauma (linked to the Troubles/conflict, adverse childhood experiences etc.) is increasing and more organisations are seeking to be trauma informed in their approaches to their work. We strongly support this direction of travel.
- An enhanced approach regarding speeding up justice (including committal reform), bail and sentencing will also be key factors in the mission of tackling and ending paramilitarism, and require further investment and support.
- Through education, training, skills development and capacity building, opportunities must be provided for young people who might be susceptible to being drawn into involvement in paramilitary groups.
- Structural division and the visual markers of paramilitarism, such as paramilitary murals, paramilitary flags and interface structures (see paragraph 1.127), must be addressed.
- Efforts must continue to grow community infrastructure and promote alternative problem solving, as well as alternative and new leaderships in communities.

1.105 We have made clear in our reporting that we strongly endorse the focus in the Programme on rigorous evaluation and urge that this focus is not lost beyond 2027 as we believe it is proving itself of real added value. Having invested so much in developing and refining processes and approaches to ensure the maximum impact, a culture and mindset of building evaluation and continuous improvement into all similar work should be fostered.

1.106 Invariably there is a balance to be struck between measuring impact and empowering those delivering on the ground to do the best job that they can in challenging surroundings and circumstances. We welcome the flexibility offered in, for example, Phase Two of the Communities in Transition initiative. We have said elsewhere in this Report that we are impressed by the expertise and capacity of many of the community groups who are participating in the Programme and it will be important that all new approaches are mindful of the expertise offered by these groups - empowering them to deliver against clear objectives in areas, while maintaining flexibility in responding to evolving needs. We note the commitment in the draft Programme for Government that “Through joint working across departments, statutory agencies, and voluntary and community organisations, we will work to keep people safe and allow them to achieve their potential.”

1.107 We also welcome the recent increased spotlight on exploitation. This is a positive step, similar to progress made eradicating the unhelpful language historically used

around “punishment” to describe paramilitary-style attacks and assaults, and it helps shine a light on the insidious nature and complexity of paramilitary harms. It is important to acknowledge that coercion, grooming, abuse and control by paramilitaries, including the abuse of children, have been factors at play in communities in NI, and that these abuses of rights need to be challenged. This needs to be a continued focus beyond 2027.

1.108 We believe that Statutory Agencies should be co-operating to play a greater role at local and strategic level in the mission of tackling and ending paramilitarism. The level of engagement, commitment and focus should not vary depending on persons in post or other variables. Leadership is currently being provided at Sponsor Group. Conversations have been happening between projects, Departments, other agencies and funders about ensuring learning and practice from these projects is shared and where possible folded into mainstream approaches. For example, those involved in specialist EA work have been sharing practice with other youth workers within their organisation and abroad. Similarly, there have been conferences and other activities to raise awareness throughout the PSNI of the PCTF, PSNI problem solving and funded community safety activities. We believe that these conversations should continue, deepen and be given a high priority by organisational leaders, particularly as they face making difficult decisions about budget allocations and focus of activity. We see a particular role for local councils to play through their co-ordination of community planning to promote the well-being of an area and improve community cohesion and the quality of life for all citizens. We believe that tackling paramilitarism and the conditions linked to its continuation should form part of these plans. There are increasing examples of good locality working through vehicles such as Operation Conexus, community-led endeavours like community safety forums, and CiT area collaboration. Supporting and enhancing effective local working should be a clear priority in this continuing work. The progress made in raising awareness of the need to tackle paramilitarism, and development of practice and collaborations to do so, must not be lost.

1.109 We have already highlighted the importance of ensuring the maintenance of the necessary funding for this work, despite the challenging fiscal backdrop. Efforts to tackle paramilitarism beyond 2027 need to reflect the reality that this is a long-haul task which is part of the unfinished business of the peace process and must continue to build on the good learnings and progress of Phases One and Two. We look forward to discussing these and other ideas with the Governments, the Executive, the Assembly, the Sponsor Group and the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Team in more detail. **We strongly recommend that the kind of paramilitary-focused work which the Programme has been responsible for should continue beyond 2027, while also ensuring that consideration is given to those elements of the work of tackling paramilitarism that could be integrated into mainstream policies. The Executive and the two Governments must ensure that work to tackle paramilitarism continues to be given a high priority beyond**

2027. The work done to date must be built upon and further efforts made to tackle this issue once and for all.

The additional dimension – Group Transition

- 1.110 In addition to the Twin Track Approach to tackling paramilitarism, there is also a requirement for a further dimension if paramilitarism is to be ended as distinct from being tackled and disrupted. That dimension we have called Group Transition, whereby not just the individual members of paramilitary organisations move on, but the groups themselves transition out of paramilitarism. Furthermore, in order to bring about such Group Transition, we have argued that there needs to be a process of engagement with the groups themselves. We made the case in our previous two reports that the ending of a group is a voluntary act on the part of its members – as the policing authorities on both sides of the border have made clear, and as we have argued in this Report, it is not possible or feasible to arrest one’s way out of paramilitarism.
- 1.111 In our previous Reports, we suggested that, as an intermediate step, the two Governments appoint an Independent Person to scope out the possible nature of, and the prospects for, such a process of engagement around Group Transition. At the meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in April 2024, the governments of the time agreed to “take forward work, including through joint support for independent scoping and engagement, to assess whether there is merit in and support for a formal process that ensures the transition to disbandment of paramilitary groups given the continuing impact of violence and harm in communities”. We regard the appointment of an Independent Person as a vital step in the journey towards completing the goal of ending paramilitarism in Northern Ireland “once and for all”, and we urge the two Governments to progress the implementation of this recommendation as soon as possible. Our analysis of the situation and what needs to be done has remained consistent across our reports and so we would not propose to revisit this in the same level of detail as in previous reports, but it is important to reiterate the broad principles behind our thinking and make reference in a summary way to a number of elements of Group Transition, and we do so now in the following paragraphs.
- 1.112 Firstly, we remain fully convinced of the need for a process of engagement around Group Transition as part of the mission of ending paramilitarism. It has been more than nine years since the Fresh Start Agreement, eight years since the Independent Three-Person Panel Report and the announcement of the Executive Action Plan, and seven years since the effective start of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, flowing from those three initiatives. Despite the undoubted success and progress achieved by the Programme, which we record and acknowledge fully in this Report, it remains the case that paramilitarism continues to exist. Ultimately, therefore, the goal of the Fresh Start Agreement that paramilitarism be brought to an end “once and for all” has not yet been fully achieved. There are many views as to the reasons why that is the case, but it is our belief that one of those

reasons is the absence of a process of engagement with the groups themselves to bring about their Transition and ending in paramilitary form.

- 1.113 We believe that the time is right to bring a major focus on the question of Group Transition and to undertake an independent, time-bound exercise to scope out potential and explore what might be involved. We reiterate our call on the two Governments to progress with our recommendation to appoint an Independent Person to take this work forward.
- 1.114 Secondly, we wish to make clear in the strongest possible terms that this initiative on Group Transition is not a substitute for the Twin Track Approach to tackling paramilitarism. On the contrary, without the Twin Tracks of robust policing and criminal justice measures, and the sustained and determined support measures for the communities where the paramilitaries operate, Group Transition has little or no chance of success. To put it directly, all three strands are required. We acknowledge that a process of Group Transition will have implications for the Twin Tracks. There will be policing implications for any process of Group Transition and likewise for those projects and initiatives of the Programme taking place in the community. That is why engagement by the Independent Person with those responsible for both Tracks of the Programme will be essential, to enable the Independent Person to take the broadest possible view. However, we repeat here what we said in our last Report – in no way or form, should a process of Group Transition be allowed to impact negatively on the work of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime. Rather it should be able to support and enhance it, all with the ultimate goal in mind of a definitive ending of paramilitarism and its influence.
- 1.115 In the limited way we have just referred to, we wish now to make brief reference to a number of, in our view, central factors involved in the issue of Group Transition.

Partial Group Transition

- 1.116 One of the key questions that has arisen in our consideration of Group Transition is whether in some form some partial dimension of Transition has already taken or is already taking place organically and without a formal process. In our view, the following illustrative but not exhaustive examples provide some signs that this is happening:
- Informal discussions among members of some groups around the nature and form of Transition;
 - Former paramilitaries engaging in education programmes that help to dispel mythologies of the Troubles/conflict;
 - Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and the rule of law taking primacy, including by the adoption of restorative practices;
 - Training and support for reintegration is being provided to those who want to change their lives by ex-prisoner organisations;

- Re-imaging of areas where paramilitaries operate and work on cultural events in consultation with local communities.

1.117 Again, we have had the benefit in 2024 of meeting directly with some of the individuals and groups involved in this work and we were impressed by their determination to make their own contribution to the development of a society free of paramilitarism. These conversations gave us encouragement that pursuing the idea of a fuller, more formal process of Group Transition is feasible. We acknowledge the argument that says if partial Transition is happening organically why not just let that continue. However, important as these examples are, faster and more widespread progress is clearly desirable and in our view, it is only through a full, formal process that a substantial impact on the issue is possible. Such a process would, for example, enable any remaining weaponry to be comprehensively dealt with. In other words, partial Transition is helpful, but it is by no means sufficient to the scale of what is required.

End State of Transition

1.118 In reflecting on the concept of Group Transition, another obvious, key question is “Transition to what?” In previous Reports we have referred to “disbandment” of the groups as the goal. We remain firmly of the view that this is the correct goal. No doubt the precise arrangements and modalities in that regard will be a key part of the work of the Independent Person. Whatever the nature of those arrangements and modalities, the outcome required is clear: that paramilitary groups are no longer part of the landscape of modern-day Northern Ireland, that there is a complete ending of their coercive control in communities and that society moves forward on the basis of entirely peaceful, democratic politics.

Deproscription

1.119 An extension of this point about end-state is the issue of deproscription – the removing of a paramilitary organisation from the list of prohibited bodies under the Terrorism Act 2000. This is provided for in law. One of the questions for consideration in exploring Group Transition, therefore, is under which circumstances could deproscription have a role to play as part of or following such a process.

1.120 At the very least, we believe that since, as we have pointed out, some paramilitaries appear to have been transitioning, and in recognition of the fact that groups do not look the same as they did during the Troubles, it is important that the UK Government review the proscription regime to ensure that only those groups which currently meet the test remain proscribed, and that there is clear information and support for those applying for deproscription. We note the repeated recommendations from successive Independent Reviewers of Terrorism Legislation that proscription should have a fixed term.

Relationship between groups and communities

- 1.121 We have argued in the Analysis Section above that the relationship between paramilitary organisations and the communities in which they operate is a complex one. A key question, clearly, for any possible process of Group Transition, therefore, will be what happens to that relationship. We believe that work to grow community infrastructure and promote alternative problem solving will be vital in that context.
- 1.122 All of these issues, together no doubt with many others, would be central to the deliberations of an Independent Person, and we reiterate our call for the two Governments to proceed with the appointment of someone to this role so that they can do this vital work.

Other Issues for Comment in the Overview

- 1.123 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 again here as we believe them to be of continuing relevance in the work of bringing paramilitarism to an end.

Legacy of the Past

- 1.124 While Legacy of the Past is not part of our mandate at the IRC, we have stated in each Report that it is a contextual factor in the background that has an impact on any process of Group Transition and efforts to tackle paramilitarism. In our last Report, we noted the passage of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act by the then UK Government in that regard. We also noted the opposition of the NI parties, victims' groups and others in civic society in Northern Ireland to that legislation. The Irish Government has brought a case against the legislation to the European Court of Human Rights. We also note the announcement by the new UK Government of their intention to repeal that legislation. It is not for us to comment on the substance of this matter but we wish to highlight that undoubtedly this issue will be in play if a process of Group Transition is undertaken. The work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains and individual examples of truth recovery processes demonstrate the information that groups and those (formerly) associated with them can provide in relation to the Troubles/conflict. Approaches to dealing with the past should be designed in a manner cognisant of this, and policy on ending paramilitarism, dealing with the past, and, ultimately, reconciliation, must be seen as interconnected.

Victims and survivors of the Troubles/conflict

- 1.125 In our work at the IRC, we are deeply conscious of the extraordinary impact of the Troubles/conflict on individuals and families directly affected. The perspectives of survivors and the families of those killed and injured are always to the forefront of our thinking. We are particularly conscious that for them, as we said earlier in this Overview, that impact is not just something in the past but an ongoing, living reality in

their lives today. We are aware, therefore, of the potential impact that the ongoing discussions and our recommendations around bringing paramilitarism to an end can have on individuals. We have engaged with individuals impacted by paramilitarism, as well as victims' groups, and we are grateful that they came forward to share their experiences. These engagements have been very valuable to us as we develop and refine our analysis and consider the implications of our Recommendations. We recognise the invaluable work of those community and voluntary organisations which have been at the forefront of supporting victims and survivors with the one goal of meeting their needs. We will continue to engage with victims as we take our work forward to achieve the goal of bringing an end to paramilitarism once and for all and ensuring that there are no more victims of paramilitarism.

Memorialisation

- 1.126 In our last four Reports, we have raised the issue of commemorations of the past that have a paramilitary dimension. Memorialisation remains a contentious issue, as events during the past year continue to demonstrate. While the focus of these events is to commemorate the past, they clearly have the capacity to impact negatively on the present, including in terms of continuing to promote peace-building and reconciliation. We believe an express focus should be brought to bear on Memorialisation, including particular arrangements and approaches.
- 1.127 In our Fifth 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". Much of this chapter was in fact exploring commemoration of events and people connected to paramilitarism. The complexity is reflected in the fact that the FICT 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 regret that this issue has not made more progress since the conclusion of the work of the FICT Commission, and we ask that the issue of Memorialisation continue to be given a focus in the debate around ending paramilitarism.

Shared Housing and Integrated Education

- 1.128 We have included a focus on Shared Housing and Integrated Education in all of our Reports. We continue to believe that among the contextual factors that influence the challenge of tackling paramilitarism on a long-term, sustainable basis are the current approaches to housing and education in Northern Ireland. Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a number of intergovernmental agreements (the Stormont House Agreement, Fresh Start Agreement and New Decade New Approach) have recognised the value of integrated education in reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and in all of our

reports we have focused on integrated education and shared housing. In December 2023, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee launched an inquiry into integrated education. The inquiry examined the growth of the integrated education sector in Northern Ireland, and barriers to growth. It also considered the implications of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 published in May 2023. With the announcement of the UK general election and the prorogation of Parliament on 24 May 2024 the Committee was unable to report on this inquiry in the usual way. The Committee wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Education Minister calling for:

- Integrated Education to be “properly resourced”,
- Recent Integrated Education funding cuts be reversed,
- The Department of Education to take Integrated Education planning seriously, and
- A more strategic approach to Integrated Education with a clearer understanding of demand.

1.129 We welcome this focus by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and urge the UK Government and NI Department of Education to give the findings serious consideration. We also welcome that the Department of Education published an Integrated Education Strategy and Action Plan in April 2023²⁵, which is currently being updated in partnership with key stakeholders.

1.130 It remains the case that more than after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the vast bulk of public housing in Northern Ireland is segregated. This is a deeply challenging situation in the context of peace-building and reconciliation. On 1 February 2024 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive became responsible for the ‘Housing for All’ Shared Housing Programme. The Programme emerged from the T:BUC Strategy and had been managed previously by the Department for Communities. At the end of November 2024, the ‘Housing for All’ Shared Housing Programme supported 12 Housing Associations with 77 developments and a total of 2,490 homes across Northern Ireland. 44 developments have been completed and a further 33 are under development or programmed to start. The benefits of the ‘Housing for All’ Shared Housing Programme extend beyond the 2,490 households as the Housing Associations work on delivery of the programme with 32 Local Advisory Groups supporting development and delivery of five-year Good Relations Plans. The plans support good relations programmes for communities and individuals who live, work and socialise within a five-mile radius of the new development. It is clear that the vast majority of people wish to live, work and socialise in mixed religion society: the NI Life and Times survey highlighted this demand, with 73% of respondents indicating that they would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood.

²⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategy-integrated-education-northern-ireland>

- 1.131 We welcome the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to prioritise housing support which we hope will move progress forward in developing shared housing at a greater pace. Unfortunately, only a small proportion of new build social housing is delivered as shared in NI and over 92% remains as single identity.
- 1.132 We remain of the view that this slow development of 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 continue to be 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 since more rapid progress on these issues is needed.

Cost-of-living crisis

- 1.133 We continue to highlight the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on those disadvantaged communities where poverty, deprivation, and lack of aspiration, opportunity, and hope can be linked to ongoing paramilitarism. We recognise the ongoing work of the Executive, NIHE, local councils and the voluntary and community sector in supporting those communities where there is greatest need.
- 1.134 It is deeply troubling that in 2022/23, 24% of children were living in relative poverty, compared with 18% the previous year. In some areas, these figures are even higher – one report to the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland highlighted that in June 2024, 32% of children in West Belfast, 29% of children in North Belfast, 27% of children in Newry and Armagh, and 25% of children in Foyle were living in poverty²⁶. The NI Audit Office Report highlights that there has been little sustained reduction in levels over the last eight years. There is, therefore, much more work to be done.
- 1.135 We note that the recent draft Programme for Government refers to the cost-of-living crisis and commits to implementing policies on childcare, housing, the economy, education, and participation through the introduction of social inclusion strategies as well as a significant programme of reform of children’s social care services which will be focused on early intervention, addressing workforce challenges, and strengthening cross-sectoral working between the statutory and voluntary and community sectors.
- 1.136 In both our Fifth and Sixth Reports we have referenced and made a recommendation concerning the cost-of-living crisis and how it is disproportionately felt in those communities already struggling in socio-economic terms. We know from experience

²⁶ <https://www.lawcentreni.org/news/cliff-edge-briefing-to-public-accounts-committee-inquiry-into-child-poverty/>

that when economic difficulties arise, people in these communities are more likely to be exposed to paramilitary influence, and therefore the grip those paramilitary groups have on communities can deepen. We recognise the good work that is ongoing to address the issues at grassroots level, and it is vital that this is not undermined. However, it is clear this is not enough, and we urge the Executive and the UK Government to prioritise work to tackle inequalities and make sure that everyone has the best possible opportunity to succeed in life.

Women

- 1.137 Over the last year, there has been increasing attention by the Executive, PSNI and researchers on the impact of paramilitarism on women, whether in the home, community or wider society. For example, Aisling Swaine's recent report, *'When you know what they are capable of': Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control*²⁷, which we summarise in Section B, highlights the links between paramilitarism and intimate partner violence in Northern Ireland, echoing the findings of Jessica Doyle and Monica McWilliams' 2018 report, *Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland*²⁸. Both reports point to the pervasiveness of the coercive control which paramilitaries continue to exert behind closed doors as well as in wider society. The prevalence of this issue is highlighted by the fact that on average one woman is murdered in Northern Ireland every other month, and every 16 minutes the PSNI responds to a domestic abuse incident²⁹. Given the seriousness of the issue, we welcome the Northern Ireland Executive's recent strategy to End Violence against Women and Girls with its ambitious vision for "a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them." The delivery plan which goes with the strategy promises an investment of £3 million in a range of voluntary and community sector projects for a range of work, including on prevention and support. We also welcome the PSNI's relaunch of its action plan on Tackling Violence against Women and Girls, both of which will require buy in and a joined-up approach from across government and society. It also requires leadership on all fronts if we are to develop a society where women and girls are safe from the actions and manifestations of paramilitarism. In previous reports, we have noted the essential roles which women play in communities, politics and public life and how they make important contributions to decision making on the transformation of Northern Ireland. In fostering women's leadership role in tackling paramilitarism, we welcome the ongoing work of the Developing Women in the Community programme for which we provide more detail in Section C. We

²⁷ https://foylefamilyjusticecentre.org/app/uploads/2024/09/Full-Report_Para-Coer-Control_Swaine-FWA.pdf

²⁸ https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/12657575/Intimate_Partner_Violence_in_Conflict_and_Post_Conflict_Societies_Insights_and_Lessons_from_Northern_Ireland.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.pivotalppf.org/our-work/pivotal-platform/116/ending-violence-against-women-and#:~:text=The%20stark%20truth%20is%20that,to%20a%20domestic%20abuse%20incident.>

continue to argue that a process of Group Transition must include the views of women most adversely impacted by paramilitarism, together with the expertise of women contributing to ending it.

Drugs

- 1.138 Drug abuse is not a problem exclusively in Northern Ireland, and other jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland are grappling with similar problems; however, the links between the drugs trade and paramilitarism make the problem in Northern Ireland unique, and we have heard that these links are growing. Drug dealing and addiction remain a major cause for concern and communities continue to suffer under the impact of associated anti-social behaviour, mental health issues, drug debts, and drug debt-related intimidation. There were 8,519 drug seizures by PSNI in 2023/24: while this is down 5% from the previous year, over the last decade, the recorded number of seizures has almost doubled.³⁰ Drug-related arrests have risen from 2,838 in 2013/14 to 3,584 in 2023/24.³¹ The latest figures show that there were 154 drug-related deaths in 2022, down 28% from the previous year; however, this still represents a 40% increase on the number of drug deaths registered a decade ago.³² We know that drug-related deaths are higher in areas of greater deprivation: the 20% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland accounted for 45% of drug-related deaths and 44% of drug misuse deaths between 2018 and 2022.³³ This highlights the cross-cutting nature of the problem: criminal justice, health and socio-economic issues are all involved and connected, requiring a multi-agency, joined-up response.
- 1.139 We know that some paramilitary groups – or individuals within them – are involved in criminality and we have heard how paramilitary-linked groups can be involved in supplying drugs; ‘taxing’ drug dealers; intimidating those with drug debts, and their families; and coercing and exploiting young people into drug dealing and other activities. The increasing focus on child criminal exploitation responds to some of these issues, and we welcome the launch of a shared definition and action plan by the Departments of Justice, Health and Education to address this matter³⁴. This definition explicitly recognises that ‘the criminal exploitation of children and young people can include being exploited into storing drugs or weapons, drug dealing, theft, violence, intimidation, vandalism, forced labour and other forms of criminality through grooming by people that children and young people trust or look up to’.

³⁰ [Trends in Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland 2006/07 to 2023/24 \(psni.police.uk\)](https://psni.police.uk)

³¹ *Ibid*

³² [Drug-Related and Drug Misuse Deaths 2012-2022 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://nisra.gov.uk)

³³ *Ibid*. Drug-related deaths are classed as drug misuse deaths where the underlying cause is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence or where any of the substances involved are controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971).

³⁴ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/child-criminal-exploitation-cce-action-plan-health>

1.140 It is important to recognise that community and voluntary groups are doing invaluable work on the ground to support individuals, families and communities worst affected by drug-related issues. The Substance Misuse Court (SMC), originally established as a pilot in 2018, is an innovative, problem-solving approach championed by the Chief Justice and senior leaders in the judiciary. We had the opportunity to observe the SMC and we were impressed with this initiative which has been evaluated and has shown that it can support eligible offenders by giving them the opportunity to engage in an intensive programme before sentencing, to help tackle their addiction, stabilise their lives, change their behaviour, and reduce their risk of reoffending.³⁵ We welcome the work initiated by the Programme to scope out a response to the issue of drug-related intimidation using learning from the Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement project (DRIVE) and the Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Project (DRIRP) in Ireland and from other aspects of the Programme, and we look forward to seeing further progress on this.

Conclusion

1.141 In each of our Reports, the Overview Section seeks to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the landscape of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today. We hope that this Overview has served that purpose for 2024. As can be seen, there is a large and impressive array of activities underway, which between them are having a real impact on the problem. However, we also make clear that, despite that undoubted progress, paramilitarism remained a real and live issue in Northern Ireland in 2024. We share the widespread frustration that more than 26 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that remains the case. However, we also believe that events during 2024, as we have outlined, not least the fact that it marked the 30th anniversary of the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires, constitute a real opportunity to tackle “the unfinished business of the peace process”, prime among that being the ending of paramilitarism. We sense a momentum around this, and we urge a redoubling of efforts in 2025 so that that momentum can deliver the definitive ending of paramilitarism in all its forms. A particular responsibility rests with the two Governments and the political parties in the Executive and Assembly to provide the necessary leadership, impetus and resources required for the task. We acknowledge the good work they have done in achieving the progress already made, and we ask that this be maintained and accelerated in the year ahead. We hope that our Report makes a contribution to the understanding of that mission and how it can best be completed.

³⁵ [Evaluation of the Substance Misuse Court Pilot | Department of Justice \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/evaluation-of-the-substance-misuse-court-pilot)

SECTION B: DATA AND INDICATORS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

2.1 This Section of the Report includes data from various statutory bodies, Departments and agencies that are relevant to considering trends in reported paramilitary activity. At the outset, it is important to note that we understand that the statistics, even when trending in positive directions, cannot fully appreciate the psychological anxiety and physical danger of vulnerable people living in communities where paramilitaries exert coercive control, and we are aware that there are incidents that do not get reported to the authorities for various reasons.

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 shootings³⁶. Here we reproduce statistics up to 31 March 2024 (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, the level of activity is still too high. 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 2014/15-2023/24

14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
3	3	5	2	2	1	3	1	1	1

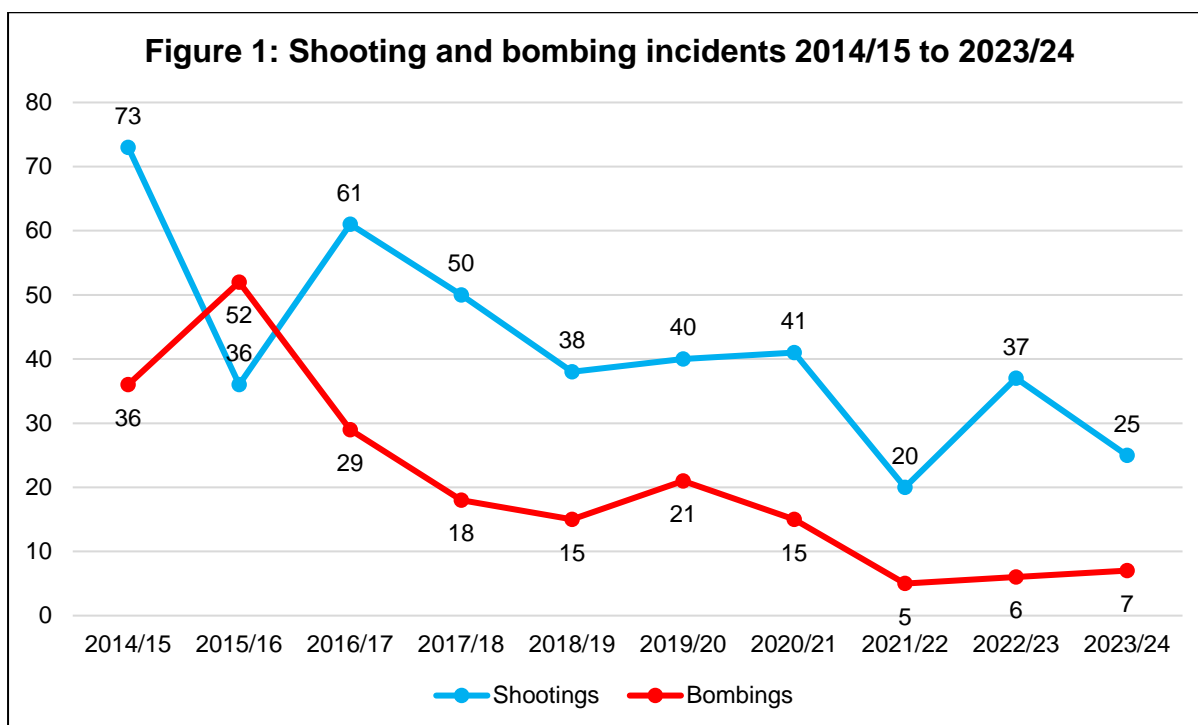
Source: PSNI security situation statistics bulletin

2.5 There was one death in the 2023/24 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 2014/15 to 2018/19 there were 15 security situation deaths; in the period 2019/20 to 2023/24 there were seven.

³⁶ <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/security-situation-statistics>

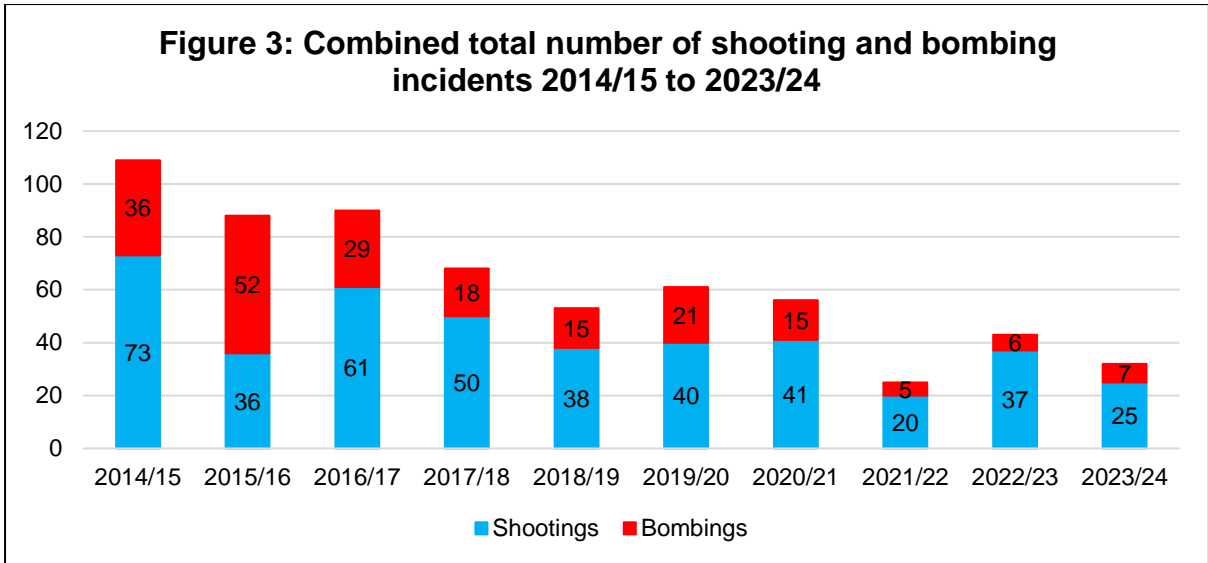
Shooting and bombing incidents

2.6 Figure 1 shows shooting and bombing incidents recorded in the past ten years (see PSNI definitions below)³⁷.



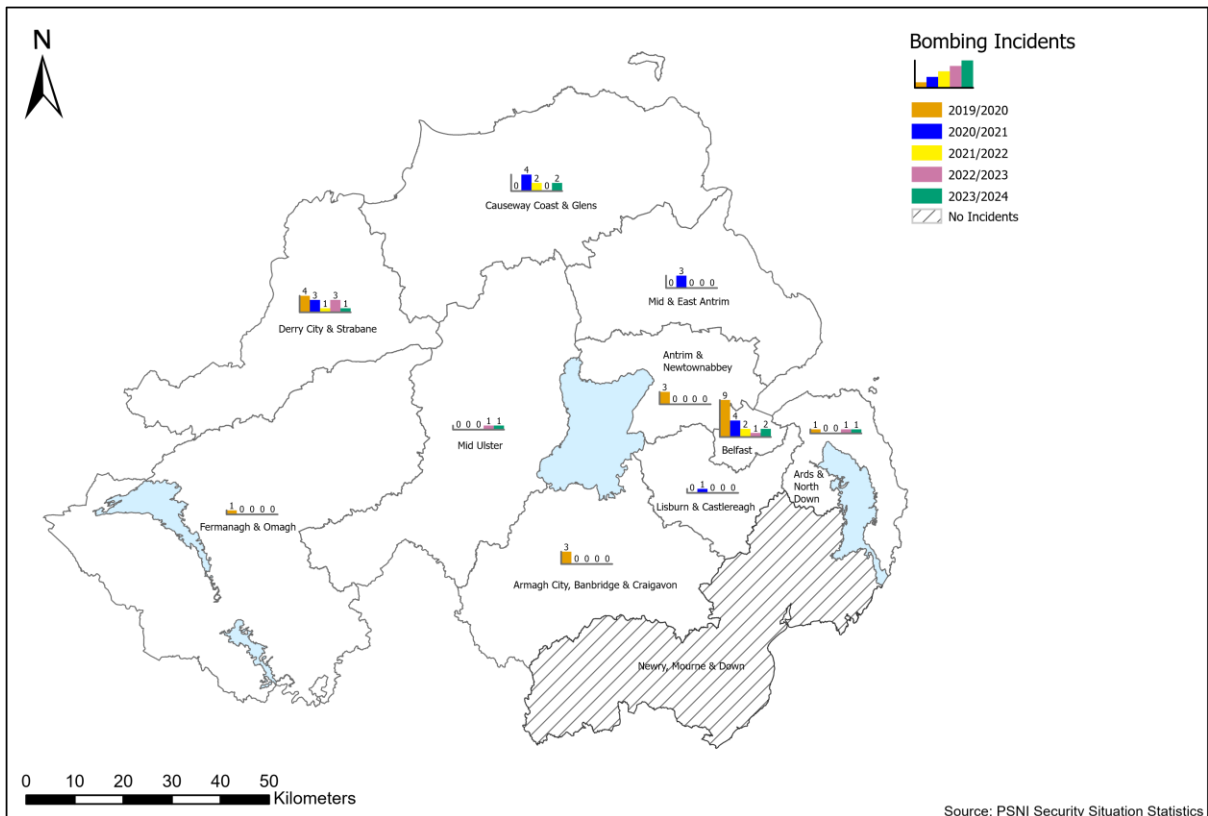
³⁷ These PSNI figures for shootings include any shooting incident relating to the security situation and include shots fired by terrorists, shots fired by the security forces, paramilitary style attacks involving shootings and shots heard (and later confirmed by other sources).

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.



Bombing incidents

Figure 4: Number of bombing incidents broken down by Policing District 2019/20 to 2023/24



2.7 There were seven bombing incidents in 2023/24, which is one more than in 2022/23. The number of bombing incidents over the past five years (54) has decreased by 64% compared to the number that occurred during the previous five years (150). In the period April – September 2024 there was one bombing incident.

2.8 In the Causeway Coast & Glens District the number of bombing incidents increased from zero to two in 2023/24. In Belfast City, the number increased from one to two in 2023/24. Ards & North Down and Mid Ulster Districts each recorded one incident, the same number as the previous year. The number of incidents in Derry City & Strabane decreased from three to one in 2023/24.

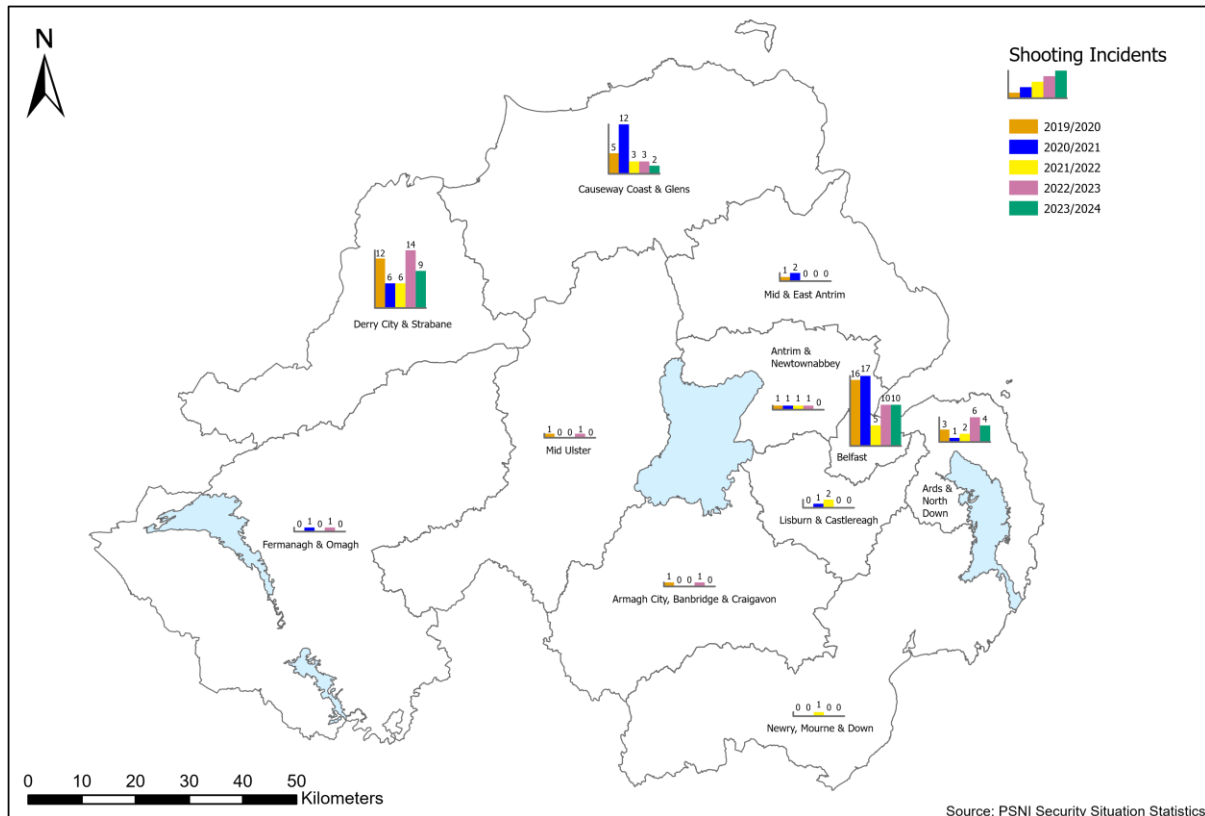
Table 2: Attribution of bombing incidents related to the security situation in Northern Ireland between 2014/15 and 2023/24³⁸

Financial Year	Loyalists	Republicans	Unknown	Total
2014/15	5	22	9	36
2015/16	13	30	9	52
2016/17	4	20	5	29
2017/18	5	13	0	18
2018/19	6	6	3	15
2019/20	8	13	0	21
2020/21	11	3	1	15
2021/22	2	3	0	5
2022/23	2	4	0	6
2023/24	3	4	0	7
Total	59	118	27	204

³⁸ 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.

Shooting incidents

Figure 5: Number of shooting incidents broken down by Policing District from 2019/20 to 2023/24



2.9 There were 25 shooting incidents in 2023/24, approximately a third fewer than the previous year (37) and the second lowest number of shootings since records began in 1969. There were 163 shooting incidents in the last five years, a reduction of 37% compared to the previous five years (258). In the period April – September 2024 there were eight shooting incidents.

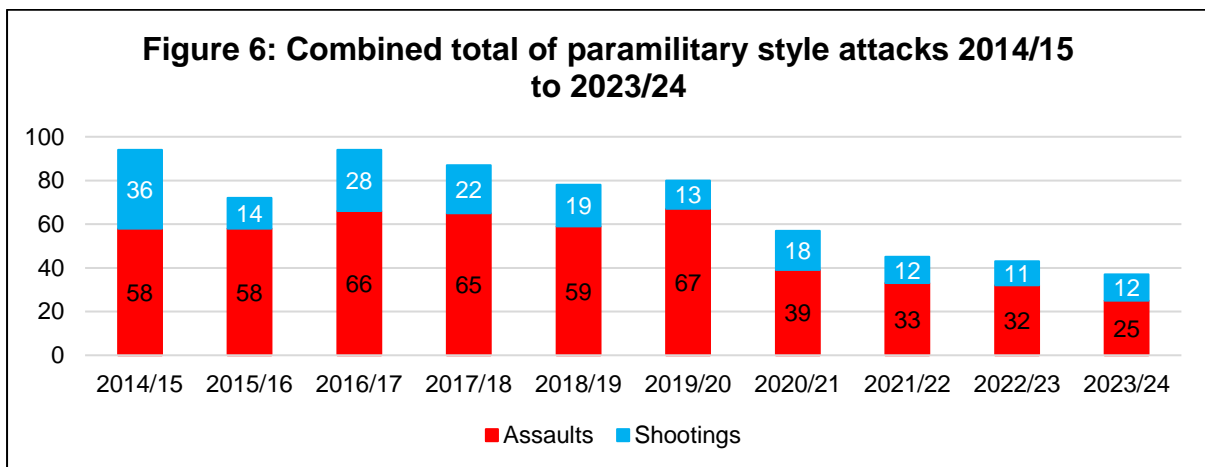
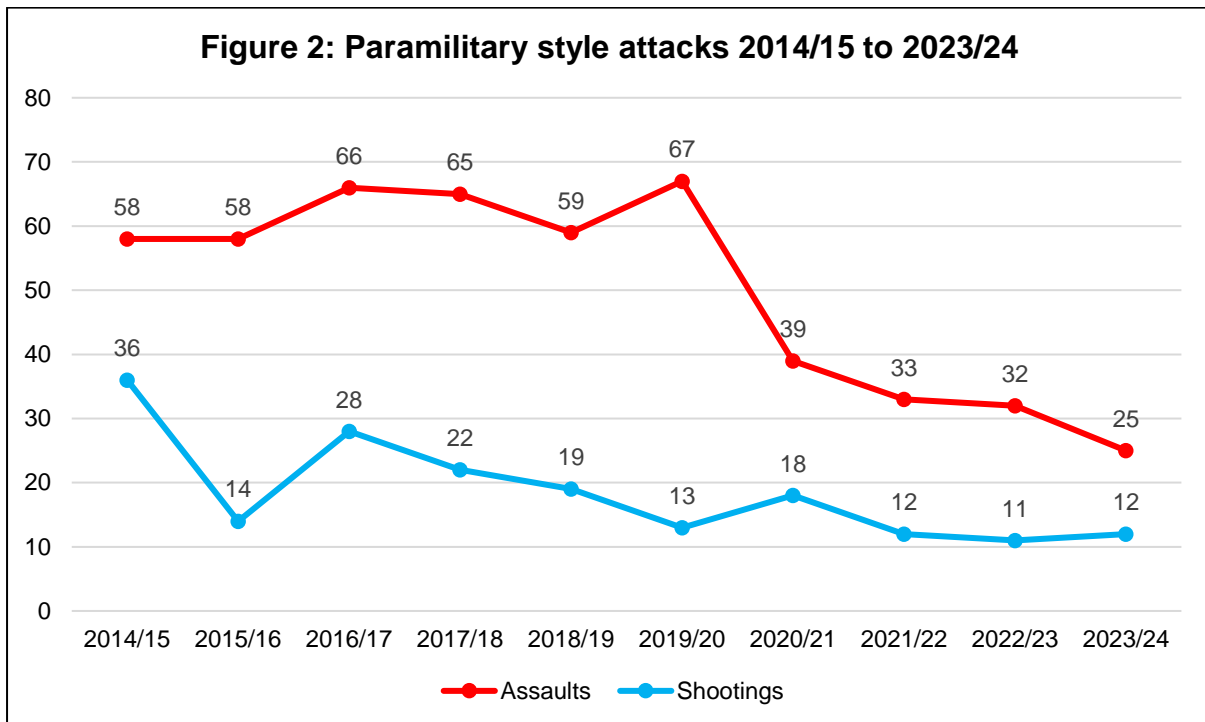
2.10 All 25 shooting incidents occurred in four Districts in 2023/24; half the number of Districts compared to the previous year. Belfast City recorded the same number of shootings as the previous year: 10. The number of shootings in Derry City & Strabane decreased from 14 to nine; the number decreased from six to four in Ards & North Down and from three to two in Causeway Coasts & Glens. Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid Ulster, Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon, and Antrim & Newtownabbey all recorded zero shooting incidents, each down one from the previous year.

Table 3: Attribution of shooting incidents related to the security situation in Northern Ireland between 2014/15 and 2023/24

Financial Year	Loyalist	Republican	Unknown	Total
2013/14	16	33	5	54
2014/15	14	53	6	73
2015/16	5	30	1	36
2016/17	8	47	6	61
2017/18	8	37	5	50
2018/19	6	29	3	38
2019/20	9	30	1	40
2020/21	17	23	1	41
2021/22	11	9	0	20
2022/2023	12	24	1	37
2023/2024	3	9	0	12
Total	93	291	24	408

Source: PSNI data

Paramilitary Style Attacks

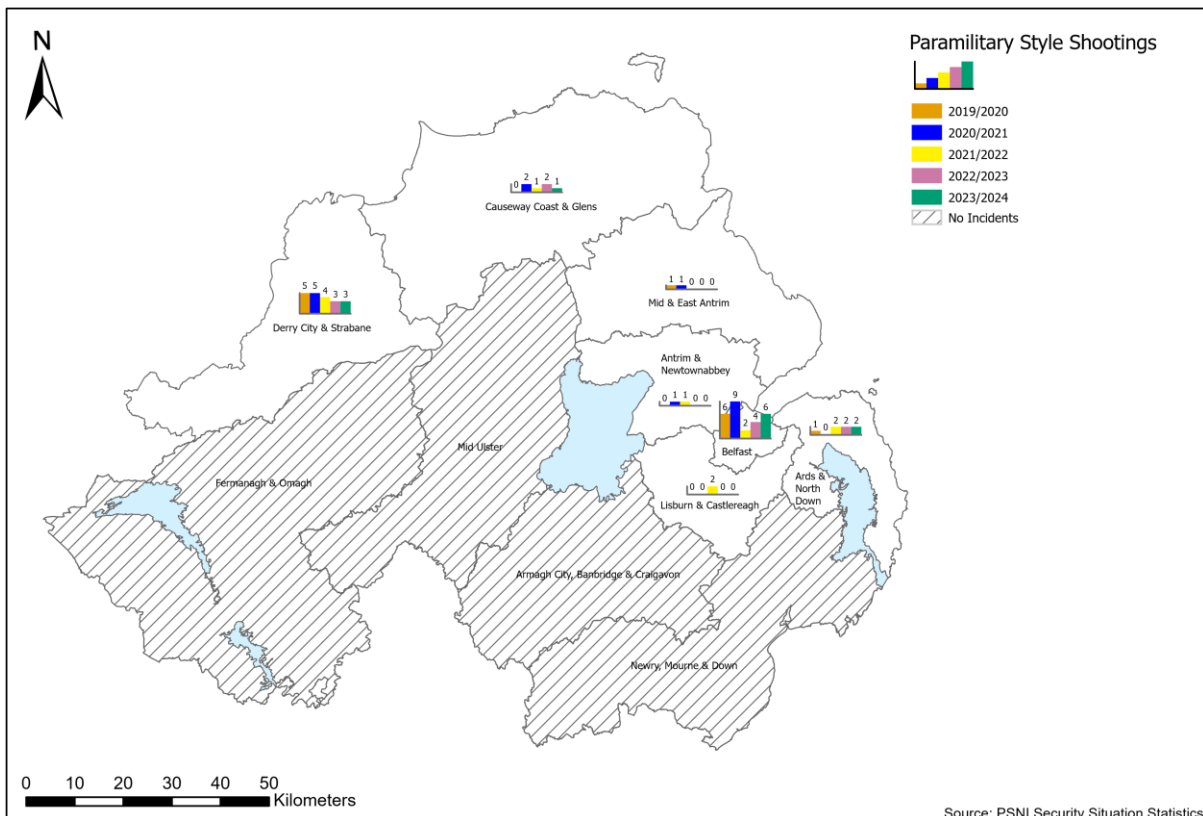


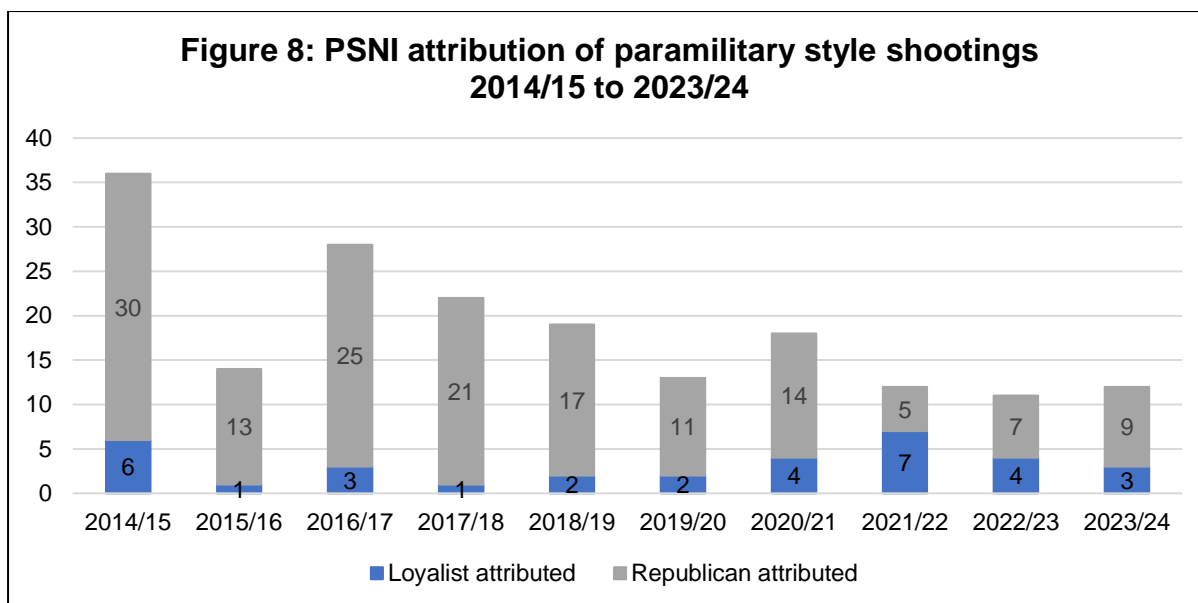
Source: PSNI data

Paramilitary Style Shootings

2.11 PSNI describe paramilitary style shootings as generally conducted by Loyalist or Republican paramilitary groups on members of their own community, usually resulting in the injured party being shot in the knees, elbows, feet, ankles or thighs. The motive is supposedly to punish the person for anti-social activities. PSNI count paramilitary style shootings that result in death as ‘security related deaths’ and so they are not reflected in the paramilitary style shooting figures.

Figure 7: Number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings in each policing district between 2019/20 and 2023/24





2.12 There were 12 casualties of paramilitary style shootings during 2023/24, one more than the previous year (11). The number of casualties of paramilitary style shootings during the past five years (66) has fallen by 45% compared to the number in the previous five years (119). In the period April – September 2024 there were three recorded paramilitary style shootings.

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

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

2.14 Of the 12 paramilitary style shooting in 2023/24, nine were attributed to Republicans and three were attributed to Loyalists (in 2022/23 it was 7:4).

Paramilitary Style Assaults

2.15 PSNI describe paramilitary style assaults as usually carried out by Loyalist or Republican groups on members of their own community as a so-called punishment. The assault may involve major or minor physical injury to the injured party, typically involving a group of assailants armed with, for example, iron bars or baseball bats. PSNI counts paramilitary style assaults that result in death as ‘security related deaths’ and so they are not reflected in the paramilitary style assault figures.

Figure 9: Number of casualties of paramilitary style assaults in each policing district between 2019/20 and 2023/24

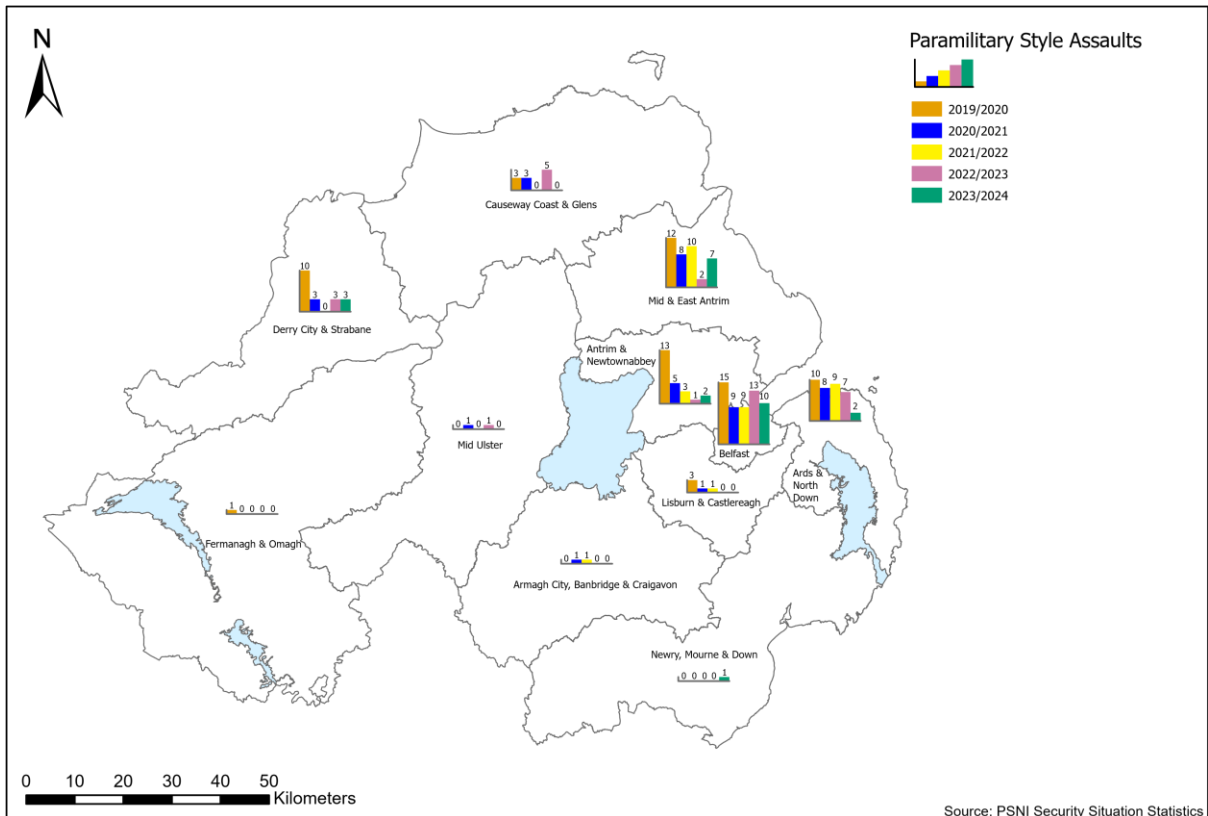
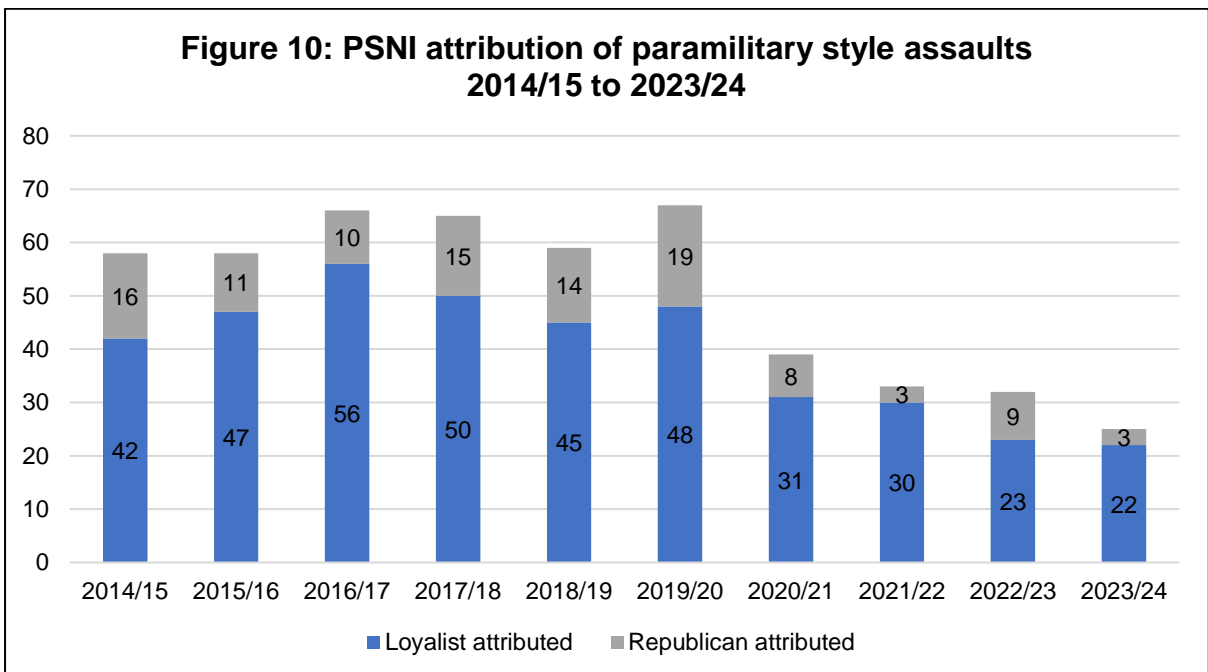


Figure 10: PSNI attribution of paramilitary style assaults 2014/15 to 2023/24



2.16 There were 25 casualties of paramilitary style assaults during 2023/24, seven fewer than the previous year and the lowest number since 1983/84. The number of assaults over the last five years (196) was 36% lower than the number in the previous five years (306). In the period April – September 2024 there were 11 recorded paramilitary style

assaults.

2.17 The highest number of paramilitary style assaults occurred in Belfast City (10), followed by Mid & East Antrim (seven). Mid & East Antrim had the greatest increase in the number of assaults (from two to seven). Antrim & Newtownabbey recorded two assaults, an increase of one from the previous year, and Newry, Mourne & Down recorded one assault in 2023/24 with no assaults recorded in previous years. The greatest decreases occurred in Ards & North Down (from seven to two) and Causeway Coast & Glens (from five to none). Mid Ulster recorded zero assaults, a decrease of one from the previous year.

2.18 In 2023/24, 22 of the 25 paramilitary style assaults (88%) were attributed to Loyalists (an increase of 16% from 2022/23); three were attributed to Republicans (12%).

Seizure or recovery of firearms, explosives and ammunition

2.19 There were 20 firearms found during 2023/24, the same as in the previous year. There was 3.4kg of explosives found during 2023/24 compared to 0.2kg the previous year, and 851 rounds of ammunition found compared to 1,172 the previous year.

Table 4: Seizure or recovery of firearms, explosives and ammunition³⁹

	Firearms	Explosives (kg)	Rounds of ammunition
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
2023/24	20	3.4	851

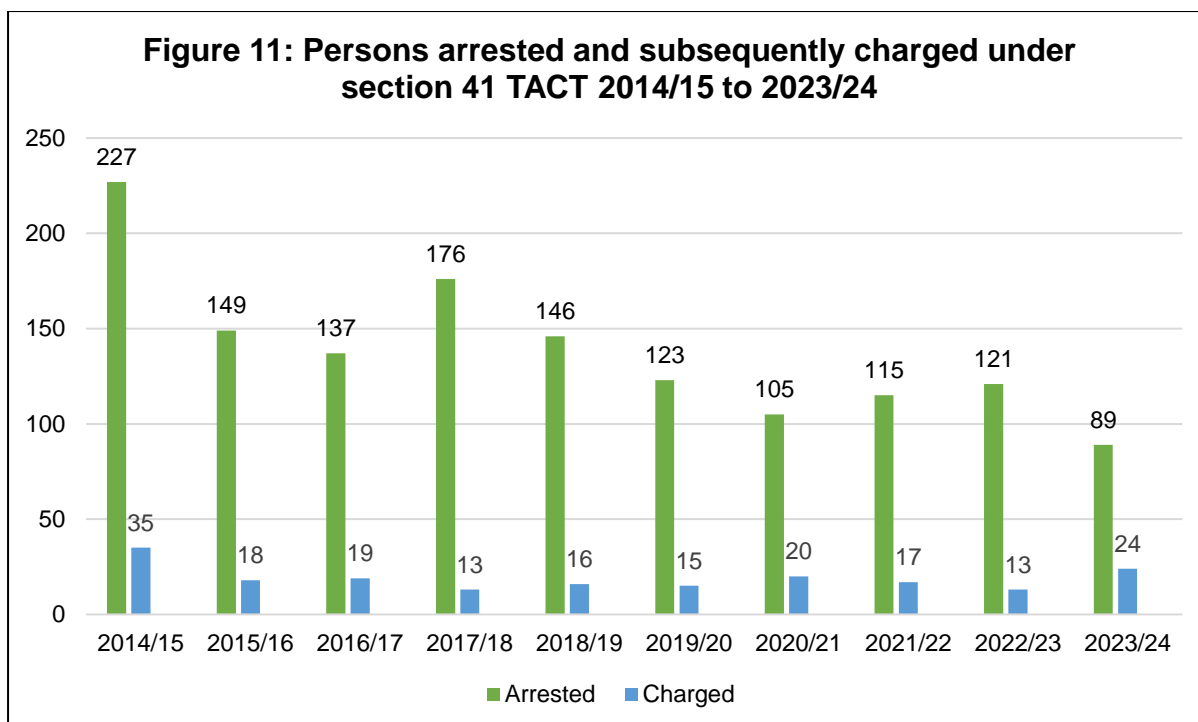
Source: PSNI security situation statistics

Terrorism Act arrests and subsequent charges

2.20 There were 89 persons arrested under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 during 2023/24 compared to 121 during the previous year (see Figure 11). That legislation provides that a constable may arrest without a warrant a person whom they reasonably suspect to be a terrorist. Of the 89 arrests, 40 (45%) of them occurred in Derry City & Strabane; 17 (19%) occurred in Belfast City and 14 (16%) occurred in Fermanagh & Omagh. There were 24 persons charged following arrests under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 during 2023/24, compared to 13 during the previous year.

³⁹ 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 bulletin⁴⁰

Terrorism legislation statistics

2.21 Reproduced below are some key statistics from the latest *Northern Ireland Terrorism Legislation: annual statistics* bulletin⁴¹.

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

2.22 In 2023, 21 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. 47 charges were brought against those 21 persons: eight were for explosives offences, eight for firearms offences, seven for attempted murder, seven for possession of articles of use to terrorists, six for supporting a proscribed organisation, six for preparation of terrorist acts, and two for membership of a proscribed organisation.

⁴⁰ Persons may be arrested under the Terrorism Act and then charged under other legislation.

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/northern-ireland-terrorism-legislation-annual-security-statistics-2023>

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.

Year of arrest	19/20	20/21	2021	2022	2023
Charged	17	20	16	13	21
Not proceeded against	3	9	2	0	2
Awaiting prosecution	3	6	8	12	19
Prosecuted	11	5	6	1	0
Found not guilty	3	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	1	0	0
Convicted	8	5	5	1	0
TACT offences	0	2	0	0	0
Schedule 7 TACT	0	0	0	0	0
Other legislation (non-TACT) -terrorism-related	8	2	5	1	0
Other legislation (non-TACT) -non-terrorism-related	0	1	0	0	0

Data presented here are based on the latest position of each case as at 22 April 2024. Figures are therefore subject to future update.

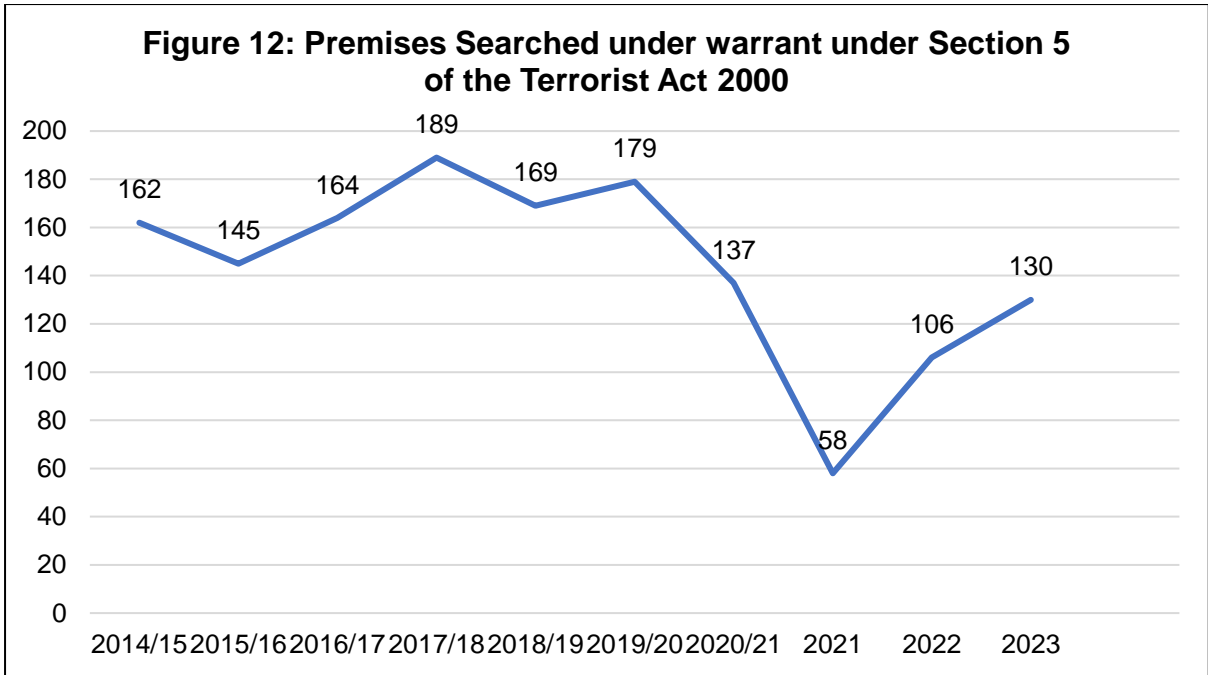
Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

2.23 During 2023, 11 persons detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 were charged with a total of 18 offences under the same legislation. Seven of these charges were related to possession for terrorist purposes, six related to support, two for membership, two for fundraising, while the remaining charge related to collection of information.

2.24 Six persons detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 were each charged with an offence under the Terrorism Act 2006 in 2023. The charges related to preparation of terrorist acts.

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

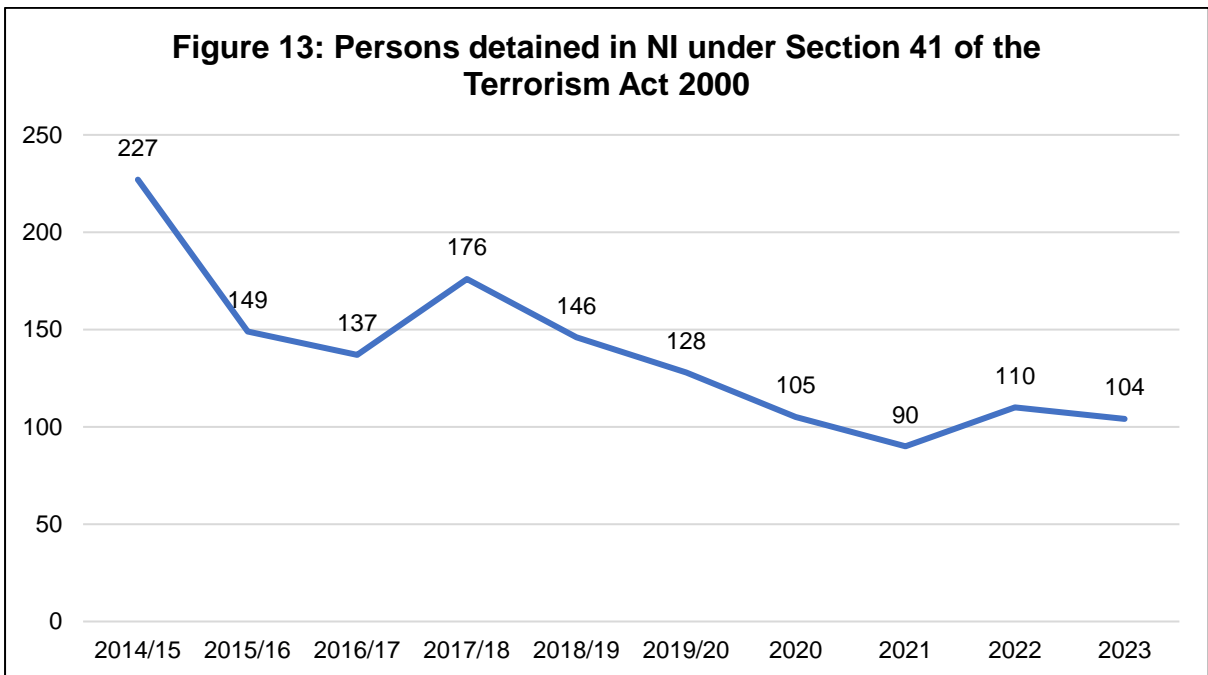
2.25 In 2023, 130 premises were searched under warrant under section 37, Schedule 5 of the Terrorism Act 2000.



Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

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

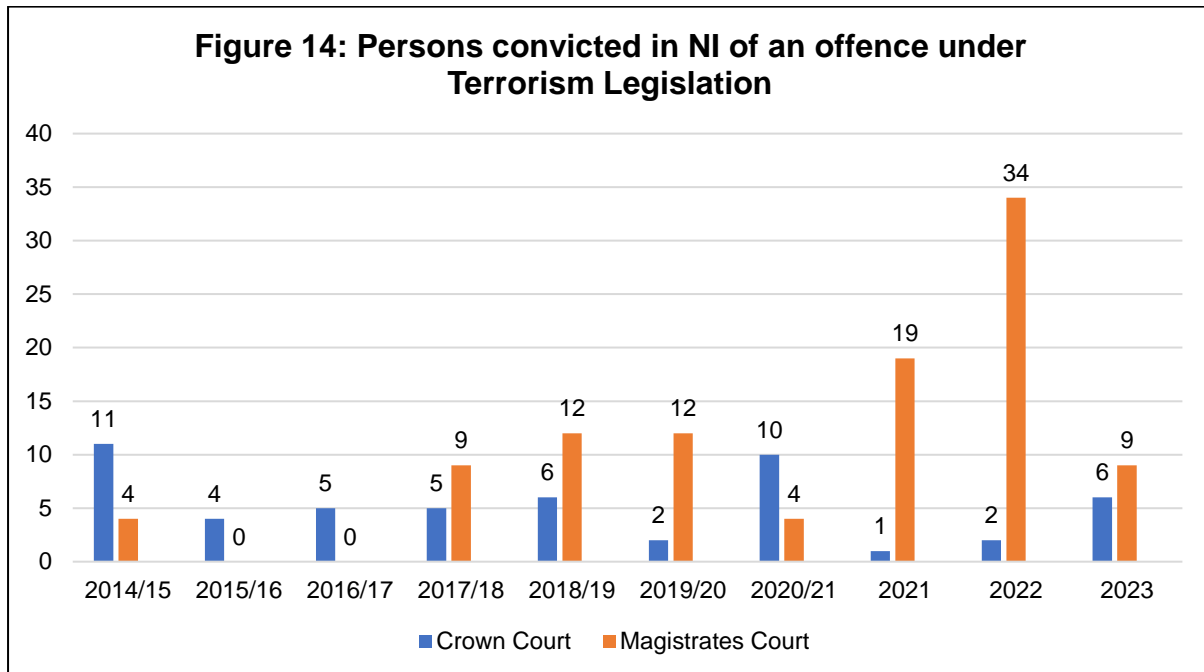
2.26 In 2023, 104 persons were detained in Northern Ireland under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000.



Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

Persons convicted in Northern Ireland of an offence under Terrorism Legislation

2.27 In 2023, 15 persons were convicted in NI of an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006 or the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008.



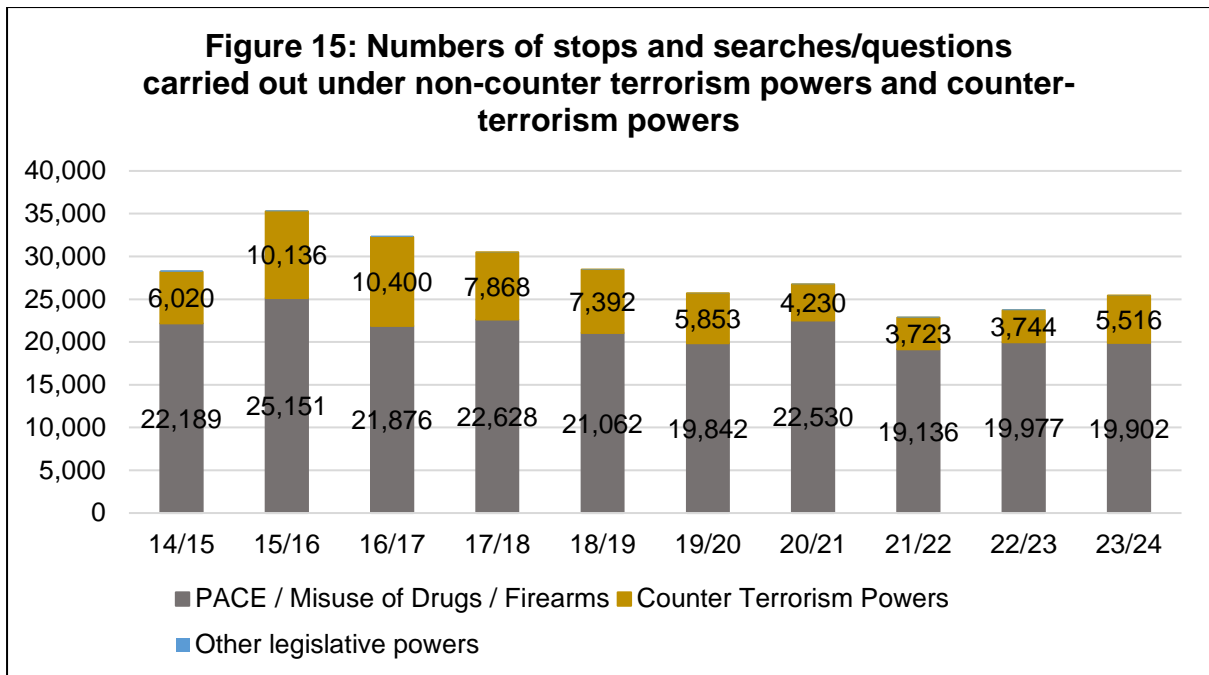
Source: Northern Ireland Terrorism legislation: annual statistics bulletin

Use of stop and search powers by the PSNI

2.28 In 2023/24 there was a 27% increase in the number of stop and searches: there were 5,516 stops and searches carried out under counterterrorism legislation, 1,772 more than the previous year⁴².

⁴² 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).



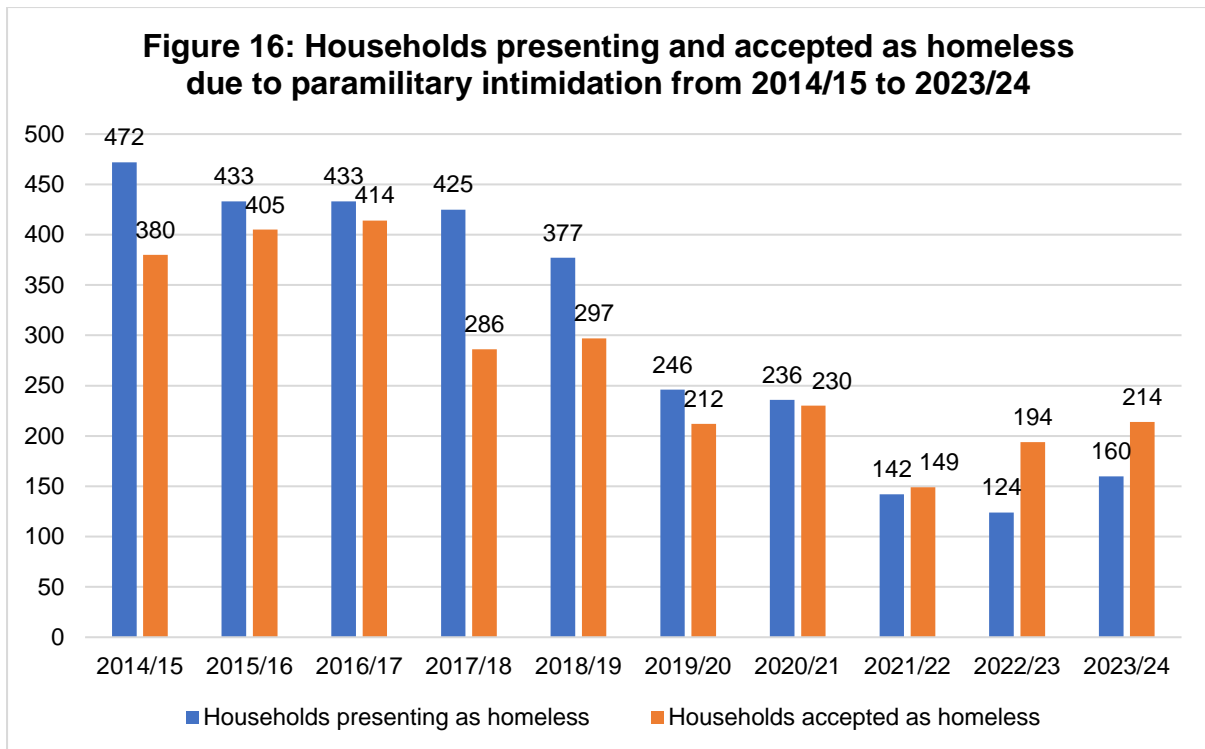
Source: *PSNI Stop and Search statistical bulletin*⁴³

Homelessness due to Paramilitary Intimidation

2.29 Figure 16 shows the numbers of households presenting and being accepted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homeless due to intimidation by paramilitaries over the past ten years.⁴⁴

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

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



Source: Department for Communities

2.30 In the last financial year, 160 households presented as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation. The Housing Executive accepted 214 households as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation, an increase of 20 from 2022/23.

2.31 The table below shows where households were accepted as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation in the last financial year broken down by District, and the increase in intimidation can be largely attributed to cases in Ards and North Down.

District	Intimidation - Paramilitary
Antrim & Newtownabbey	15
Ards & North Down	119
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	<5 ⁴⁵
Belfast City	38
Causeway Coast & Glens	<5
Derry City & Strabane	16
Fermanagh & Omagh	<5
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	7
Mid & East Antrim	8
Mid Ulster	<5
Newry, Mourne & Down	6
Total	214

Source: NIHE

Other criminal justice trends and metrics

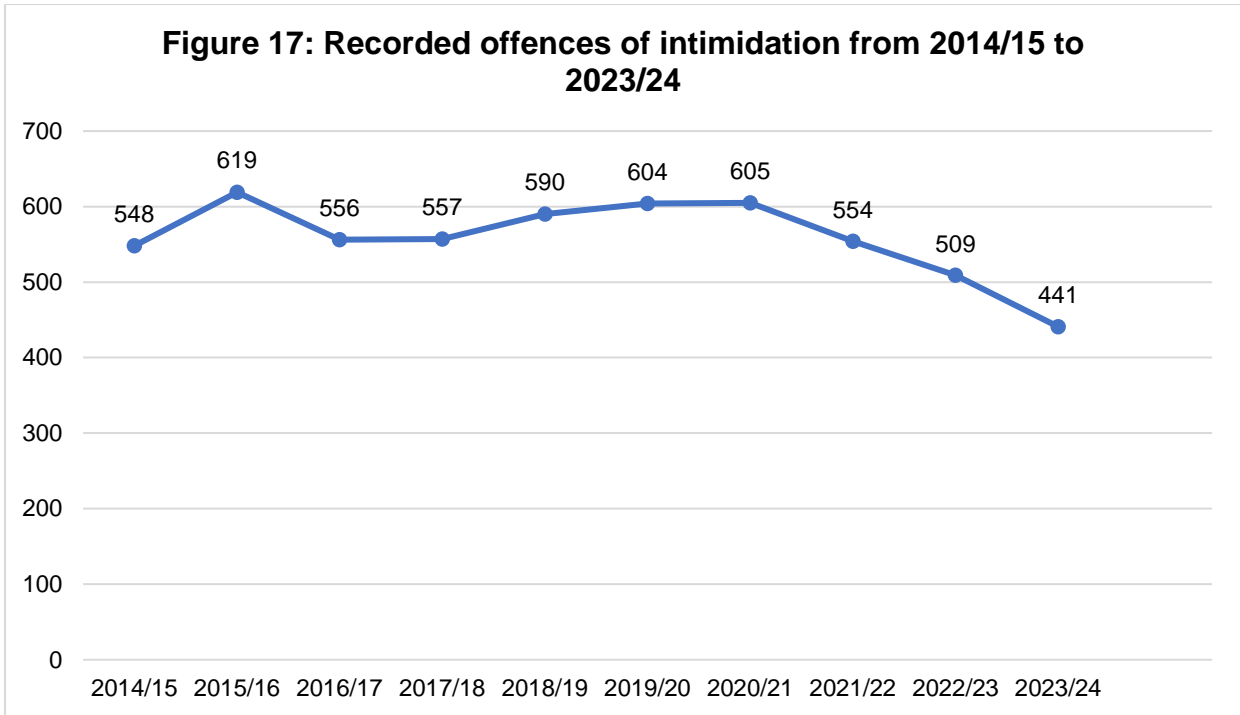
2.32 In the following Section we consider general trends in crime data from the PSNI, specifically intimidation and sectarian crimes and incidents, and the average time taken from a crime being reported to disposal at court, as published by the NI Courts and Tribunals Service.

2.33 *Relevance:* Although not all intimidation and hate crime is carried out by paramilitaries, we know that sectarian and hate crimes and intimidation take place predominantly in areas where paramilitaries operate.

Intimidation

2.34 In 2023/24 there were 441 recorded offences of intimidation in Northern Ireland, a reduction of 15% 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.

⁴⁵ Data is anonymised where there are four or fewer cases.



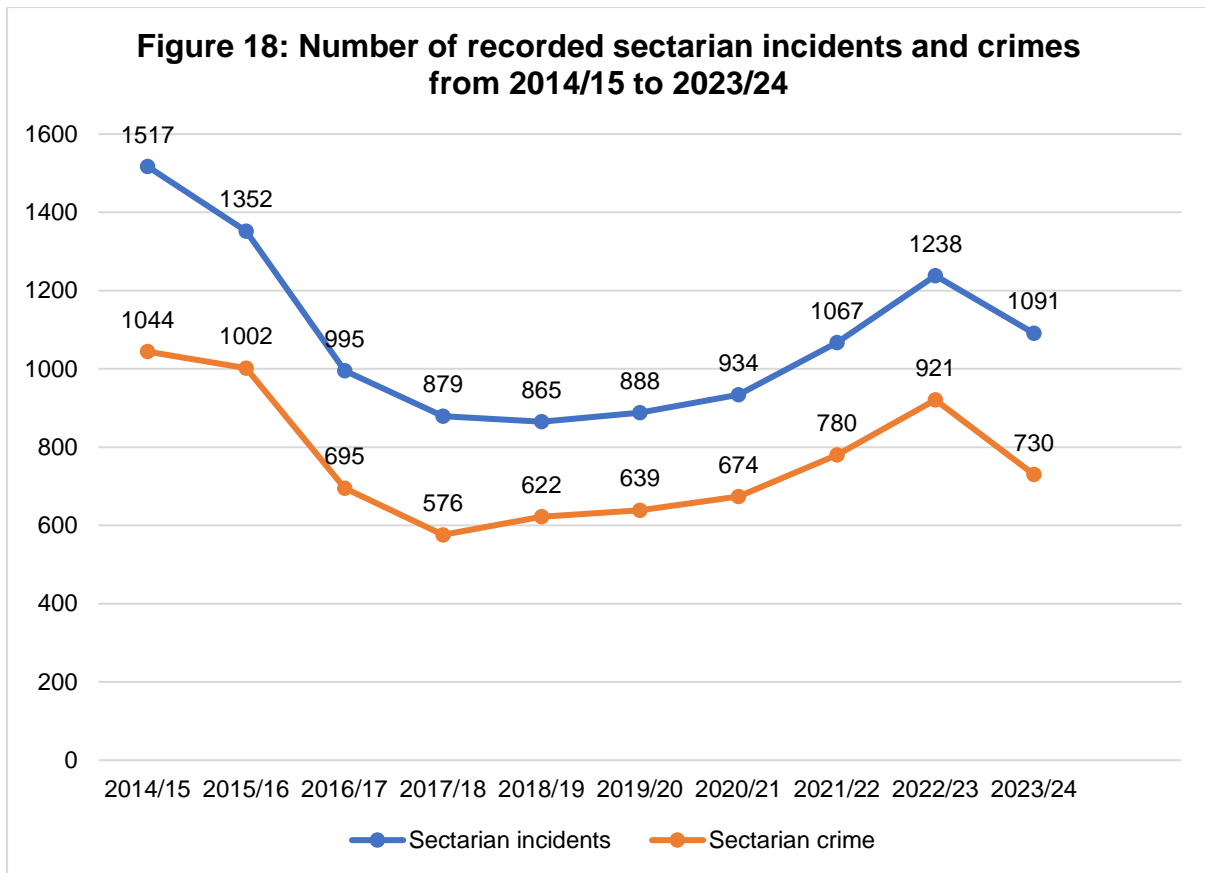
Source: PSNI Crime Statistics⁴⁶

Sectarian incidents and crimes recorded by PSNI⁴⁷

2.35 The number of sectarian incidents and crimes decreased in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23. There were 1,091 sectarian incidents recorded by the police in Northern Ireland in 2023/24, a decrease of 147 when compared with the previous 12 months. The number of sectarian crimes recorded by the police fell to 730, a decrease of 21% (down 191) on the previous 12 months.

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

⁴⁷ 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”.



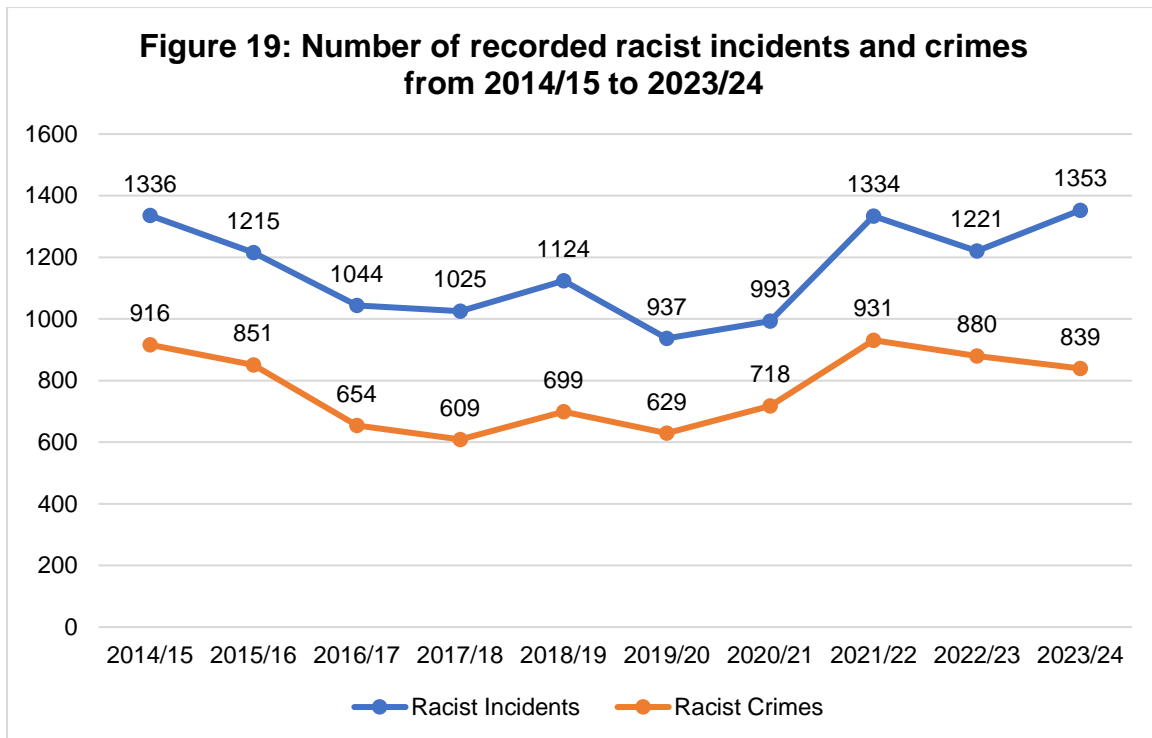
Source: *PSNI Bulletin: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland*⁴⁸

Racist incidents and crimes recorded by PSNI⁴⁹

2.36 There were higher levels of race incidents and lower levels of race crimes recorded when compared with 2022/23. The number of racist incidents recorded in 2023/24 was 1,353, which is 132 higher than 2022/23. The number of racist crimes recorded in 2023/24 was 839, which is a decrease of 41 from the previous 12 months. The 2023/24 statistics cover the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, and therefore do not include the period of unrest during the summer months in 2024.

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

⁴⁹ 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 being recorded. Racist crimes are included in the incident count and the two should not be added together”.



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

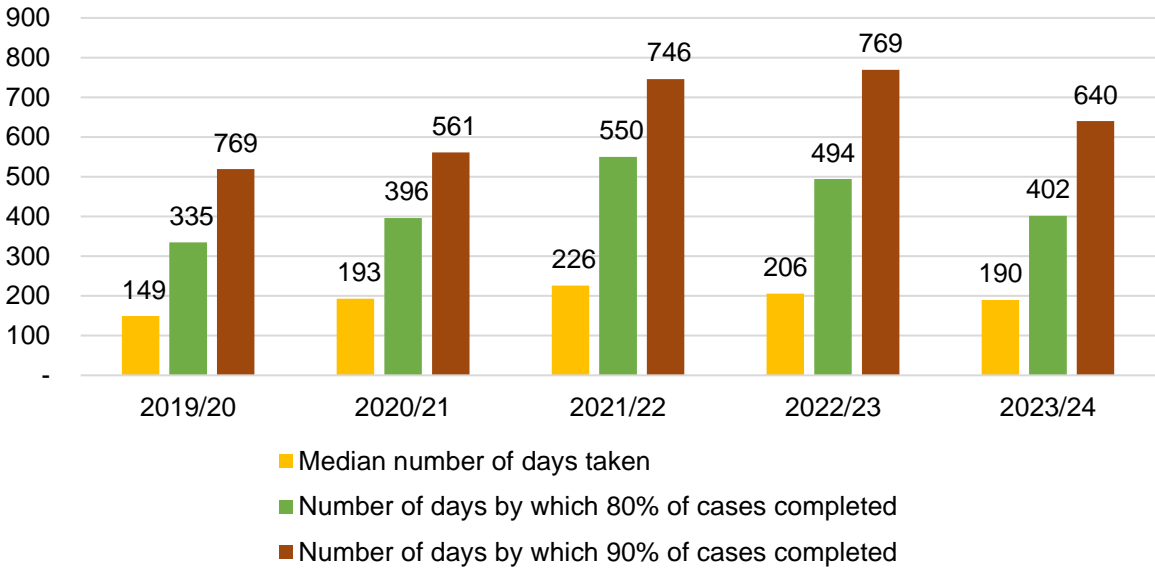
Court statistics

2.37 Source: The graph below shows data from the NI Courts and Tribunals Service⁵⁰ on the time taken for cases to be dealt with at court, from the date an offence was reported to the court disposal date. Although the data below are not limited to paramilitary and terrorist cases, they do include such cases.

2.38 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.

⁵⁰ https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/202223_case_processing_time_tables_0.xlsx

Figure 20: Time taken for cases to be dealt with by courts, from date the incident was reported to the disposal at court from 2019/20 to 2023/24



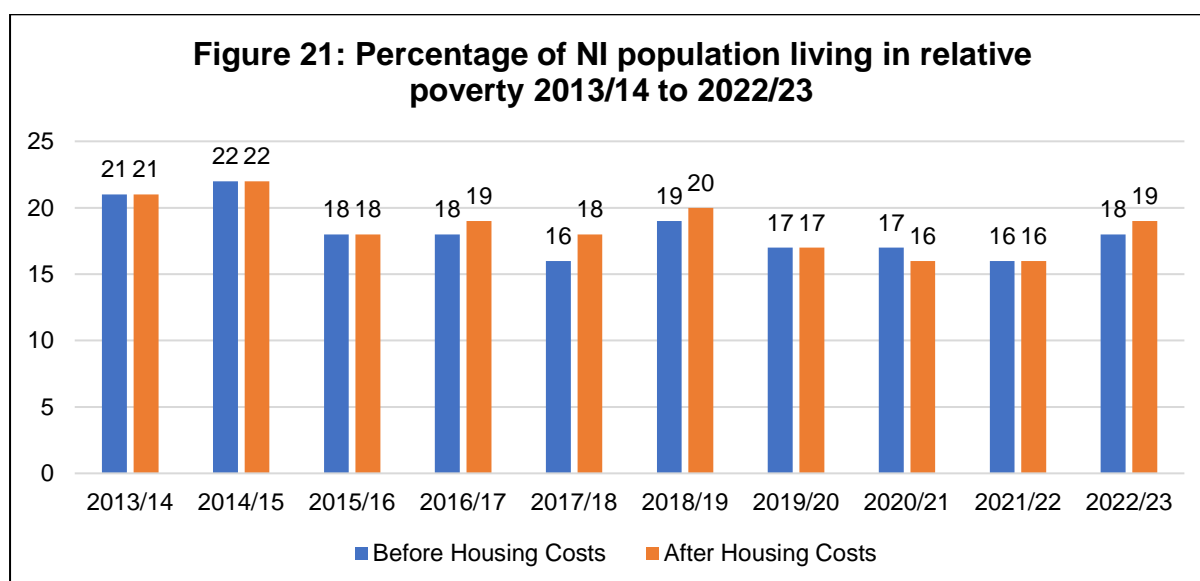
Source: Department of Justice statistics

Poverty and living conditions

2.39 *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 NI⁵¹.

2.40 *Relevance:* Links between poverty, deprivation, disadvantage, lack of aspiration and vulnerability are well established in research and literature relating to violence. The Twin Track analysis we have provided in this report emphasises the importance of addressing broader socio-economic issues, including these factors, as critical to the success of work on tackling paramilitarism. Given the continuing levels of poverty in Northern Ireland, ambitious, wide-reaching and transformative policies and initiatives are required to deal with this ingrained issue.

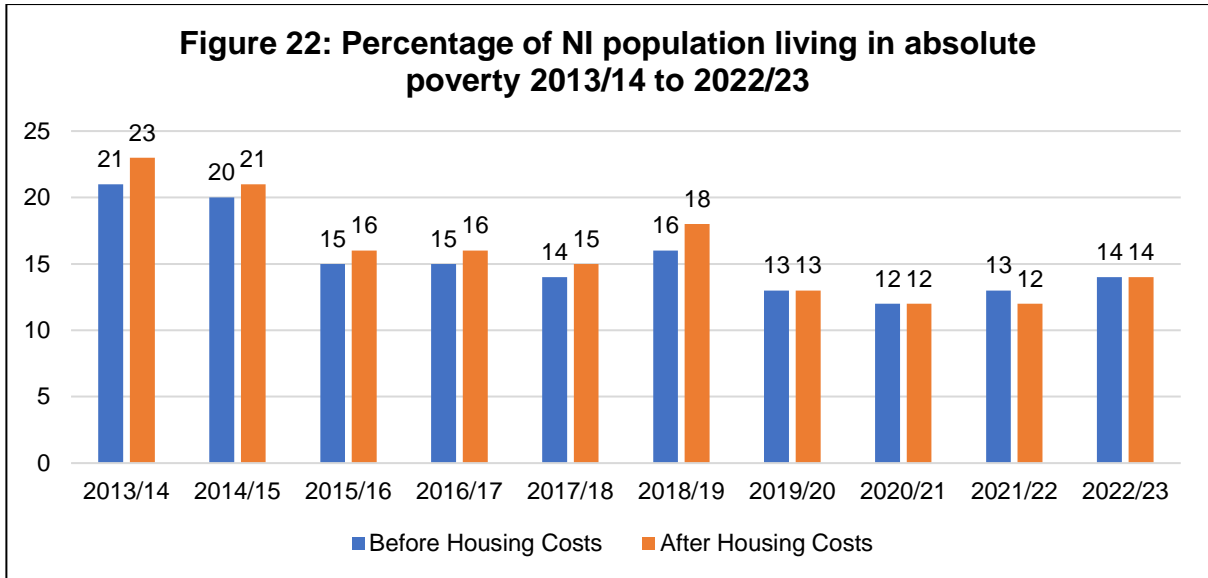
2.41 In 2022/23 the proportion of individuals estimated to be living in relative poverty was 18% (representing 349,000 people) and 14% (c. 272,000) were estimated to be living in absolute poverty (both figures are after housing costs and are not statistically significant changes from the previous year). The tables below show the ten-year trends⁵².



⁵¹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-and-income-inequality-report-2022-23>

⁵² <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-and-income-inequality-report-2022-23>

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

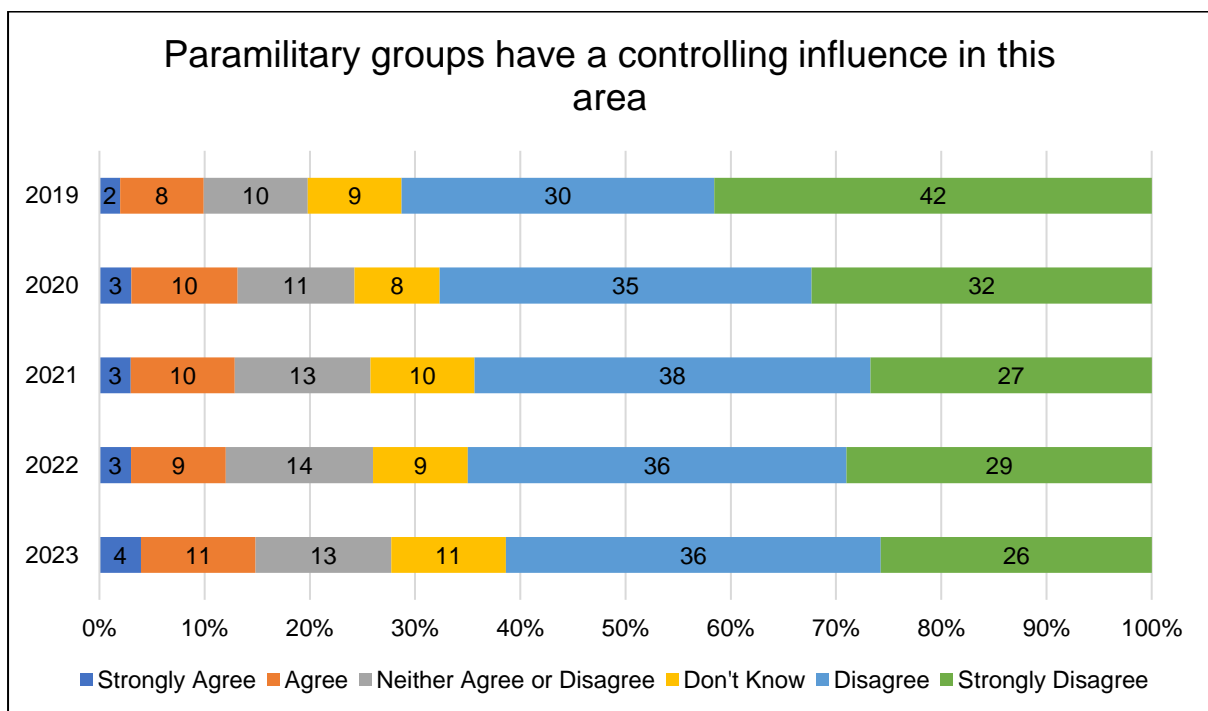
2.42 *Source:* The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is undertaken each year to record the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues⁵³. A number of the questions in relation to paramilitarism are funded by the Programme, and it uses the responses to these questions to measure the impact of interventions at population-level. Because of rounding, percentages in the charts below may sometimes add up to more than 100.

2.43 *Relevance:* Understanding how communities perceive paramilitaries, the control paramilitaries may exercise, and any community role that some might see them playing are vital to tackling paramilitarism. A deeper understanding of the issues facing communities where paramilitaries operate will shape the further work which is required to address the risks and harms and to build more resilient communities.

⁵³ <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/>

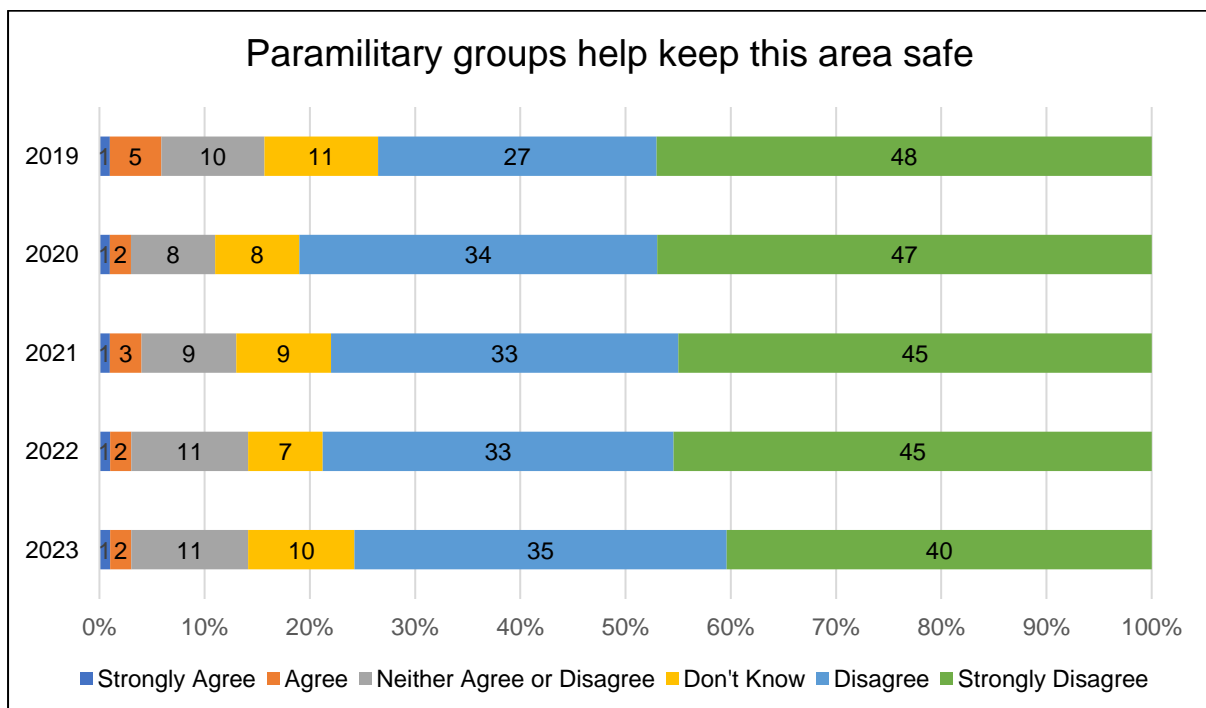
Respondents were asked by the survey how much they agree or disagree with the statement: “**Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in this area.**” Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed and agreed that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence remained broadly consistent. 2% strongly agreed in 2019, rising to 4% in 2023, and 8% agreed in 2019, rising to 11% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence fell from 42% in 2019 to 26% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed rose from 30% in 2019 to 36% in 2023.



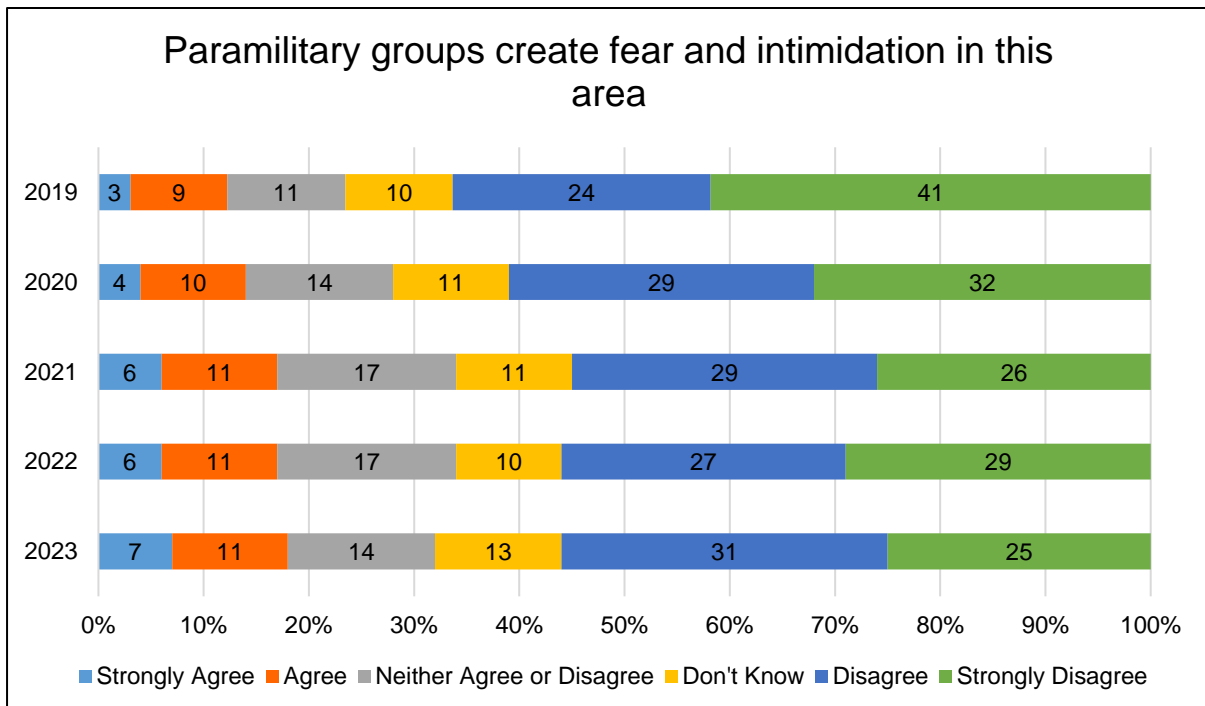
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“Paramilitary groups help keep this area safe.”** Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed that paramilitary groups helped keep the area safe has remained consistent at 1% and the percentage that agreed has decreased from 5% in 2019 to 2% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups helped keep the area safe fell from 48% in 2019 to 40% in 2023, and the percentage of people that disagreed rose from 27% in 2019 to 35% in 2023.



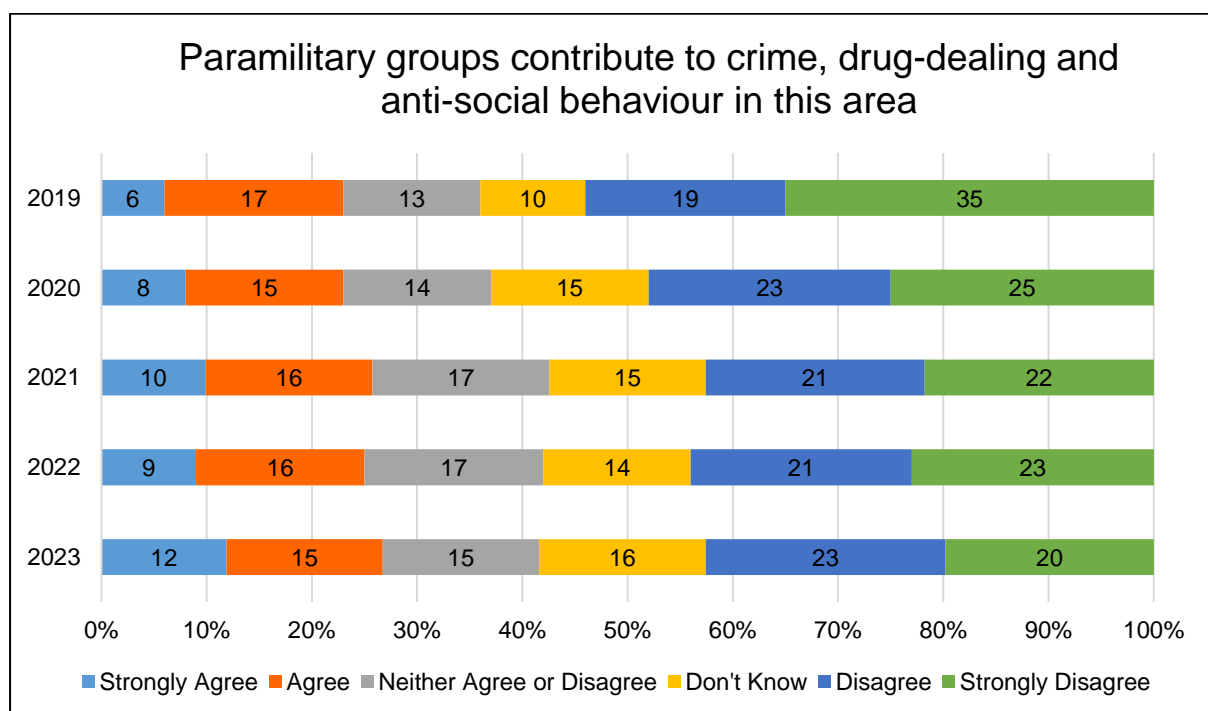
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “**Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in this area.**” Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that either strongly agreed or agreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation rose from 3% in 2019 to 7% in 2023, and from 9% in 2019 to 11% in 2023 respectively.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation fell from 41% in 2019 to 25% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed rose from 24% in 2019 to 31% in 2023.



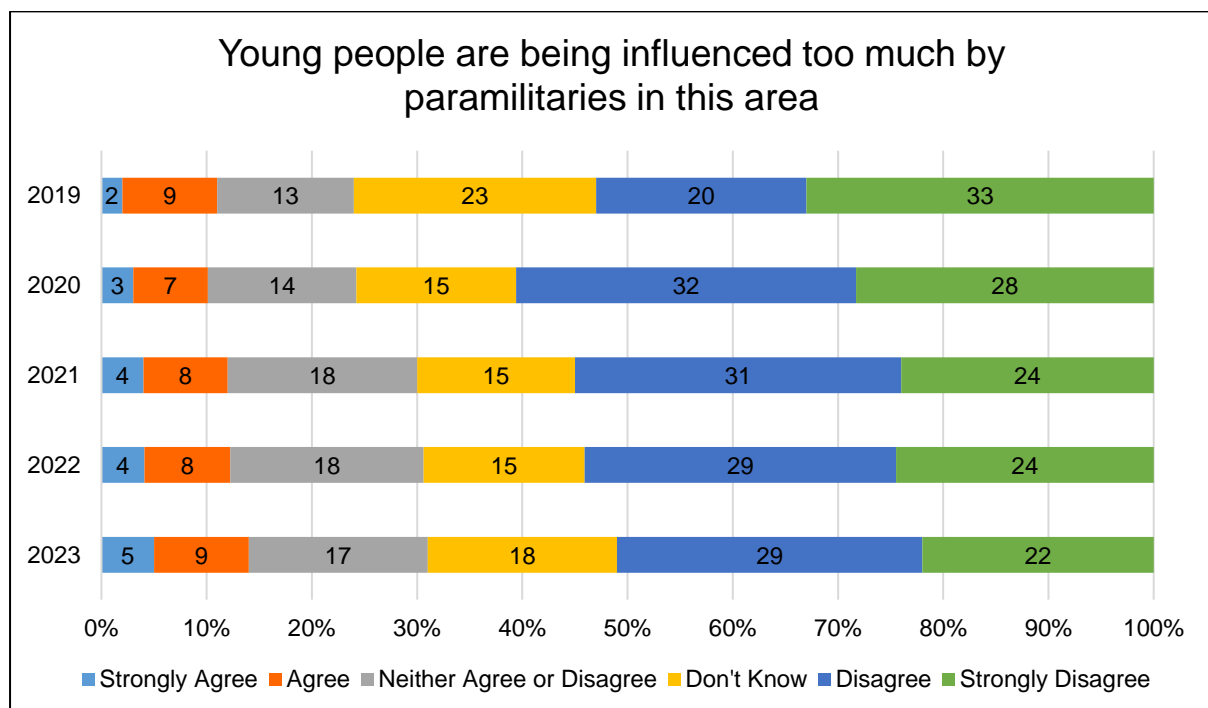
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **“Paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour in this area.”** Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug dealing, and anti-social behaviour rose from 6% in 2019 to 12% in 2023, and the percentage of people that agreed with the statement fell from 17% in 2019 to 15% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug dealing, and anti-social behaviour fell from 35% in 2019 to 20% in 2023, and the percentage of people that disagreed rose from 19% in 2019 to 23% in 2023.



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.**” Over the last five years:

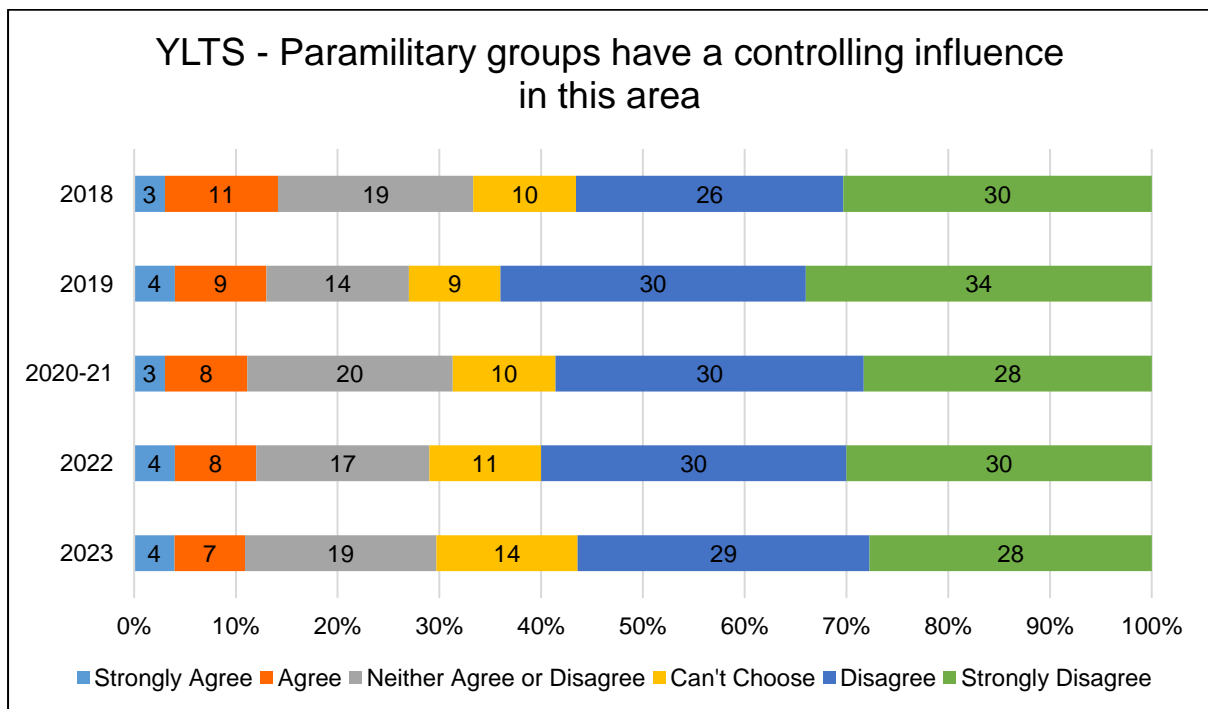
- The percentage of people that strongly agreed and agreed with the statement remained broadly consistent, with 2% strongly agreeing in 2019, rising to 5% in 2023, and 9% agreeing with the statement in 2019 and 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that young people were being influenced too much by paramilitaries in their area fell from 33% in 2019 to 22% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed rose from 20% in 2019 to 29% in 2023.



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.

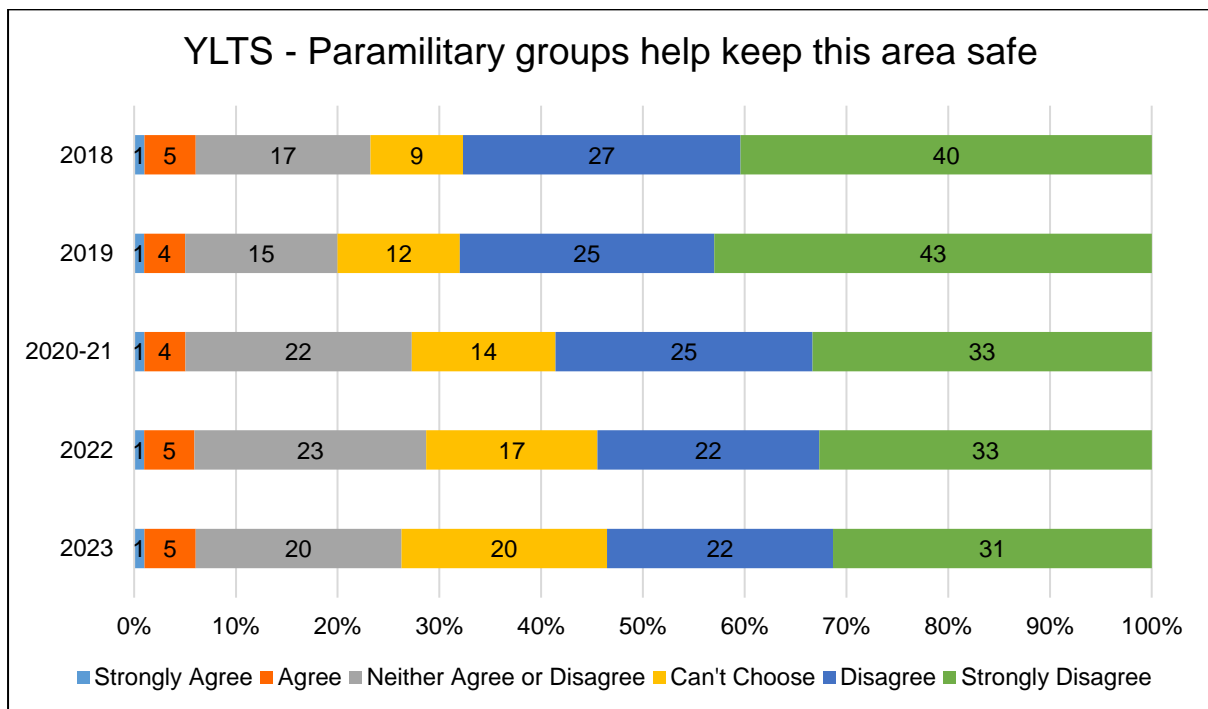
Young people were asked to consider how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: “**Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in this area.**” Over the 2018 – 2023 period:

- The percentage of young people that strongly agreed that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in the area remained consistent with 3% in 2018 rising to 4% in 2023. The percentage of young people that agreed with the statement fell from 11% in 2018 to 7% in 2023.
- The percentage of young people that strongly disagreed and disagreed that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence remained broadly consistent with 30% in 2018 falling to 28% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed with the statement rose from 26% in 2018 to 29% in 2023.



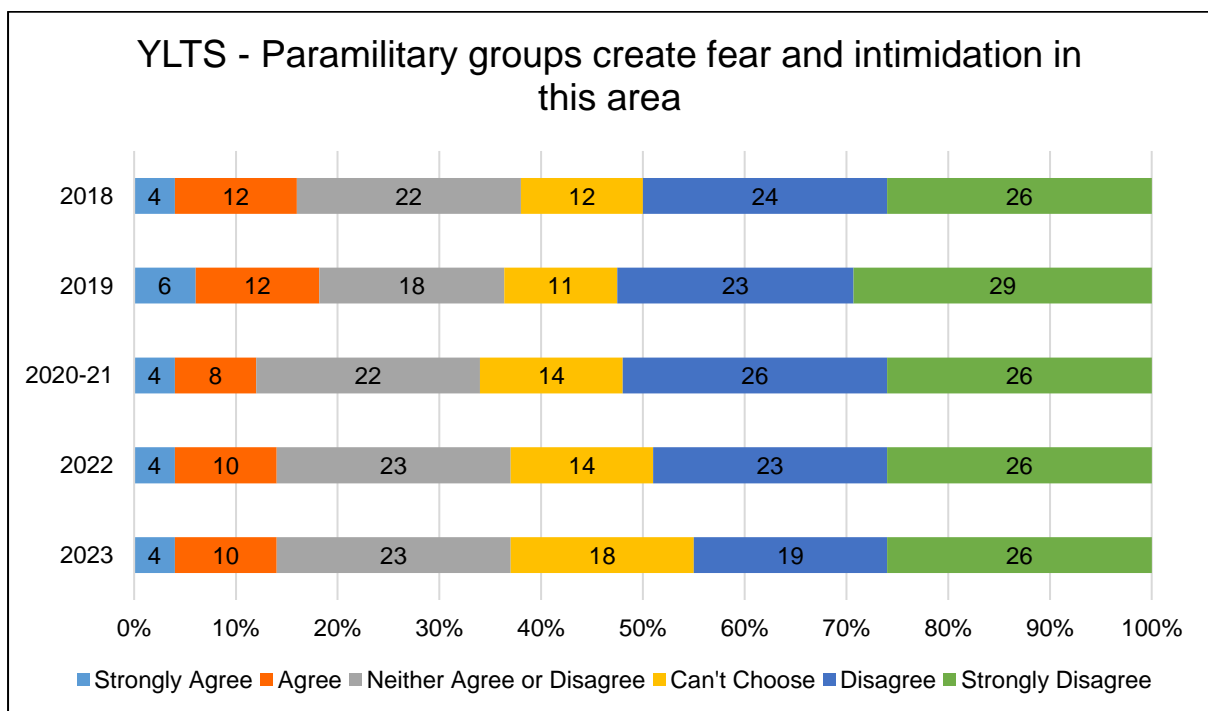
Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **“Paramilitary groups help keep this area safe.”** Over the 2018 – 2023 period:

- The percentage of young people that strongly agreed and agreed that paramilitary groups helped keep the area safe remained consistent with 1% agreeing each year, and the percentage that agreed with the statement remained at 4 - 5% during this time.
- The percentage of young people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups help keep the area safe fell from 40% in 2018 to 31% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed fell from 27% in 2018 to 22% in 2023.



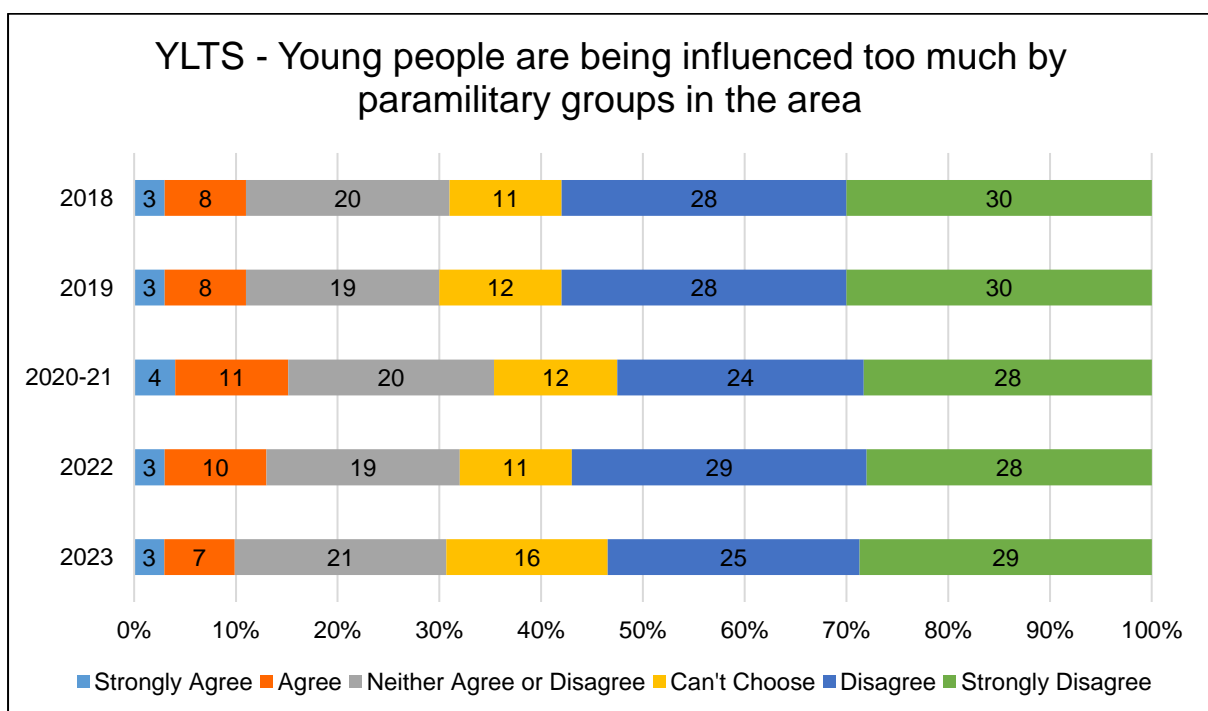
Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “**Paramilitaries create fear and intimidation in this area.**” Over the 2018 – 2023 period:

- The percentage of young people that strongly agreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in the area remained consistent at 4% for four of the five years, and the percentage of young people that agreed with the statement fell from 12% in 2018 to 10% in 2023.
- The percentage of young people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in the area has remained consistently at 26% for four of the five years, rising to 29% in 2019, and the percentage that disagreed fell from 24% in 2018 to 19% in 2023.



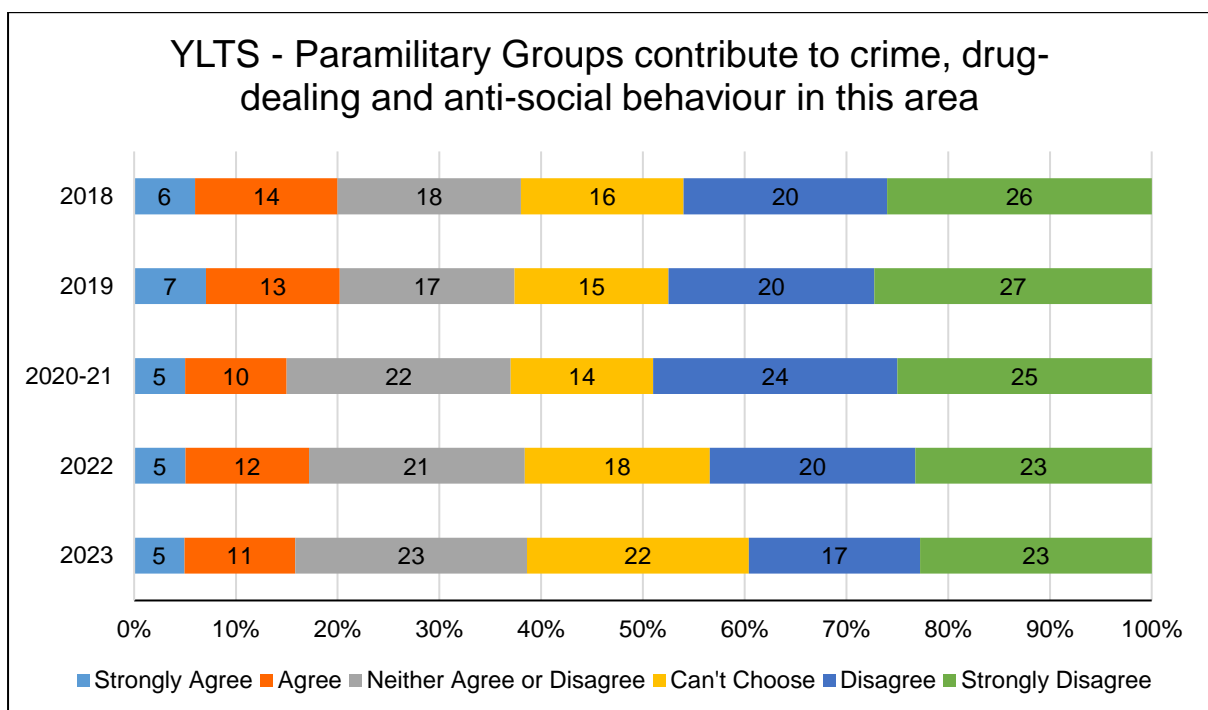
Young people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “**Young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in the area.**” Over the 2018 – 2023 period:

- The percentage of young people that strongly agreed that young people were being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in the area remained consistent for four of the five years at 3% and rose to 4% in 2020/21. The percentage of young people that agreed fell from 8% in 2018 to 7% in 2023.
- The percentage of young people that strongly disagreed that young people were being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in the area fell from 30% in 2018 to 29% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed with the statement fell from 28% in 2018 to 25% in 2023.



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.”** Over the 2018 – 2023 period:

- The percentage of young people that strongly agreed that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour decreased from 6% in 2018 to 5% in 2023, and the percentage that agreed fell from 14% in 2018 to 11% in 2023.
- The percentage of young people that strongly disagreed that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour fell from 26% in 2018 to 23% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed fell from 20% in 2018 to 17% in 2023.



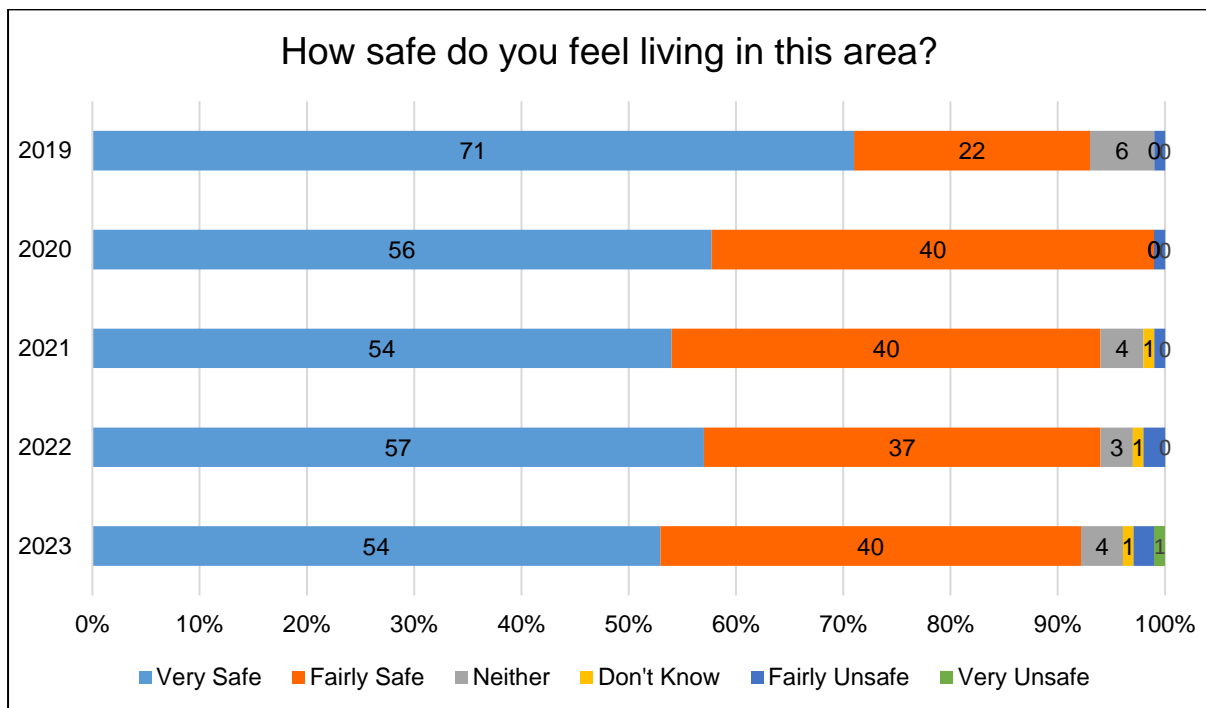
Views in relation to the police and criminal justice system

Source: NILT

2.44 *Relevance*: Trust and confidence in the police and criminal justice system is a key element in understanding the 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.

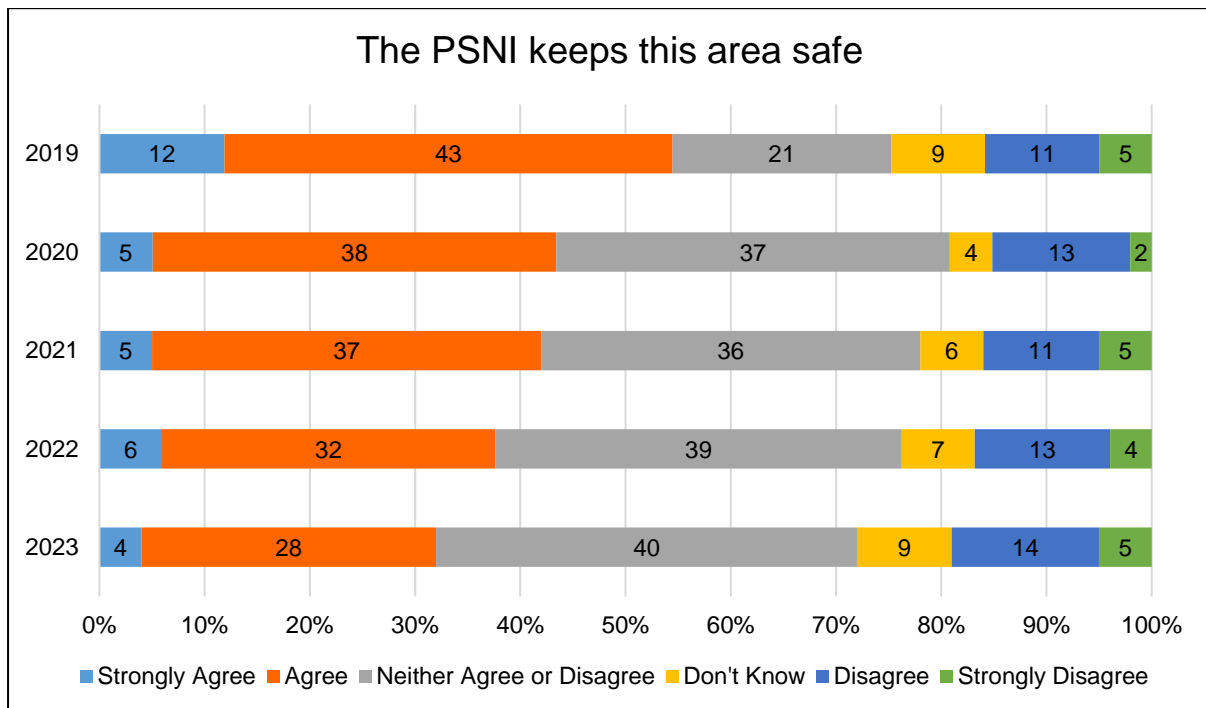
Respondents were asked: “**how safe do you feel living in this area?**” Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that felt very safe fell from 71% in 2019 to 54% in 2023 and the percentage who felt safe rose from 22% in 2019 to 40% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that felt fairly unsafe living in the area and very unsafe each rose 1% in the five-year period.



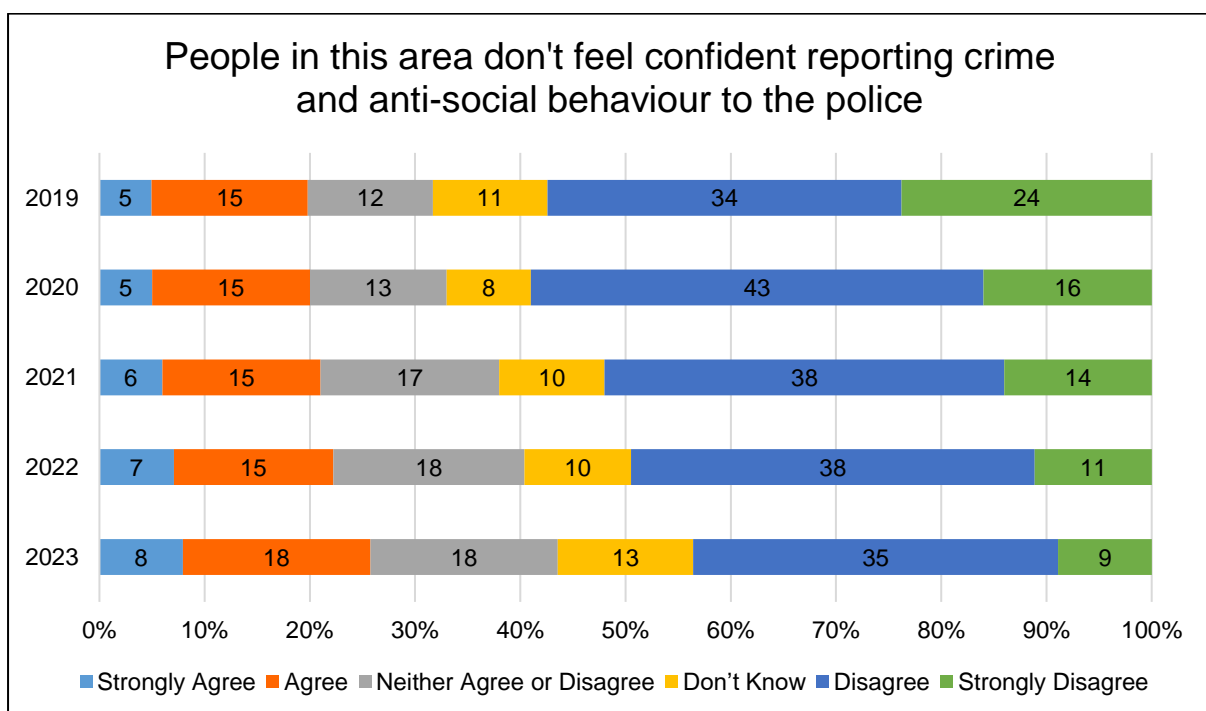
Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“the PSNI keeps this area safe.”** Over the last five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed that the PSNI kept the area safe fell from 12% in 2019 to 4% in 2023, and the percentage that agreed with the statement fell from 43% in 2019 to 28% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that the PSNI kept the area safe remained the same at 5%, and the percentage of people that disagreed with the statement rose from 11% in 2019 to 14% in 2023.



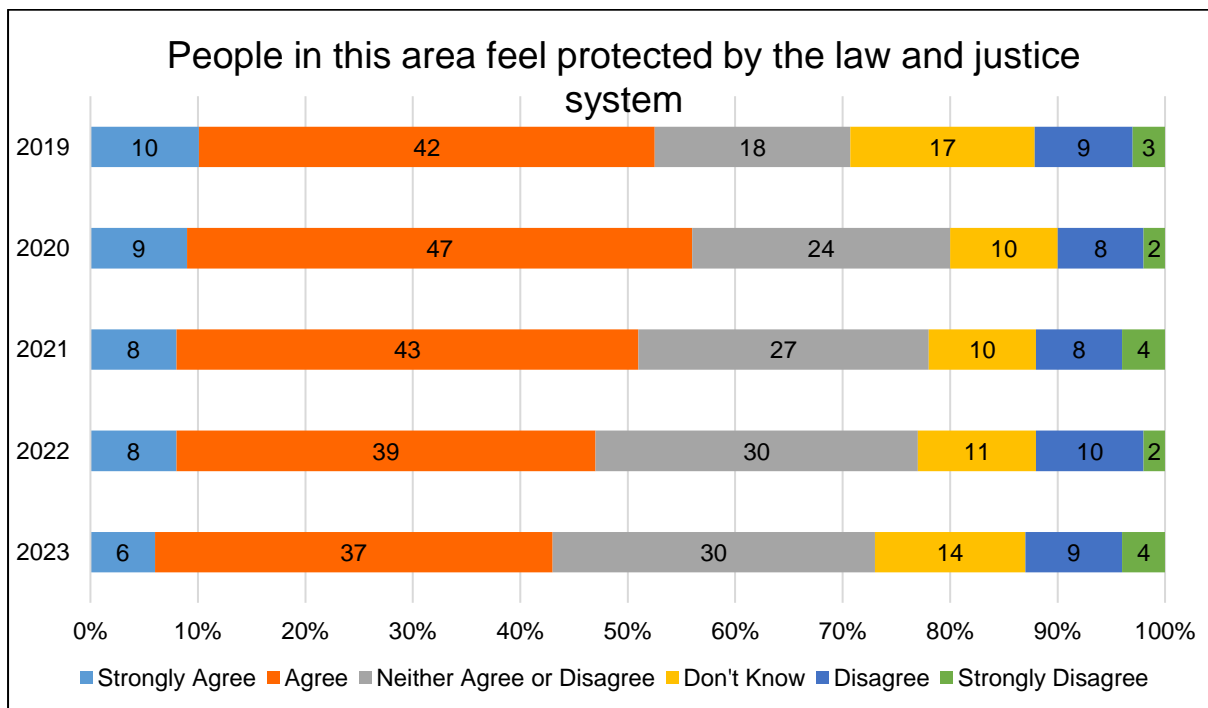
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“People in this area don't feel confident reporting crime and anti-social behaviour to the PSNI.”** Over the past five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed that they didn't feel confident reporting crime and anti-social behaviour to the PSNI rose from 5% in 2019 to 8% in 2023, and the percentage that agreed rose from 15% in 2019 to 18% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed with the statement that they don't feel confident reporting crime and anti-social behaviour to the PSNI fell from 24% in 2019 to 9% in 2023, and the percentage of people that disagreed with the statement rose from 34% in 2019 to 35% in 2023.



Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed and disagreed with the statement: **“People in this area feel protected by the law and justice system.”** Over the past five years:

- The percentage of people that strongly agreed that they felt protected by the law and justice system fell from 10% in 2019 to 6% in 2023, and the percentage that agreed fell from 42% in 2019 to 37% in 2023.
- The percentage of people that strongly disagreed that people in the area felt protected by the law and justice system rose from 3% in 2019 to 4% in 2023, and the percentage that disagreed remained at 9%.



Other recent research concerning the impact of paramilitaries in NI

2.45 Aisling Swaine's report, *'When you know what they are capable of': Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control*, was published in September 2024.⁵⁴ The report examines the issue of coercive control in the context of intimate partner violence in communities where paramilitaries are present, including the coercion that may be exerted using connections with a paramilitary group, whether those connections are real or feigned. The report shows how women's fear is heightened when intimate partner violence takes place within the wider landscape of paramilitarism. It shows the coercive circumstances which some women live in and how paramilitary-influenced coercion shapes their intimate, familial and community relationships, their ability to seek help, and their experience of services when they do.

Figure 23: Socio-ecological coercive context



2.46 The report shows the relationship between coercive control in women's relationships and wider community-based paramilitary social controls. The report describes how the concept of coercive control was originally developed in relation to intimate partner violence to describe patterns of insidious harms and behaviours that build slowly

⁵⁴ Swaine conducted this research with the support of Foyle Women's Aid and Foyle Family Justice Centre. The research process included two focus groups and interviews with:

- Victim-survivors of paramilitary-related coercive control,
- Policy sector and community workers, including community development workers, staff of women's organisations, support workers to those experiencing a wide range of violence and abuse, and service providers (e.g. police, housing), and
- An individual in a political level leadership role.

towards the full coercion and control by a partner over a woman. The report notes that coercive control is increasingly used as a frame for understanding paramilitary activities in Northern Ireland and it adapts the concept to paramilitarism to show how it can be applied to deepen understanding and analysis and improve responses.

- 2.47 The report gives an overview of the socio-ecological coercive context that enables paramilitary-related controls, including the historic political context in relation to paramilitary control, gender inequality, the silencing of gendered violence during the Troubles, and the lack of attention and accountability for the harm caused.
- 2.48 The report presents a comprehensive framework for understanding paramilitary-related coercive control. The framework explains the components involved in how paramilitary-related gendered coercive control operates and becomes an effective means of control. This includes the creation of an atmosphere of fear to solidify control, the exploitation of women's vulnerabilities including control of and access to their children, the issuing of threats and demands that make tactical and explicit use of paramilitarism to harm and control women, and the ways that paramilitarism is used to enable group-based surveillance of women to solidify control. Reporting what was happening was challenging for the women, not only because of potential harm from a partner but also because of the potential harm from paramilitaries, and the risk of ostracisation from their community. Women feared being labelled as 'touts'. The research also found that services were compromised by fears that their workers experience, as well as their inability to confront tacit paramilitary control of communities and services. In addition, the report found that victim-survivors had varied experiences of engaging with the PSNI: while some provided welcome support, others took an approach to women in dangerous situations of intimate partner violence that exacerbated the threats they lived with and did not take the woman's own understanding of the paramilitary threat seriously, sometimes appearing more interested in the partners' paramilitary links than the woman's safety. Paramilitary conventions, implicitly or explicitly used by an abusive partner or the paramilitary group as a whole, are a means to further the net of coercive control within a relationship, home or community.
- 2.49 The report makes several recommendations. It identifies a need for a joined-up, multi-agency response to paramilitary-related coercive control based on a shared, gendered understanding of how paramilitary-related coercive control affects victims of abuse. It calls for trauma informed protocols to be developed to specifically support women trying to leave the kinds of coercive situations described in the report, and for women's own understanding of their lived realities to inform the approach taken. Paramilitarism, (sexual) violence, and threat should be approached using a gendered analysis, including by the police. The report says that service providers, including police, should be supporting and engaging with these women primarily as victim-survivors of intimate partner violence, rather than allowing the paramilitary-related elements of their relationship and abuse to become the primary component in the ways that support is

provided. The report recommends that all police units, regardless of their role, should be trained on how paramilitary-related broader social controls are gendered and are co-opted into intimate relationships. The report notes the need for further research, both in other areas of Northern Ireland and to retrospectively examine Troubles-related gendered violence to enhance understanding of women's experiences of harm during the Troubles.

SECTION C: DETAILED CONSIDERATION OF THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER WORK

3.1 In this Section of the Report we consider in further detail the work being delivered through the Programme, as well as highlighting some other relevant work being undertaken by the Executive and public sector bodies. The goal agreed by the NI parties and the UK and Irish Governments in the Fresh Start Agreement of ending paramilitarism “once and for all” requires a comprehensive cross-Government approach. That is why we touch on a range of ongoing activity in the pages ahead. It is important both to recognise the contribution that the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime has been making, and to look to other areas where progress is needed. The Programme provides investment for almost 100 projects and has the aim of “safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control”. We explore progress in each project in greater detail in this Section.

3.2 We have structured this Section around the key benefits being sought through the Programme:

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

As part of our work, the Commissioners and Secretariat meet a wide range of project delivery partners (both in the public sector and the community and voluntary sector) to understand what is working well, what difference interventions are making, and what gaps, needs or areas for improvement there are. We have also reviewed materials and evaluations compiled by the Programme team to inform our detailed analysis of progress. We are grateful to all of those who have met us in 2024 and since we began this work.

3.3 The history of the political agreement which led to the Fresh Start goal and Programme is set out in the Overview. Key milestones in this work are set out in the graphic overleaf.

TACKLING PARAMILITARISM

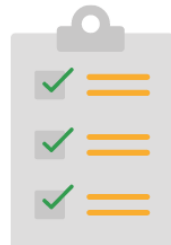


FRESH START AGREEMENT NOVEMBER 2015

Multi-party agreement spotlights the need for further work to "tackle the insidious influence of paramilitarism and reinforce efforts to tackle organised crime and criminality".

INDEPENDENT PANEL TO REPORT ON THE DISBANDMENT OF PARAMILITARY GROUPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND DECEMBER 2015

An independent panel is appointed by the Executive to make recommendations for a strategy to disband paramilitary groups.



EXECUTIVE ACTION PLAN JUNE 2016

The NI Executive agrees a programme of work to tackle paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime.

INDEPENDENT REPORTING COMMISSION FORMALLY BEGINS WORK AUGUST 2017

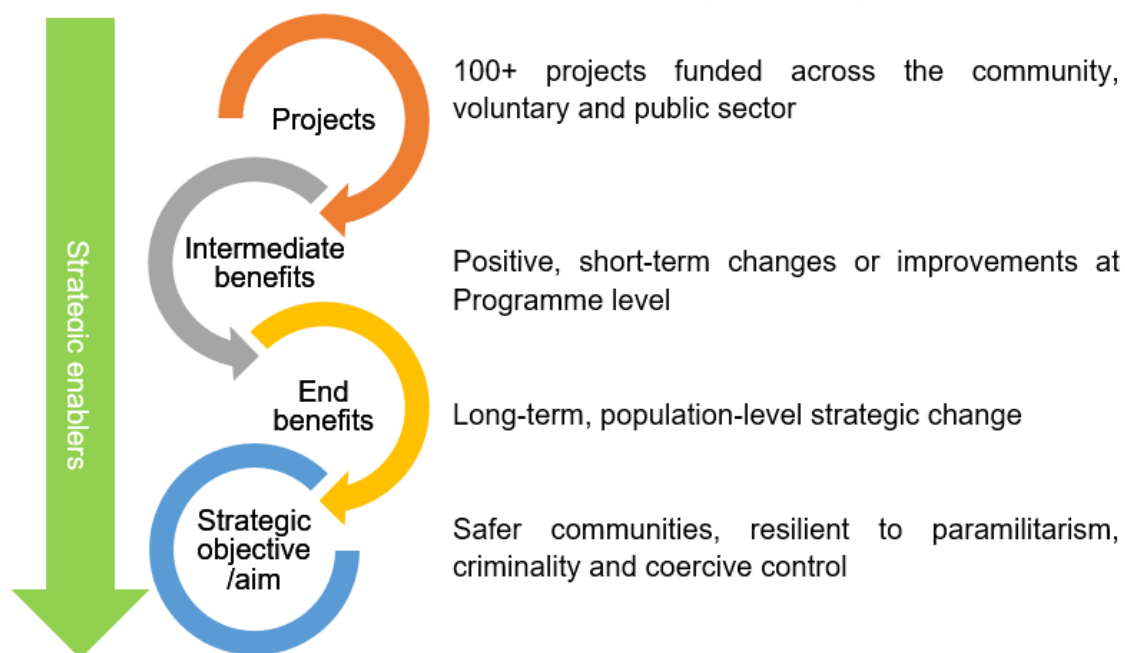
The IRC is established by Treaty to consult and report on work ongoing, and to make recommendations for further actions.



PHASE TWO OF THE PROGRAMME APRIL 2021

The Executive agrees to a second phase of the Programme, beginning in April 2021.

3.4 Following a review of the initial phase of the Programme and detailed thinking about how to maximise impact, Phase Two of the Programme has a specific focus on shared outcomes. This is developed through a benefits realisation approach, which puts an emphasis on actual measurable and sustainable changes (“benefits”) as distinct from individual project outputs. For example, a project with a focus on outputs might count the number of participants; a focus on outcomes means looking at the change in participants’ lives as well as the impact of that change on their wider environment. Through this framework, the collective impact of the projects – and enabling activities such as research, communications etc. – should deliver real change, and if they do not then the approach should be refined. 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.



3.5 Phase Two of the Programme adopts a **public health approach to violence**, that is to say: treating violence like a disease. This means seeking to deeply understand the problem, diagnosing its causes, developing and testing practice to prevent it, refining the model, scaling up what has proven to be effective and monitoring progress. The following Programme diagram helps to summarise this:

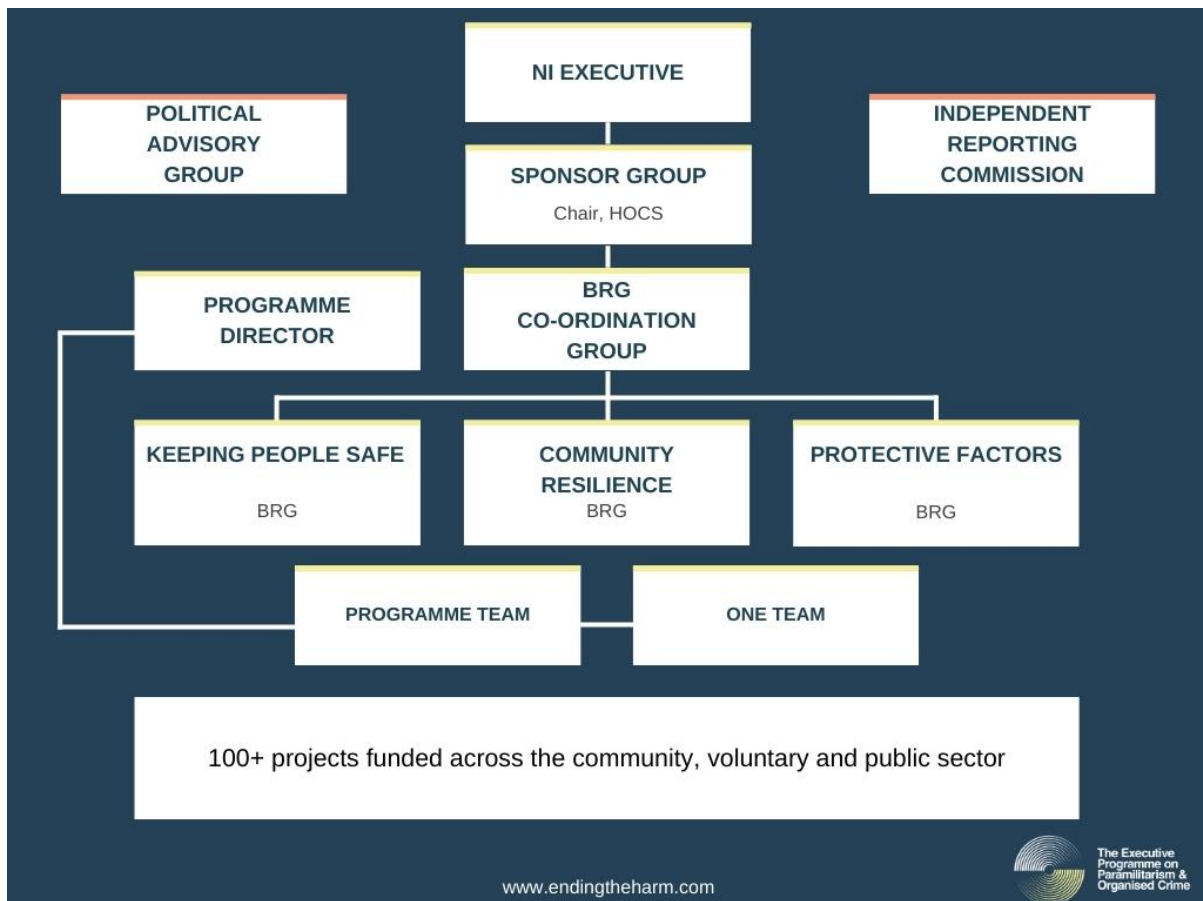


3.6 A dedicated **Programme Team** supports coordination of the work, and projects are led by delivery leads in various Departments and agencies (ranging from The Executive Office and the Departments for Education, Communities and Health to the PSNI, Education Authority and Probation Board), often in partnership with the community and voluntary sector. A mixture of long-established and newer partner organisations help deliver the projects in areas, taking locally-tailored approaches. Officials come together in a range of structures to encourage further progress:

- Three **benefits realisation groups** (BRGs): those involved in clusters of linked projects meet quarterly to consider progress made, difficulties encountered and future opportunities. The Chairs of each group form a **benefits realisation coordination group** which, together with the Programme Director and Senior Responsible Owner (the person accountable for successful delivery and recognised as the leader driving this change forward), form an oversight group.
- **One Team**, which meets monthly, brings together project delivery leads to update each other on their respective work, explore issues of common concern and promote a joined-up approach to all of these endeavours.
- A senior **Sponsor Group** is chaired by the Head of the Civil Service, bringing together senior leaders from across the public sector. Sponsors are responsible for championing the Programme in their business areas and for considering and addressing relevant external risks, opportunities and dependencies that will either accelerate or slow progress towards outcomes. Sponsors have specific responsibilities to address gaps or impediments to progress, informed by evidence and data.

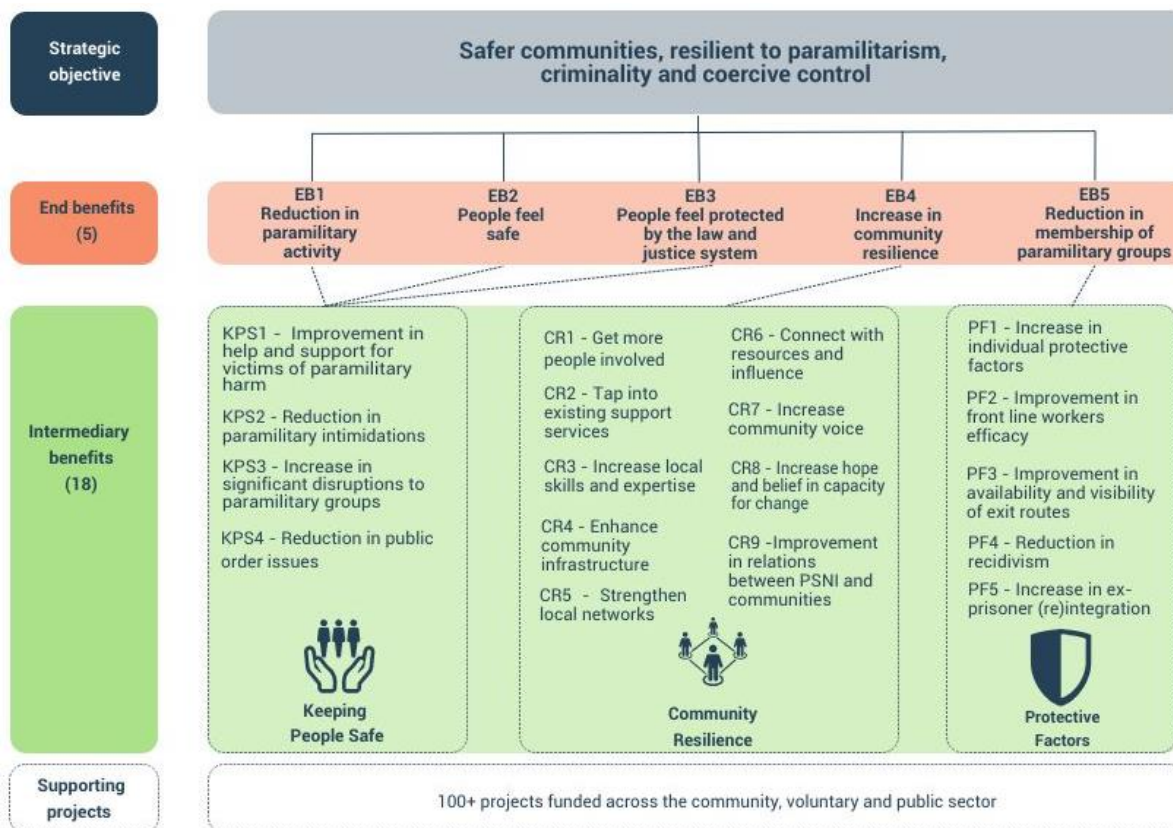
3.7 Through this collaboration structure and these processes, those involved in projects

and this work share ideas, experiences and learning with each other, build further expertise, foster ongoing and future collaboration, and identify gaps, overlap and dependencies. The Programme has a key role 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.



3.8 Data and evaluation have been a priority throughout the Programme and as a result we have a better understanding of the current situation regarding paramilitarism, and what works to help tackle it. That knowledge is being shared through conferences, workshops, articles published in international journals and new collaborations, as well as the Programme’s Ending the Harm communications campaign. This learning is highly relevant to a wide range of practitioners, funders, policymakers and other professionals: those working to tackle paramilitarism, those working on linked socio-economic issues and those working directly in communities. Efforts should continue to engage a wider audience in learning from this work, as well as ensuring knowledge and experience from other non-EPPOC work is shared and learnt from. The more the information is shared and understood, the more it can be built into new strategies, policies and funding approaches, as well as informing practice, and so enhance the public policy response to ending paramilitarism.

3.9 The diagram below 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.



3.10 Underpinning this work is an “enabling framework”, which was agreed by the Executive in April 2021:

- **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.

Keeping People Safe

Overview:

3.11 Paramilitary-linked criminality continues to cause harm to individuals, groups and communities, and so efforts to keep people safe are vital. This stream of work involves both supporting victims and disrupting paramilitary-linked criminality.

3.12 The Programme's work in this domain is designed to contribute towards measurable and positive change over the long-term through:

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

3.13 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 to realise intermediary benefits, which in the case of keeping people safe are:

- improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm;
- reduction in paramilitary intimidation;
- increase in significant disruption to paramilitary groups, and
- reduction in public order issues.

Relevant Programme activity:

Project	Paramilitary Crime Task Force
Description	A law enforcement task force consisting of the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI), the National Crime Agency (NCA), and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Its remit is focused on criminality linked to the most high-risk groups. PCTF collaboration allows each agency to share resources, capacity, and capability with the aim of frustrating, disrupting and dismantling paramilitary organised crime gangs through a robust law enforcement response. By tackling the criminal activities of paramilitary groups, PCTF aims to reduce the coercive control of such groups and the harm people and communities experience.
24/25 Funding	£5,556k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm;• Reduction in paramilitary intimidations;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in significant disruptions to paramilitary groups; • Reduction in public order issues; • Improvement in relations between PSNI and communities; • Improvement in front line workers' efficacy; and • Reduction in recidivism.
Summary update	In 2023/24, the PCTF conducted 175 searches, made 82 arrests, 59 charges/reports, seized drugs estimated in value at £1.3m, seized 39 weapons and £0.23m in cash. The team has been working to implement findings of an external review and has participated in the collaborative working structures of the Programme.
IRC comment	<p>The combined law enforcement response to paramilitary-linked criminality has continued to work to good effect in the last year. This enforcement activity sends a strong message to communities and to criminals that criminality will not be tolerated, and this is closely linked with enhancing community confidence in policing. Efforts to frustrate, disrupt and dismantle groups' criminal activities are a vital part of efforts to reduce paramilitary harms to individuals and communities.</p> <p>We welcome the efforts by each agency to ensure that they are maximising links into their wider organisations, so that the full resources of law enforcement partners are brought to bear against paramilitary-linked criminality. Increases in actions taken are seen by communities and those involved in criminality, and can help to make the case to those involved in paramilitary-linked criminality to take a different pathway. It is encouraging that the PCTF is continuing efforts to ensure that its impact on the groups can be effectively measured.</p>

Project	Support for victims of paramilitary violence (InSync)
Description	Provides support for victims of paramilitary activity and harm. The project identifies victims through multiple outreach channels and seeks their consent and commitment to participate. Support is provided 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. This involves mentoring and/or signposting to other services. The project also aims to build capacity among service providers to work with victims.
24/25 Funding	£137k

Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm.
Summary update	73 people received support through this project in 2023/24.
IRC comment	<p>This project has identified a group of victims who have not received appropriate supports for their experiences of paramilitary harm. They combine a mentoring approach with counselling support, to help people living with the consequences of paramilitary harm to begin to rebuild their lives. We commend the project's commitment to evaluating its efficacy, to ensure its processes operate well and it delivers the required support.</p> <p>There is significant complexity in the experiences of those receiving support. Some might feel that their community continues to judge or ostracise them, following an incident such as an assault or shooting. Some may even believe that they 'deserved' an attack, because of the normalisation of violence in certain communities and views that paramilitaries are delivering a form of informal 'justice'. While we reject those interpretations, it is also vital that those mindsets and beliefs are deeply understood if they are to be addressed.</p> <p>It is concerning that victim support structures and the work of counselling services and others have not met the particular needs and manifestations of trauma among these individuals to date, albeit it is reassuring that this service exists to provide appropriate supports. Mainstream services should take learning from InSync and ensure that support is more accessible to those facing the barriers described here. A critical next step will be identifying what opportunities there are across the system to provide a better level of support to victims of paramilitary harm in the future. Furthermore, it will be important to identify what barriers to support have historically existed and for honest conversations to take place about whether these have been adequately addressed, including through work such as the NI Mental Health Strategy's implementation and development of the Regional Trauma Network. We urge the Minister of Health to give this careful consideration.</p>

Project	Drug Related Intimidation Response Scoping
Description	This piece of work is scoping a service response to the issue of drug related intimidation using learning from the Drug Related

	Intimidation and Violence Engagement project (DRIVE) and the Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Project (DRIRP) in Ireland and from learning generated through the Programme. It will explore reframing of the issue, a collective response centred around drug and family support services, and data collection.
24/25 Funding	£90k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in paramilitary intimidations.
Summary update	Research and scoping work is progressing as planned.
IRC comment	This is a useful example of the Programme identifying gaps and opportunities, as it had its origins in discussions held by the Keeping People Safe benefits realisation group. Ensuring that the public service response to drug-related intimidation is as effective as possible is vital work not least given because of the rise in drug and addiction problems, and the challenging issue of paramilitary threats, intimidation and exploitation connected to drugs. It is welcome to have additional partners involved in the Project, in this case the Department of Health and Public Health Agency. We look forward to further updates on progress in this area.

Project	Threat to life review
Description	A review looking across the system at how threats to life are dealt with, including picking up the recommendations from the review of the Belfast City Council-run support project for people under threat about how to collectively support people under threat. Close work across a range of partners will be required to establish how to collectively deliver a coherent, trauma informed, data driven response to those who are subject to threats to their life.
24/25 Funding	£100k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm.
Summary update	We understand that this work is at an early stage, but progressing.
IRC comment	We welcome that further work is being done around supports for those threatened by paramilitaries, including looking across the range of partner organisations involved and getting upstream of the issue. Consistency and nature of support for victims of threat has long been raised as an area of concern. It is important that organisations such as the PSNI, Housing Executive, Government Departments all commit to engaging with this review, and to implementing findings.

Other relevant activity:

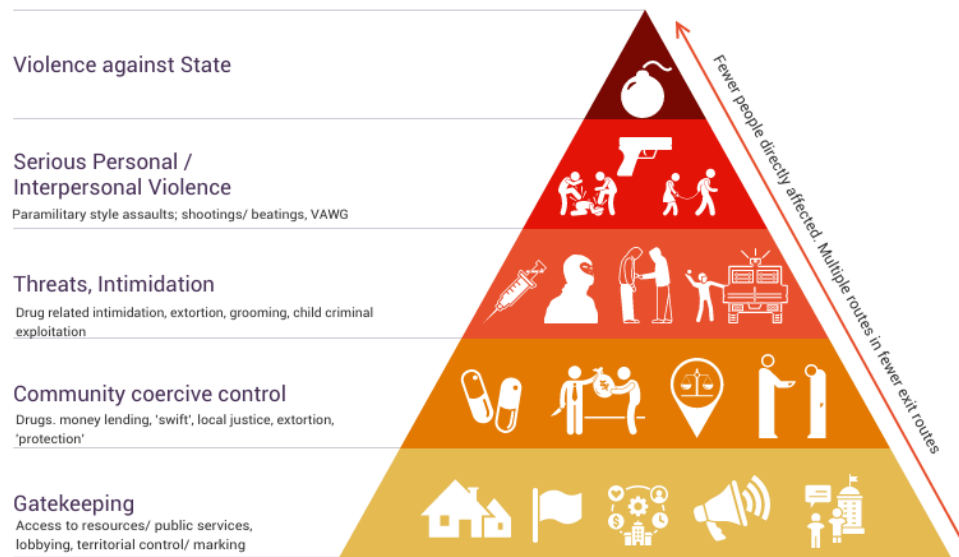
3.14 The PSNI play a vital role in keeping people safe. As set out in the Overview, a wide range of policing activity is relevant to this benefit, but keeping people safe is not the responsibility of the PSNI alone. Many organisations play a role in keeping people safe including the Housing Executive, local councils, Health and Social Care workers, Probation Board and Prison Service, other statutory service providers, and a wide range of community and voluntary sector organisations, including those delivering restorative justice interventions in communities. Strategies such as the Policing Plan 2025-2030, any future Organised Crime Strategy, refreshed Community Safety Strategy, NIHE's Community Safety Strategy, as well as wider Executive initiatives such as the successor to the Building Inclusive Communities strategy, community infrastructure support and neighbourhood renewal, should all detail how they will contribute to tackling paramilitarism (beyond Programme initiatives), as part of building a whole system response to this issue.

Measuring progress:

3.15 Given the importance of keeping people safe, measuring progress in this domain is vital. In the NI Life and Times Survey, there have neither been significant reductions in the number of people believing paramilitaries create fear and intimidation in their areas nor significant increases in feelings of safety or being protected by the law and justice system. There are many possible complex reasons for this. This should not be seen as devaluing current efforts, but rather a signal to further explore how efforts can be grown and approaches refined if required.

3.16 The Programme has highlighted the importance of deepening collective understanding of hidden harms and seeking to address them.

Paramilitary harm

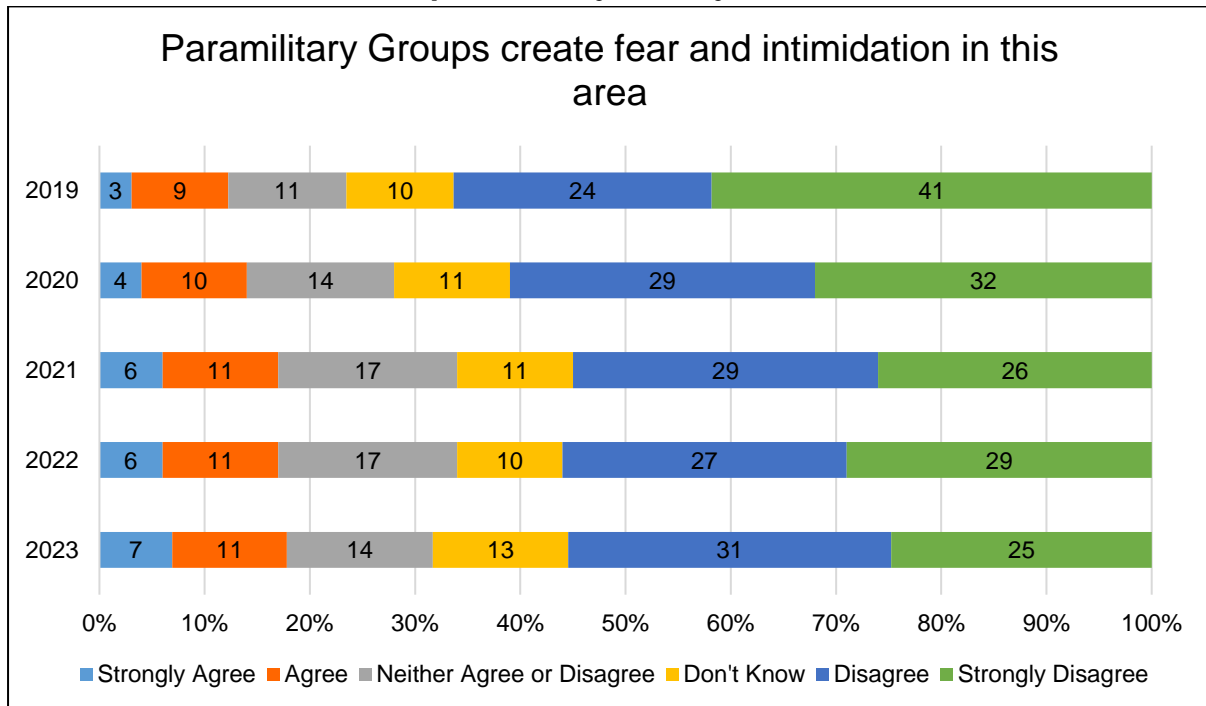


Source: *The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime*

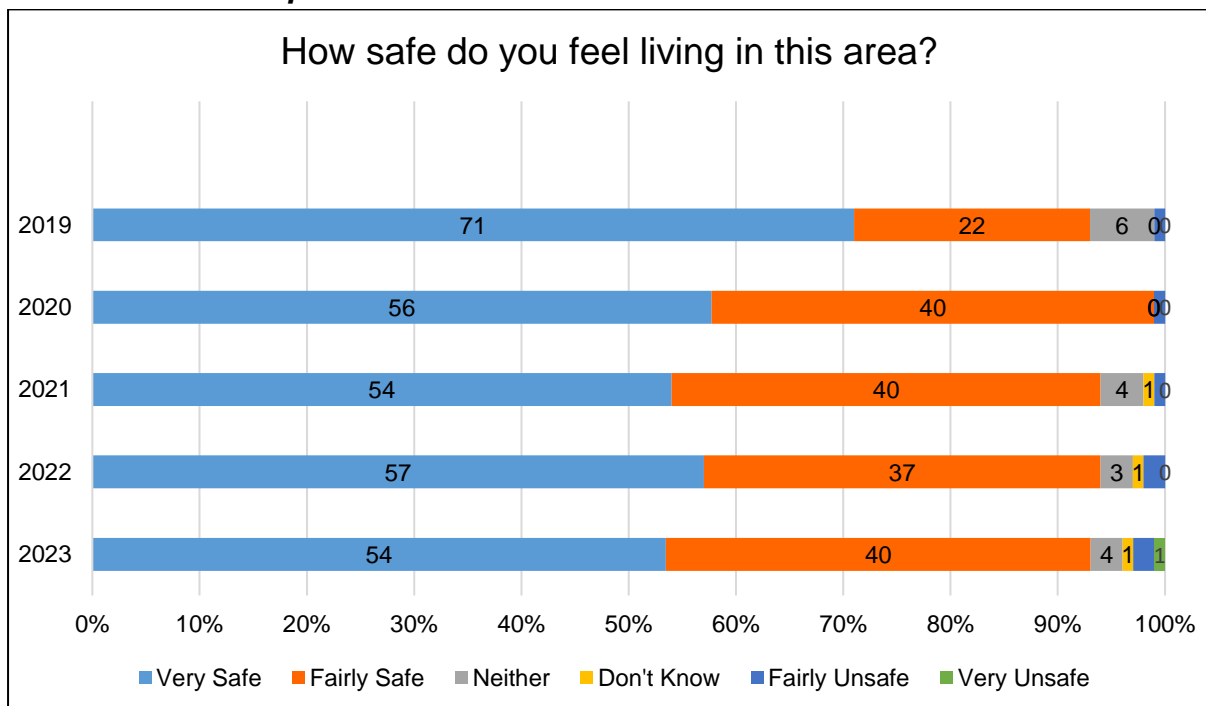
Measuring levels of paramilitary activity is not straightforward. We know that paramilitary harm continues to be underreported for reasons to do with fear, intimidation, other pressures and the legacy of the Troubles/conflict. Measuring hidden harms such as levels of coercive control, assessing the impact of enforcement actions on groups and analysing the data is not straightforward. Nevertheless, the collective efforts of the Programme have helped us to understand the nature of harm much more deeply and has encouraged a community of practitioners to grow and work collaboratively around these issues. We therefore encourage efforts to expand measurement of progress in this domain.

- 3.17 We welcome the growth in projects seeking to support victims, and because of the importance of achieving consistent victim support across the system (including through ongoing efforts such as the embedding of the Victim Charter), we see potential merit in measuring progress in this area as an end benefit in its own right. Given the importance of system-wide change, we believe it would be useful to frame such a metric in terms of consistent victim support through mainstream delivery as well, not just through funded projects.

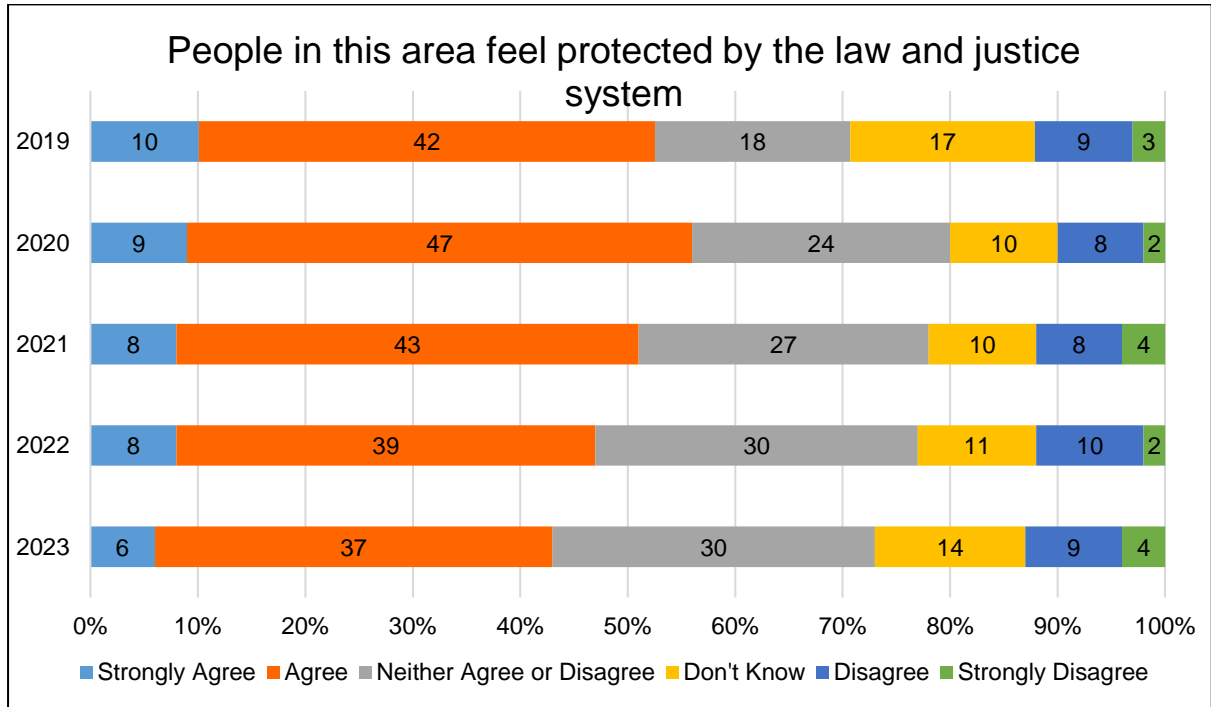
End benefit 1: Reduction in paramilitary activity



End benefit 2: People feel safe



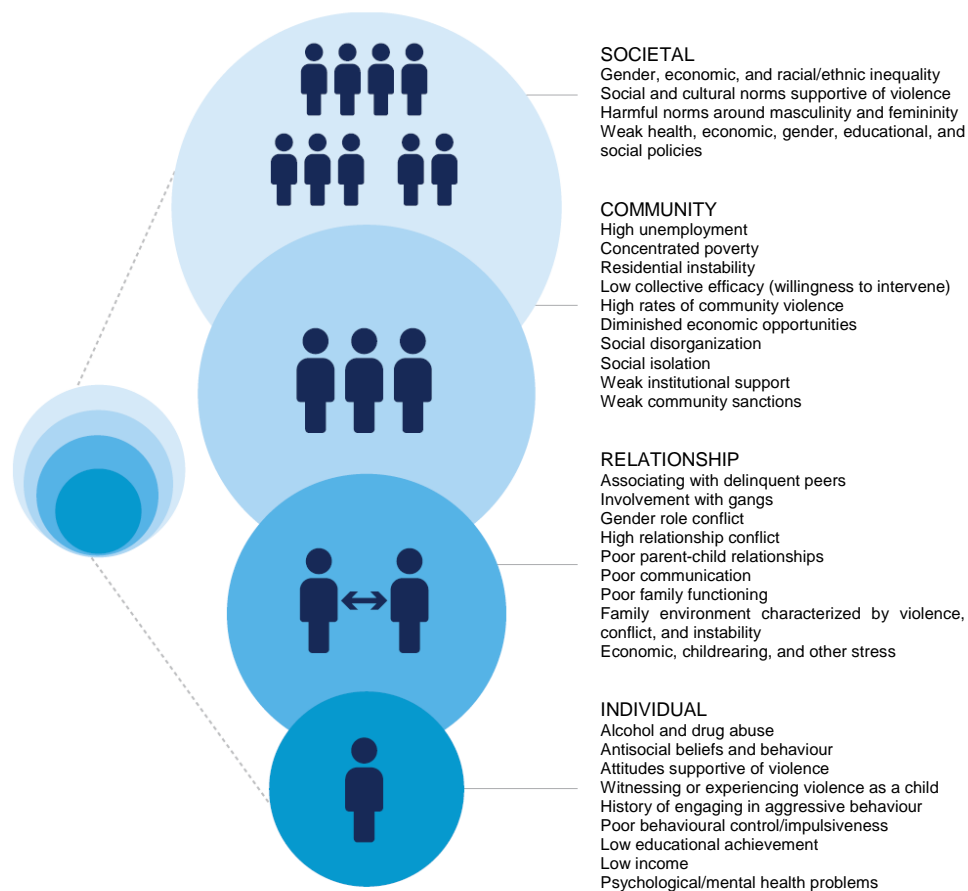
End benefit 3: People feel protected by the law and justice system



Protective Factors

Overview:

3.18 The Programme is seeking to increase protective factors, which act as buffers to shield people from risks – in this case, risk of involvement with or harm by paramilitary groups. There are individual, familial, community and societal conditions that can mitigate risks which increase the likelihood of mental and physical health problems, criminal involvement, substance misuse, or exploitation or abuse; threaten an individual’s development; and limit future social and economic opportunities. A range of risks (which might vary depending on context) are shown in the diagram below⁵⁵.



Protective factors – which help to protect people from these risks and harms – include social supports, healthy problem solving and emotional regulation skills, self-efficacy, personal responsibility, lawfulness and optimism/hope for the future. In the case of tackling paramilitarism, these factors can help reduce and mitigate vulnerability to exploitation, attack and/or recruitment by paramilitaries in certain areas, or, by their absence, increase these vulnerabilities.

⁵⁵ Adapted from the Early Intervention Foundation <https://www.eif.org.uk/why-it-matters/what-is-early-intervention>

3.19 Work to increase the protective factors of prisoners and former prisoners is specifically aimed at promoting reintegration and reducing the likelihood of reoffending and/or being recruited into (or back into) paramilitary groups.

3.20 All of this work is intended to contribute to the end benefit of reduction in membership of paramilitary groups. Intermediary benefits include:

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

Relevant Programme activity:

Project	Youth Work
Description	<p>Description</p> <p>This collection of projects provides a range of youth work support in targeted geographical areas and settings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ENGAGE: Area youth workers are deployed in areas of need to deliver outreach work, mentoring and increase protective factors. Specialist youth engagement workers work directly with young people within communities who have been harmed by paramilitary groups and/or those most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary activity. ENGAGE is based on the developing needs of children and young people in areas of Northern Ireland that have seen an increase in activities from criminal gangs, protests regarding policing and Brexit coupled with civil unrest, riots, and interface violence. • RAPID provides agile responses during times of community tensions and social unrest. • Supporting Youth through Engagement (SYTES) works in partnership with PSNI in schools and local communities to engage vulnerable young people from key areas to promote lawfulness and engage with young people at risk of exclusion from school. • Youth Voluntary Academy is a lawfulness programme co-facilitated with PSNI and Youth Service with peer groups.

	<p>These two projects will be delivered alongside a ‘Peer Educators in Violence Reduction’ pilot project in 2024/25. The aim of this is to reduce the incidence and severity of violence in schools and the community by empowering students to become leaders and change-makers in their communities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CONNECT places youth workers in hospital emergency departments to support vulnerable young people and reduce the physical and social effects of paramilitary activity by working in partnership with PSNI and hospital emergency departments towards the reduction of violent crime. • Y-Box is a co-produced, evidence-based model for the prevention of youth violence by responding to challenges around gender norms. The model was developed by Queen’s University Belfast and the EA, and it focuses on young men who have been involved in violence and supports them in small groups to reflect on questions about identity and masculinity. The model provides a tool for practitioners to help young men understand their relationship with violence and practice non-violent alternatives. It has been tested and is ready to be used more widely across Northern Ireland and beyond, as part of a wider suite of initiatives that are helping reduce youth violence and break the cycle of harm. Engage youth workers in South Belfast are also piloting this approach with young women. • Capacity building 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. It will also support a pilot programme in two identified schools.
24/25 funding	£1,819k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm; • Increase local skills and expertise; and • Increase in individual protective factors.
Summary update	<p>The EA has been actively engaged in ongoing evaluation to identify best practice and understand the impact of initiatives and the mechanisms which create those impacts. These interventions have seen increases in a range of protective factors and there has been a significant reduction in risk taking behaviours. Evaluations were undertaken to examine the effectiveness of the Connect project and to look at quasi-experimental evaluation designs to</p>

	<p>refine and improve the ENGAGE model, and an economic appraisal of the Connect project is also ongoing</p> <p>The projects increase the ability of front line workers to respond to the needs of young people through partnership working and collaboration. This enables others to deliver benefits across the Programme, even where EA projects are not specifically working. For example, several of the projects involve working in partnership with PSNI, which has the added benefit of helping to improve trust and confidence in policing.</p> <p>1,416 young people engaged with Connect across two hospitals, 60 of whom received longer-term support. After engaging with Connect, these young people were less likely to self-report a likelihood of engaging in unlawful behaviour, to be exposed to violence, and were less likely to screen positively for probable depression. The Connect project has now been extended to a third hospital, with two full-time youth workers now based in Craigavon hospital, in addition to the existing staff in Altnagelvin and the Ulster hospital.</p> <p>50% of the young people on the ENGAGE project self-reported an imminent risk of physical violence when they started, but this dropped to 18% by the end. 54% of those who were assessed as having 'poor' social support at the start were assessed as having either 'moderate' or 'strong' social supports at the end of their participation, and 52% of those who scored within the clinical range for probable PTSD when they started the project were below that threshold by the time it finished.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>The youth service does vitally important early intervention work as well as providing supports for young people at risk of, or experiencing, paramilitary harms. The EA has taken an evidence-based and data-driven approach to their work, allowing them to better gauge the impact of interventions and apply what works well to greater effect. Their continuing commitment to evidence-based working, innovation and refining what works is exemplary.</p> <p>The work that has been done to evaluate and iterate the ENGAGE project is a particularly good example of this. We commend this approach and how they have embedded into practice what has been learned through their work with the Programme and Colm Walsh.</p> <p>The evaluations of the ENGAGE and CONNECT projects in 2024 show the significant positive impact these interventions can have</p>

	<p>on vulnerable young people, and we welcome the expansion of CONNECT to a third hospital site. We encourage the Department of Health to work with other hospitals to explore whether a variant of this model would be useful in other large hospitals. The EA shows good flexibility in responding to specific areas' needs and emerging risks, as well as being self-reflective about where it can fruitfully engage with young people at reachable moments. The new Y-Box and X-Box models recognise the importance of gender and we look forward to their wider implementation. They also do valuable work equipping the wider system to engage with these issues, through capacity-building efforts and supporting system-wide initiatives such as efforts to increase awareness and understanding of child criminal exploitation.</p> <p>Effective youth work is a vital component of efforts to tackle paramilitarism and must continue to receive appropriate funding into the future.</p>
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Project	Mid & East Antrim Youth Support Hub
Description	Geographically focused pilot providing support for young people (aged under 25) who are at risk of harm or involvement with paramilitary groups in the Mid and East Antrim area. The project is delivered as a workstream of the Mid & East Antrim Support Hub.
24/25 funding	£150k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm; • Tap into existing support services; and • Increase in individual protective factors.
Summary update	The Youth Support Hub did significant work supporting 22 young people in 2023/24. The work highlighted high levels of exposure to violence, substance use and family issues, all well-documented risk factors. However, there have also been significant challenges with embedding and maintaining the Hub on a longer-term basis.
IRC comment	<p>The work of the hub in Carrickfergus and Larne (and latterly further across the District) was paying dividends, both by identifying young people who would benefit from additional support who had not previously been flagged by the system and then by arranging appropriate supports.</p> <p>We recognise the benefit in bringing together a range of support structures such as youth workers, Trust-led family support structures and the Youth Justice Agency to provide a wraparound</p>

	<p>support for young people at risk of paramilitary harm and/or involvement with groups. We regret that there have been recent challenges embedding and maintaining the Hub as a result of staff turnover in critical roles, and we urge the Programme Team to capture the good work that was done by those involved in the Hub, and ensure lessons are learned from the challenges it faced.</p> <p>The key outcome across all this work is that we achieve a more consistent level of support for young people in order to protect them from paramilitary harm and/or involvement in groups. Achieving this across Northern Ireland should be an urgent priority as part of duties protecting young people and breaking the cycle of harm. The model trialled via the Hub offers one way of providing enhanced, more joined-up support to vulnerable young people and we hope this approach will continue to be considered, further developed, and initiated in other areas.</p>
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Project	WRAP project to improve educational underachievement
Description	<p>A wraparound, flexible education service to children and young people facing significant challenges in East Belfast, South Belfast, Greater Shantallow area, and Rathcoole/Monkstown. The four areas were selected in late 2019 based on levels of educational deprivation; paramilitary activity and criminality; and the availability of strong community organisations to deliver programmes. As well as delivering interventions, these organisations understand the benefit of early intervention, trauma informed practice and the need to build community capacity to support outcomes.</p> <p>While seeking to address educational underachievement, 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"> • 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

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. <p>Measures of success include improvements in children, young people and parents' attitudes to self, education and outlook on the future.</p>
24/25 funding	£618k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase local skills and expertise; Strengthen local networks; and Increase in individual protective factors.
Summary update	<p>There is a range of activities underway across the four WRAP areas, for children of every age. The delivery partners work closely with other services in communities to maximise the benefit to children, families, teachers and schools, and the wider community. To give just a few examples of the positive and varied initiatives over the last year, East Side Learning provided training in the Solihull approach, which focuses on understanding the importance of communication as a trauma informed practice tool; THRiVE organised a conference on promoting effective collaborative working; Forward South Partnership ran workshops about parent-child relationships, perinatal and ante-natal classes to ensuring the best start in life for young people; and the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership worked with at-risk young people at post-primary level to provide skills and training for work placements.</p>
IRC comment	<p>We consider these early interventions to be critically important, having a positive impact on the lives of children and their families and acting to prevent harm before it happens. Through surveys and other evaluation work there is good evidence of social and life skills development, the impact of parenting and family therapy, and positive change in aspirations for their own lives and for their community.</p> <p>Uncertainty in relation to community sector funding is having an impact. Delivery partners can lose experienced staff due to lack of stability, which has only been exacerbated during the cost-of-living crisis which has severely affected delivery areas, with knock-on effects on delivery. Longer-term, more predictable funding could ameliorate this, and policy-makers should consider this when planning for the longer-term future of educational projects such as WRAP and funding for the community sector more broadly.</p>

The growing complexity of special education needs and increasingly diverse communities also needs to be incorporated into planning.

We welcome efforts to incorporate lessons learnt from the WRAP project into Department of Education initiatives such as the RAISE programme. The RAISE programme replaces the Reducing Educational Disadvantage (RED) Programme, taking lessons learned and further embedding and upscaling a whole-community approach to education. RAISE will aim to deliver on the recommendation set out by the Fair Start Report ‘to ensure all children and young people regardless of background are given the best start in life’. It will invest in communities and families in the most disadvantaged areas through place-based partnerships to address educational underachievement across all local government districts in Northern Ireland and we look forward to seeing the Programme develop further. In previous reports we have highlighted the importance of education and educational attainment in tackling paramilitarism and its impact on both individuals and communities, with access to good education and educational supports as key factors. We therefore welcome the enhancement and growth of initiatives in this domain, which must always be designed to build on what’s been learned and avoid unnecessary duplication.

We believe passionately in addressing root causes of residual paramilitarism and view dealing comprehensively with educational underachievement as a key aspect of that because 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, and look forward to seeing what the RAISE Programme can do to ensure it reaches its full potential.

We also welcome that the draft Programme for Government commits to support the “delivery of high-quality education for all children and champions better support for children and young people, especially those with special educational needs, so that all children are happy, learning and succeeding”. Education is vital in the longer-term socio-economic transformation that we continue to advocate for in tackling paramilitarism.

Project

Trauma Informed Practice

Description	<p>The Programme funds the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to embed knowledge of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and of trauma informed practice across the system to improve outcomes for children, adults, families and communities who have been impacted by adversity through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling cross-sectoral collaborative working and coordination to generate trauma informed systemic approaches for those impacted by childhood adversity, • Translating knowledge and learning into strategic planning and governance for organisations and the system, and • Assisting organisations and government Departments to continue to develop their workforces to raise awareness of childhood adversity and trauma sensitive approaches to practice through leadership, policy and practice. <p>The SBNI’s Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) programme seeks to embed an ACE-aware and trauma informed approach across health, social care, education, justice and the community and voluntary sectors through provision of training and the application of a trauma lens to all strategy, corporate planning, policy and practice. The aim is a whole-system response that improves outcomes for children and adults across the course of their lives.</p>
24/25 Funding	£328k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in front line workers efficacy.
Summary update	<p>The TIP team have developed an organisational change toolkit to support trauma informed approaches being embedded in all organisations, helping organisations assess where they are and supporting them get to where they want to be. The team has also worked specifically with a number of organisations to encourage them in this work.</p> <p>In March 2024, the <i>Implementing Trauma Informed Approaches in NI</i> report was published, following specially commissioned research which found that a trauma informed approach has the potential to underpin policy development and provide a consistent theoretical framework. The report recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A trauma informed strategy for Northern Ireland, • Development of regional and inter-Departmental research and outcomes strategy, and independent evaluation of progress; • A regional NI trauma informed resource hub or centre, and • A regional training framework.

<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>We welcome the good progress being made embedding trauma informed practice.</p> <p>One of the common lessons from much of the Programme work is the complexity of needs of young people and adults who have experienced paramilitary harm directly or who are at greater risk of harm. Giving people and organisations tools, training and advice about how they deliver services in a manner which acknowledges Northern Ireland’s history and particular needs is vital work. If people struggle to access services or find navigating and sustaining their engagement with services prohibitively difficult or stressful, that leaves a gap which paramilitaries may seek to exploit, so providing more trauma informed services is a way to narrow that space for paramilitaries and supports wider efforts to address the socio-economic conditions linked to paramilitarism.</p> <p>We welcome the commitments in the draft Programme for Government that: “Acknowledging the levels of trauma in our post-conflict society, we will work across the Executive to embed trauma informed, responsive systems; systems that help people to easily navigate and access the support they need, when they need it, and for however long they need it for”; and “We will develop a trauma informed public sector, equipping staff at all levels with the skills needed to work in partnership and support people as they rebuild a sense of control and empowerment in their lives”.</p>
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<p>Project</p>	<p>Aspire</p>
<p>Description</p>	<p>Focuses on marginalised men aged between 16 and 30 who are most susceptible to paramilitary/criminal influence and therefore most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary or criminal activity, to help them develop alternative coping mechanisms and increase their resilience.</p> <p>Aspire provides intensive interventions to enable individuals to access alternative pro-social pathways including employment/training, stable housing, personal development, and health/wellbeing. It also addresses substance misuse, offending behaviours, and family relationships. For those who have complex needs, extra support is provided 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. Aspire is delivered by the</p>

	Probation Board (NI) in conjunction with community and voluntary sector partners.
24/25 funding	£1,640k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in individual protective factors; • Reduction in recidivism; and • Increase in ex-prisoner reintegration.
Summary update	The project is contributing to increasing protective factors with a focus on improving the mental health and wellbeing of participants. It also addresses substance misuse, offending behaviours, and family relationships. Targets for the project have consistently been met and the project has been positively evaluated, showing good outcomes for participants such as substantial improvements of protective factors. Service users who exited the project in 2023/24 completed exit questionnaires which showed that 85% agreed/strongly agreed that they had an increased confidence in their future, 77% agreed/strongly agreed that Aspire staff helped them plan realistic and useful goals, and 100% felt that the project was helpful/very helpful in addressing their behaviours.
IRC comment	Aspire continues to provide much-needed support for some of the most marginalised service users with complex problems. The programme has improved outcomes for its service users and has generated insights and knowledge which have an application for other, similar services for at-risk groups. We continue to see the case for the expansion of the programme to include men over 30. We recommend that serious consideration be given to how the types of support provided by Aspire can be continued and potentially expanded in the medium-term, beyond the conclusion of the Programme in March 2027. This should cover both clients under statutory supervision and those identified in the community.

Project	Engage
Description	Work with women in custody and in the community to build resilience and equip them with the skills and learning to withstand paramilitary influence when they exit the criminal justice system. This work should enable them to engage with Department for Communities programmes in their communities, where appropriate, and support desistance from further offending.
24/25 funding	£92k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in individual protective factors; • Reduction in recidivism; and • Increase in ex-prisoner reintegration.

Summary update	<p>The project supports at least 80 women each year. Activities include one-to-one work, sessional work and ongoing group work to address issues such as trauma, addiction, mental health, and parenting. Demand for the service remains high and women make up 11% of the Probation Board's caseload.</p> <p>When service users were surveyed, 100% rated the service as 'Very Good', agreed that the support they received helped them make positive changes in their lives, and would recommend the service to other women in a similar situation. Over 90% of respondents said that they felt more confident since receiving support and that they had felt an improvement in their emotional health. 87% said their alcohol use had reduced and 77% said their drug use had reduced since receiving support. 75% reported they had achieved their primary goal.</p>
IRC comment	<p>This work is crucial in helping women to transition back into their communities and strengthening their ability to deal with the challenges in their lives. This project is delivered by Start 360 in conjunction with the Probation Board, and reflection on the successes of the project and how they can be embedded and built on should include some consideration of how partnerships like these may be able to engage with people and provide them with supports beyond what the statutory services alone can provide.</p> <p>This is another example of project that has generated useful knowledge which should be shared with others providing similar services, whether that's organisations in the community and voluntary sector, the Probation Board, Prisons Service, or the Department of Justice.</p>

Project	Child Criminal Exploitation Infrastructure Support
Description	<p>This funding is supporting the development of an improved system-wide response to Child Criminal Exploitation, mainstreaming practice into the child protection system. The Departments of Health, Justice and Education have developed a two-year action plan in collaboration with multi-agency stakeholders to address Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase awareness to create a shared understanding of CCE as child abuse; • prevent the criminal exploitation of children and young people;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that there is an effective protection and intervention response when exploitation occurs; and • pursue and bring to justice those responsible for exploiting young people, making the best use of existing legislative powers. <p>The Action Plan includes commitments to develop:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trauma informed training and guidance for professionals including risk assessment tools; • data to create a shared understanding of the nature and scale of CCE in NI; • clear child protection pathways for professionals and members of the public to make referrals for children and young people who they believe are at risk of or are being exploited; and • resources and awareness-raising programmes for young people, their parents and carers as well as wider general public.
24/25 Funding	£110k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in front line workers efficacy.
Summary update	<p>Work to deliver against the Action Plan is ongoing. The action plan includes a definition for CCE to assist people to recognise when children and young people are being exploited:</p> <p><i>“Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse which occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity. The exploitation may be through violence or the threat of violence but may also appear to be transactional and in the context of perceived relationships and friendships. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears to be consensual.</i></p> <p><i>Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can also occur through the use of technology and social media.</i></p> <p><i>The criminal exploitation of children and young people can include being exploited into storing drugs or weapons, drug dealing, theft, violence, intimidation, vandalism, forced labour and other forms of criminality through grooming by people that children and young people trust or look up to.”</i></p>

IRC comment	As we have previously commented, it is important that the whole system recognises the challenges around CCE and that recommendations made about developing the system's response to CCE are taken forward. We welcome the additional resource to co-ordinate and drive forward activity, and the support of Ministers in the Education, Health and Justice Departments.
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Project	Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)
Description	<p>This project is designed to address a gap identified through the Programme as there are currently no obvious dedicated exit routes from paramilitary groups or crime gangs. Different approaches to disengagement from groups have been tried and tested in other parts of the world. The Programme has identified that the approach which appears to have most synergy to paramilitarism in NI is CIRV. CIRV aims to take a coordinated, multi-agency approach to reduce violent behaviour among suspected or known gang members and those at risk of gang involvement or criminal exploitation. CIRV draws on the theory of focused deterrence, which allows those who genuinely want to leave groups or avoid joining them to access support to do so. In parallel, and as part of an integrated model, targeted law enforcement and criminal justice responses can be deployed to tackle the offending behaviour of referred individuals who chose not to end their involvement in violence and other harms.</p> <p>Research suggests that the average impact of focused deterrence on violent crime is likely to be high: a review of 24 studies suggested that, on average, focused deterrence strategies reduced crime by 33% and the Youth Endowment fund deems that it is in the top third of approaches by impact. Contemporary iterations of the CIRV programme continue to deliver impressive results, for example the initiative in Northamptonshire reported a 40% reduction in reoffending.</p> <p>A scoping project is being undertaken to consider if 'focused deterrence' is transferable and could help to reduce the harm caused by paramilitary and organised crime groups in Northern Ireland.</p>
24/25 Funding	£150k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in paramilitary activity; and • Reduction in membership of paramilitary group.

Summary update	Dedicated staff have been working through the applicability of this model with partners and have completed a feasibility stage. They are now working towards launching area-based pilots in 2025.
IRC comment	We welcome the positive step of seeking to provide additional supports to enable individuals to exit groups. It is heartening that this work is both seeking to learn from other jurisdictions and working to adapt it appropriately to ensure it is as effective as possible in a Northern Ireland context.

Other relevant activity:

3.21 Piloting innovative work to enhance protective factors has shown what a difference this can make in individual's lives. There are many contexts where this can be supported (to differing levels). For young people this can include schools, early years settings, after school provision, youth services (both statutory and community), sports and leisure settings, as well as home and community environments. For adults protective factors can also be enhanced in a range of settings and contexts: through social work, employment coaching, resettlement and rehabilitation support, and provision of other core public services like housing, health care, and mental health services. This can happen in local communities, through social networks, and on an informal basis. Furthermore, lack of economic opportunity, community and support in your local environment, deprivation, urban decay, addiction and isolation can be linked to vulnerability to paramilitarism. As such the strategies, frameworks and approach to delivering these services should be cognisant of the role that they can play in creating opportunities and resilience and offering support for people to help them play their part in creating a society free of paramilitarism.

3.22 We will consider community supports and resilience (which are also linked to protective factors and keeping people safe) further in the next Section.

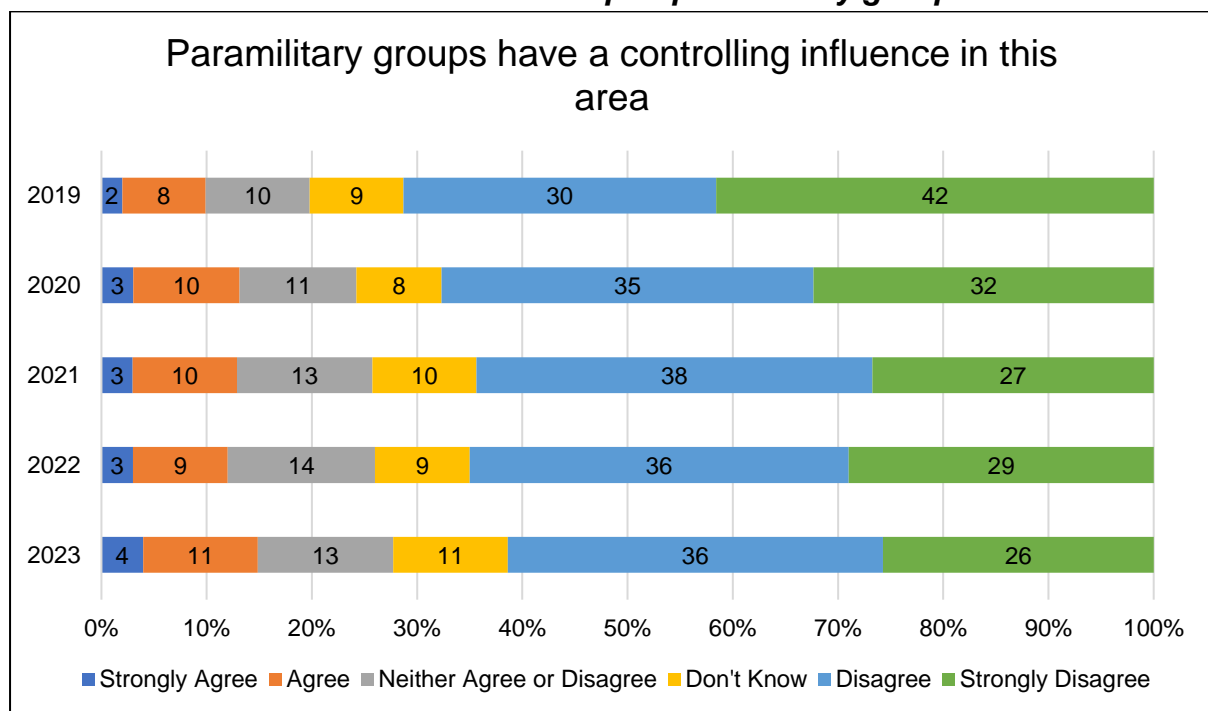
Measuring progress:

3.23 Collectively these projects have been doing important work to build up individuals' protective factors, and these interventions can have wider ripple effects into families, streets, friendship groups and communities. As we have noted elsewhere, these projects are limited to particular areas and have finite reach – but the learning and evolving practice is relevant across so many fields of work. Progress is measured by reduction in paramilitary group membership, which is considered through NILT responses to a question about paramilitary groups having a controlling influence in an area. 15% of respondents to the 2023 NILT survey believed that paramilitaries had a controlling influence in their area, compared with 12% in 2022. There could be many reasons for this increase, including increasing awareness of coercive control and greater community confidence to name what's happening. Although perception is a useful and important indicator, it will be important that security partners provide

information about trends and patterns in membership to those partnering in this vital work.

3.24 In addition, further work has been done this year to understand the NI population’s experience of Adverse Childhood Experiences and exposure to violence – this deeper understanding of needs should help to inform the design and delivery of many different public services, ensuring that trauma informed, people-centred and empathetic approaches are taken, as the Executive’s goal of a trauma informed public sector is pursued. We welcome the commitment to innovation in this area of work: exploring focused deterrence models, refining youth work responses for maximum impact, growing the public sector’s awareness of and response to child criminal exploitation, and championing area-based responses. As more people across the system recognise the role that their work can play in building protective factors and the relevance to tackling paramilitarism, the more important it will be to continue to build links and measure progress, challenges and success. The benefits realisation group and Programme team have provided a strong platform for this – it must continue to be built upon.

End benefit 5: Reduction in membership of paramilitary groups



Community Resilience

Overview:

3.25 The aim of this end benefit is enhancing the resilience of communities that are vulnerable to paramilitarism. This means strengthening the collective ability of a community (and society) to respond to change, ongoing adversity and risk. Giving communities the support, confidence, relationships and skills to tackle local issues and problems, and ultimately to reject paramilitarism, is a crucial part of the work to end paramilitarism. Through conversations, analysis and research developing the approach, three broad areas for increasing community resilience have been identified:

- 1. Mobilise Resources:** increase 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:** build social capital, strengthen 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:** involve people in decisions that affect their lives, increase community voice – give more people, particularly marginalised voices, a say in what happens in their area and increase hope for the future and belief that change is possible.

3.26 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:

Project	Developing women in the community
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Description	This work is delivering eight Developing Women in the Community Projects over a two-year period ⁵⁶ . The projects provide training and support to women of all ages, equipping, and empowering them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to become involved in transformational community development and helping to support communities to move away from paramilitary activities.
24/25 funding	£425k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get more people involved; • Tap into existing support services; • Enhance community infrastructure; • Improvement in relations between PSNI and communities; and • Increase in individual protective factors.
Summary update	<p>This project has achieved outcomes related to community resilience, as well as increasing protective factors through the development of life and social skills. Many women self-reported feeling disconnected from their communities and lacking direct access to social supports at the start of the project; however, at the end there were increases in participants' sense of belonging and their involvement in their communities due to increased skills and expertise. Participants reported a positive change in their perceptions of community support, and this was particularly the case for victims of violence.</p> <p>In addition to growing a sense of ability to bring about change, and giving people tools and supports to do that, these projects have contributed to enhancing community infrastructure through the creation of new women's groups, employment opportunities and increased volunteering. For example, two new women's groups have been formally constituted, developing out of the projects in Ballysally and Rathcoole.</p>
IRC comment	We welcome the continuing development and contribution of the Developing Women in the Community Programme. It is important to recognise the specific experiences of women living in communities impacted by paramilitarism. Aisling Swaine's recent research on intimate partner violence, coercive control and paramilitarism illustrates some of the specific and complex dynamics at play within homes and communities. It remains essential to ensure that women have the support to develop

⁵⁶ Ards, Coleraine, Macedon, Court & Oldpark, Black Mountain, Derry City and Strabane District Council (The Moor, Waterside, Sperrin, Foyleside and Ballyarnett District Electoral Areas), and Titanic.

	<p>leadership skills in their communities and this should be seen as a critical part of wider efforts to challenge paramilitary control.</p> <p>A further evaluation report on this project is due at the end of 2024-25 and its findings will have applications both for similar projects but also for the wider, strategic approach to addressing violence against women and girls. It is important to ensure that there is effective, joined-up working between that strategy and this programme to ensure learning and best practice is shared and to avoid duplicating services. Learning from these projects should also inform work reviewing the approach to community resilience, community sector (infrastructure) funding and area regeneration, including the Department of Communities' review of People and Place.</p> <p>These kinds of projects require longer-term funding, as short-term funding restricts the ability of projects like these to provide sustained support over longer periods of time, makes building trust harder, and means that a greater share of staff time is spent on repeated funding applications.</p>
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Project	Communities in Transition
Description	<p>Work to increase resilience in eight areas⁵⁷ where there is a history of paramilitary activity, criminality, and coercive control. It is about providing people with the opportunity, skills, and confidence to improve their local area, building on what is already working well locally. It supports those eight areas to transition into communities where paramilitary activity no longer plays a role. This project is designed to support ambitious initiatives that will build the capacity of individuals and groups to affect positive change for themselves and their communities. These initiatives include locally-based projects around community safety, health and wellbeing, arts and culture, area regeneration, personal transition, raising aspirations of young people, and a regional project to increase the use of restorative practice in non-justice settings.</p>

⁵⁷ New Lodge and Greater Ardoyne; Lower Falls, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Upper Springfield, Turf Lodge and Ballymurphy; Shankill, upper and lower, including Woodvale; Brandywell and Creggan; Larne area, including Antiville and Kilwaughter and the Carrickfergus area, including Northland and Castlemara; parts of the Mount and Ballymacarrett in East Belfast; Drumgask (Craigavon) and Kilwilkie (Lurgan); and parts of North Down including Clondeboye and Conlig, including Kilcooley.

	<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"> 1. Community Safety and Policing; 2. Addressing the needs of young people; 3. Health and Wellbeing; 4. Environment and Culture; 5. Community Development Issues; 6. Restorative Justice and Restorative Practice; and 7. Personal Transition.
24/25 funding	£2,279k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get more people involved; • Tap into existing support services; • Increase local skills and expertise; • Enhance community infrastructure; • Strengthen local networks; • Connect with resources and influence; • Increase in community voice; • Increase hope and belief in capacity for change; and • Improvement in relationships between the PSNI and communities.
Summary update	<p>CiT is currently delivering 31 projects across the eight CiT areas. 6,590 individuals were involved in CiT activities between April and September 2024. To give just a flavour of what has been delivered through the projects, 84 activities strengthened relationships and engagement with communities, 65 activities increased connections between communities and statutory services, and 65 activities have increased local skills and expertise.</p> <p>CiT is currently coming to the end of its second phase of delivery and is now considering options for delivery after 2024/25. This involves reviewing the progress to date in terms of realising the benefits, lessons learned, and overall progress and change in its areas of focus. This is a complex task involving a significant amount of information and it is expected that there will be some areas which have made greater progress than others. It is possible the project will change delivery approach, identify different issues which need to be addressed, and change its areas of specific focus.</p>
IRC comment	A large amount of varied and valuable work has taken place through CiT, and we commend the variety and flexibility that the

programme is able to offer, which means that interventions can be tailored to local needs.

Discussions are underway about what CiT should look like after the current phase concludes at the end of March 2025. This is an opportunity to focus on the ultimate objectives for the programme, the projects and approaches which have been successful, and where there is room for improvement. We understand that The Executive Office has commissioned research with a view to updating the selection of targeted areas to reflect current levels of need and vulnerability and our deepened collective understanding of the issue of paramilitarism, and we welcome these efforts to ensure interventions are taking place where they are needed most.

The flexibility that the programme has afforded delivery partners has been appreciated. This reflects the particular needs of each area and should be retained in any future programme. Consideration should be given to ensuring that the right balance is struck between oversight and good governance, on the one hand, and keeping administrative requirements for delivery partners as light as possible. Longer-term funding is also needed as annual budgets do not support effective forward planning. Strengthening communities in areas where paramilitaries have operated is crucial work, and a holistic response should continue to be taken that identifies clear links between issues in communities that are connected to continuing paramilitarism and developing projects and responses which play their part in changing that situation.

Project	Fresh Start in the Community
Description	<p>Fresh Start Through Sport is a multi-sports initiative that uses engagement through sport to divert and support those on the edges of the youth justice system who are vulnerable to paramilitary harm and influence.</p> <p>Education in community development practice is an education and training project that aims to improve community resilience to negative influences and criminality. The project is designed to support community workers/volunteers by providing them with the skills and knowledge to be more effective, confident, and better equipped to manage negative influences in their areas.</p> <p>Ballyarnett Community Safety and Development programme works with hard-to-reach/at-risk young people, their parents/carers</p>

	<p>and those in the community to address issues such as anti-social behaviour, develop community ownership, and build capacity.</p> <p>Strengthening Futures, Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership 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. They may have been drawn into street disturbances, anti-social behaviour or drug and alcohol use, and/or be in danger of being recruited by paramilitary organisations.</p>
24/25 funding	£500k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get more people involved; • Tap into existing support services; • Strengthen local networks; and • Increase in individual protective factors.
Summary update	<p>312 young people have participated in Fresh Start through Sport programmes in East, South and West Belfast, Newtownards, Lurgan, Rathcoole, Derry & Strabane, Dungannon, Dundonald, Coleraine, Downpatrick and Carrickfergus. Age limits for participants were lowered for a recent course offered to ensure that the right children could be included. The most recently completed evaluation, which covered 2023/24, found progress in getting more people involved, improving relations between PSNI and communities, and increasing individual protective factors. However, the evaluation also showed that the Fresh Start through Sport has consistently been more successful in recruiting and engaging participants from PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) backgrounds compared with those from CNR (Catholic Nationalist Republican) backgrounds, noting that participant recruitment is significantly impacted by project delivery areas.</p> <p>Programme Surveys found that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10% of participants reported feeling unsafe in their communities. This is an increase from 2022/23, where the figure was 3%. • 12% of participants reported that they had been threatened by paramilitaries. • 63% reported that they had seen someone being attacked by individuals that they believed were members of paramilitary groups <p>In 2023/24, through engagement with the Education in Community Development Practice project, 23 community workers in the Lurgan area completed the University of Galway-</p>

	<p>accredited Diploma in Community Development Practice. 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 programme continues to work with local young people, having so far delivered a personal development programme and wraparound support to 153 young people and their families. The project is delivered by the Shantallow Renewal Company whose interconnectedness, trust, and expertise are absolutely key. In 2024 through collaboration they were able to bring together those involved in bonfire activity and enrol them in a Youth Employment Programme, and together with a number of new and innovative community-led initiatives, the result was that the bonfire was replaced with a community event.</p> <p>The Strengthening Futures project, delivered by Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership, is a community-based education and active citizenship project aimed at young adults who feel disconnected from their communities and believe that their voices are not being heard. These young people have been drawn into street disturbances, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol use and have been or are in danger of being recruited by paramilitary organisations. 160 young people took part in this project during 2023/24, which also provided support to 119 families and delivered 33 wider school-based workshops to cover topics such as paramilitarism, exploitation, health and wellbeing, and internet safety. As a result:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 120 Open College Network accredited qualifications were achieved, along with 108 other vocational qualifications. • 100% of the young people involved reported improved confidence, ability to make informed life choices and employability.
IRC comment	<p>We welcome that 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. It is important that best practice and learning through these projects is captured and shared with other similar projects to ensure the maximum possible benefit is derived from these interventions. For example, there may be lessons for those delivering family support in other contexts including family support hubs, and also other community-based programmes including CiT.</p>

Project	PSNI Community Safety and Community Engagement
Description	<p>This project aims to ensure that PSNI can fully contribute and play its part in addressing the complex ecosystem of issues that affect community relationships and trust in policing, the criminal justice system, and other statutory functions.</p> <p>It aims to develop activity and PSNI capacity (including problem solving) in support of violence and harm reduction through long-term prevention, using a public health approach and targeted interventions to test, refine and deliver benefits in affected groups and areas. The project develops proactive and reactive interventions to address risk and protective factors through enhanced locality-based working delivering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diversionary activity and primary and secondary interventions for young people linked to other programmatic delivery; • primary and secondary interventions at a community level; • targeted interventions to enhance problem solving, engagement and visibility of policing; • Locality based working allows PSNI to site the interventions in the correct geographical areas. The PSNI continues to pilot locality-based working in the Carrick and Larne areas and continues to work with partners to refine how area-based working can contribute to achieving outcomes sought by Executive Departments such as: tackling deprivation; improving community safety; and fostering good relations. The principal driver for involvement in these initiatives is to identify the critical success factors that deliver effective joint working.
24/25 funding	£250k
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in help and support for victims of paramilitary harm; • Reduction in public order issues; • Get more people involved; • Tap into existing support services; • Increase in community voice; and • Improvement in relations between PSNI and communities.
Summary update	PSNI have funded a range of small-scale projects which incorporate educational sessions, sports and recreational activities. The funding enables them to work flexibly with hard-to-reach young people with fitness and mental health often being the routes into the various projects.

	<p>Some of the sports-based projects have involved partnering with the Belfast Giants and Rangers Football club to involve young people in pro-social activities and help them to make better choices. Other projects have focused on vulnerable young people in residential social care, or on fostering opportunities for young people to work on issues such as anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, consequences of risky behaviour, paramilitary activity, reducing crime and the fear of crime which builds their resilience and self-confidence, and ultimately helps them not to become involved in paramilitarism or public disorder.</p> <p>These projects also provide the opportunity for the PSNI to engage the local community and become more visible and accessible and go some way to enhancing the PSNI's problem-solving approaches.</p> <p>The PSNI team responsible now have a coalition of partners willing to be involved in projects, and they have established a central team to assist the Districts with business cases for funding, and to share expertise and learning from projects. However, PSNI are concerned that current resourcing constraints and the implications of neighbourhood officers being redeployed, could impact the flexible and immediate response the projects bring to community tensions, with a real risk of progress being lost or digressing in communities where paramilitaries operate</p>
IRC comment	<p>This is crucial funding which enables the PSNI to be more visible and accessible in hard-to-reach communities. The flexibility of the funding allows them to respond to local needs and priorities in a timely manner before things escalate, and the diversionary projects engage young people who would be vulnerable to paramilitarism to change mind sets, break the cycle and make better life choices. We welcome the collaborative approach to working with councils, trusts, and the voluntary and community sector on these projects, and the development of a central team in PSNI to support all Districts with problem solving, best practice and widening their scope to enhance community policing. We share the PSNI's concern that current resourcing constraints and the implications of neighbourhood officers being redeployed could impact these projects. We highlight throughout the report that the PSNI's approach to Neighbourhood policing is critical in the delivery of high quality policing to the entire community, and in the context of effectively addressing paramilitary activity, it is essential that both work in tandem.</p>

Other relevant activity:

3.27 The Programme has been piloting new interventions in this space; their work takes place in a broader context. The Community and Voluntary sector plays a vital role in furthering the prosperity, stability and flourishing of areas and community life, often with the funding support of philanthropic organisations and mainstream government grants. That is why resourcing and supporting those organisations effectively is so crucial, as is commissioning them in a manner which supports a focus on delivery. Funders such as the International Fund for Ireland, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Community Foundation NI, National Lottery Community Fund, Social Change Initiative, Co-Operation Ireland and the PEACE Programmes all fund activities, programmes and organisations that can contribute to progress in this area. A range of government interventions can also play a part, including neighbourhood renewal, the Building Inclusive Communities strategy, area regeneration efforts, council services, as well as the approach taken by front line service delivery staff such as local housing officers, jobs and benefits officers, health and care staff, emergency services, and educators. When front line staff take an inclusive, participatory, community-centred approach to work, it can help to grow community resilience. In order to get a full picture of the growth of resilience, identify gaps, avoid unhelpful duplication and trial the most effective ways to meet need, it is vital that the closest possible connections are grown and fostered between all those involved.

Measuring progress:

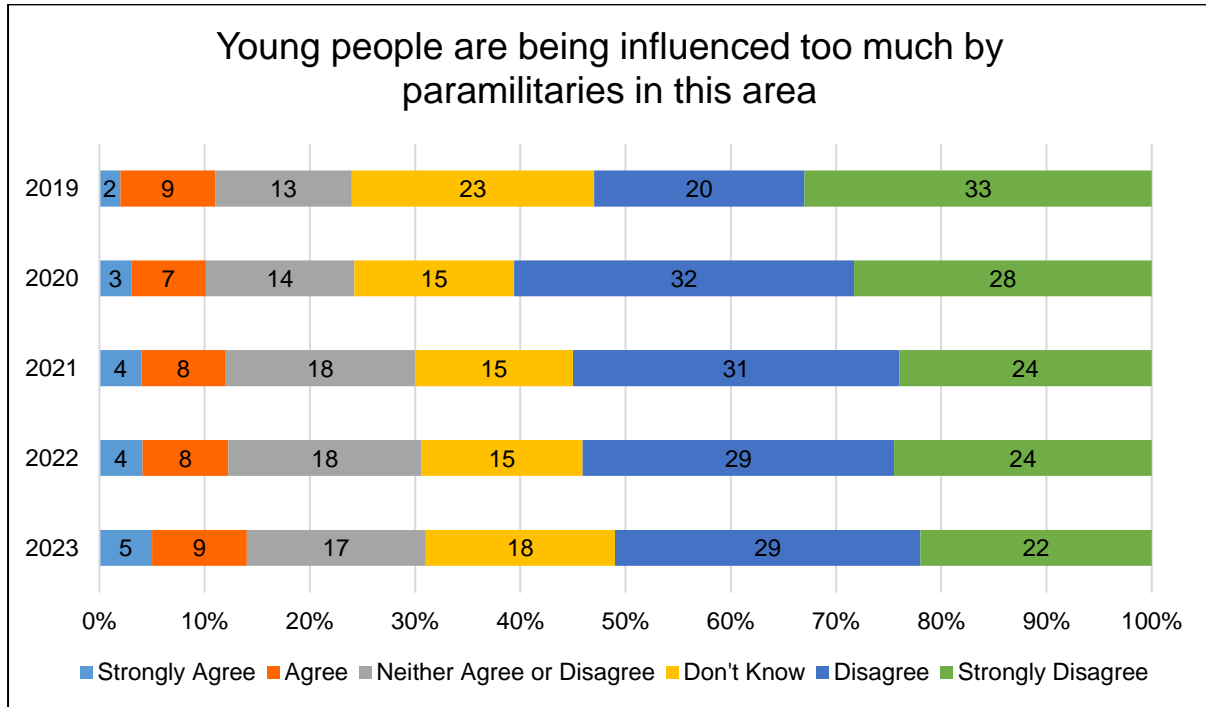
3.28 This is long-term work responding to deep-rooted needs and issues in communities. It is therefore important that a long-term view is taken to planning, expectations of results and flexibility is built in. Furthermore, each local area has different needs, priorities, community infrastructure and people, and so a locally-tailored approach is essential. Given the complexity of needs and issues, progress may not always be linear and initiatives may take time to bear fruit. While there must be a rigorous approach to the use of public money, so too local organisations should continue to be valued and empowered, as they often have the best information about community needs, know how best to meet them and what difference is being made. Good work has been done to agree the best measures of progress at intermediate benefit level (as summarised in paragraph 3.26 above). We encourage the continuing refinement of surveys and methodologies for collecting relevant data. It may be that establishing baseline measures of community resilience more broadly in Northern Ireland would be helpful to informing future strategic, funding and policy choices.

3.29 Progress at end benefit level is measured by an NILT question about whether young people are influenced too much by paramilitaries in an area – while this is absolutely an important dimension, we would suggest that expanding this to look at community resilience more broadly would be helpful. Although we recognise that this may be a challenging ask in the final two years of the Programme, it may also be helpful with

building even greater links into mainstream work already ongoing and support discussions about how to develop this type of work and embed it further.

3.30 The involvement of community organisations in community resilience work (and the rest of the Programme) means that people who know areas well, who can leverage local relationships and who can effect change at the grass roots are closely involved in efforts to tackle paramilitarism. Where possible, this is undoubtedly the best approach. We see an opportunity to further develop a strong community of all of those involved in this work – on top of the existing Programme structures – to ensure that community organisations are as plugged in as sponsoring officials. Good working relationships already exist on the ground in many places and there are already pockets of good practice such as area-based collaborating partner meetings, regular catch-ups, thematic CiT meetings and conferences with those involved. We see merit in exploring a mechanism for bringing those partners together to share common issues, learn from each other's experiences and share information about the paramilitary problem in their area on a regular basis. This could help to deepen that sense of collaboration and of value of community partners, as well as provide a vehicle for shaping future policy, approaches and practice.

End benefit 4: Increase in community resilience



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

3.31 In our Fifth Report we reviewed in detail Actions that we considered to be complete or largely complete from the original Executive Action Plan (EAP). As there had been significant progress against many of them, and a new approach was being taken in 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 the following Section we highlight Actions from the EAP where we believe further progress is required.

Further work required:	Organised crime legislation
Comment	For the past five years we have recommended that the NI Executive and Assembly progress organised crime legislation similar to what is available in other jurisdictions. The Department for Justice has consulted on organised crime legislation, and provisions have been drafted which will be formally added as amendments to the draft Justice Bill which the Minister of Justice brought to the Assembly in September 2024. We welcome this progress and hope this Bill will progress swiftly through the Assembly, notwithstanding the time needed for appropriate levels of legislative scrutiny, so that appropriate sentences can be imposed on those harming communities through organised criminality. This legislation should also support efforts to draw clearer distinctions between paramilitary-linked criminality and former paramilitaries seeking to move on.

Further work required:	Removing avoidable delay; bail and sentencing
Comment	<p>We continue to be concerned that the criminal justice system in NI is slower than in other jurisdictions. Delays in the criminal justice system and associated challenges around bail and subsequent sentencing, coupled with the impact of restricted resource allocations, are impacting public confidence in the rule of law. We see a role for everyone – politicians, communities, civic society, faith leaders, as well as those in the criminal justice system – to work to further enhance confidence and to deliver a system which sees justice being done. It is vital that work on these issues is prioritised.</p> <p>We welcome the continued work on committal reform, early engagement, out of court disposals, the remit of the Magistrates’ Court and the better use of digital processes, and the commitment by the Criminal Justice Board to prioritise and drive forward the</p>

Speeding Up Justice programme. However, without appropriate funding across this sector the level of ambition may be curtailed.

Bail

Concerns about bail arrangements continue to be raised. While we fully appreciate that this is bound up with delay and the complexities of balancing competing human rights obligations in the context of bail decisions, to ensure public confidence in the bail regime, and to support its objectives, we echo the recommendation of Criminal Justice Inspection NI that the Department of Justice consult on bail arrangements for Northern Ireland, promoting a societal conversation about its objectives, parameters and how it works.

We welcome the demonstrated continuing commitment to problem solving, which has seen the High Court bail days changing so that prisoners are not released at the weekend anymore, when they are more likely to struggle with accommodation and accessing benefits.

Sentencing

It is important that sentences are seen by members of the public as appropriate and proportionate, and we therefore welcome that the Lady Chief Justice has continued to prioritise enhancing the public's understanding of criminal justice, and particularly the sentencing process. We support work on judicial training on sentencing principles and sentencing remarks to include how victim personal statements are communicated. We also understand that the Department of Justice intends to introduce a Sentencing Reform Bill in this Assembly mandate. It will be important that the Department and justice partners continue to evaluate whether sentencing in relation to paramilitary-linked criminality is appropriate or requires further enhancement.

It is notable that the Substance Misuse Court in Belfast is now embedded, and further innovation in problem-solving justice would be desirable.

Further work required:	A dedicated restorative justice fund and Centre of Restorative Excellence
Comment	We see restorative practice as crucial to increasing community skills and resilience and fostering new approaches to problem solving. There has been innovation in this space such as the Prison Service looking at adopting a restorative strategy, the PSNI piloting restorative interventions relating to Community Resolution Notices

	<p>(CRN), Probation Board NI and accredited restorative justice organisations making progress introducing restorative justice in custody, resettlement and reintegration stage. Victim Support NI continues to deliver training to both statutory and non-statutory organisations and individuals and the CiT STARS Programme continues its good work.</p> <p>We welcome the appointment of the Interim Protocol lead who has been working to implement the revised 2023 Protocol for community-based restorative justice organisations, seeking to enhance the use of restorative justice throughout the criminal justice system, and working towards establishing a Centre of Restorative Excellence. We regret the time it has taken for work to be progressed in this area and urge other Departments and agencies in areas such as communities, education, housing and others to support restorative practice through the development of this centre.</p> <p>It is important that restorative justice is appropriately funded, bringing in new organisations, and developing new schemes. It is vital that the community sector is appropriately funded to deliver interventions and services which can be very specialist in nature, but are lifesaving.</p>
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Further work required:	Removing barriers to employment for ex-prisoners, as well as improving access to financial services (including lending and insurance), adoption, and travel
Comment	<p>While the Communities in Transition ex-prisoners workstream has continued to fund targeted work with ex-prisoners to boost skills, confidence and motivation to prepare for employment and re-connecting with communities, further work is required to remove barriers to employment. This should include 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>We urge the Ex-Prisoner working group to continue to raise relevant issues and to work with Departments to develop solutions, as this is all a vital part of moving society forward beyond the Troubles/conflict.</p>

Further work required:	Improve the educational and employment prospects of children and young people in deprived communities, focusing
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	particularly on those who are at greatest risk of educational under attainment
Comment	We welcome the commitment from the Northern Ireland Executive, and the Programme Team to the importance of education in tackling paramilitarism. The draft Programme for Government states that people will get the support they need at every stage of their lives by removing barriers to education. We recognise the excellent work of the WRAP Programme, and we also welcome the RAISE Programme as a new initiative which aims to raise achievement to reduce educational disadvantage. It is taking a whole-community, place-based approach in identified localities across Northern Ireland to deliver on the recommendation set by ‘A Fair Start’: to ensure all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life.

Further work required:	Independent Review of the separated regime in prisons
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:	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
Comment	We are encouraged by the draft Programme for Government’s commitment to refresh the Executive’s Good Relations Programme, Communities in Transition, Together: Building a United Community, Urban Villages, and Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme, and the introduction of a strategic approach to racial equality. These initiatives are significant opportunities to bring the public sector together in partnership with community groups to solve problems and shape services in local communities. Ambitious targets as crucial, given the potential for this work to deliver important societal change.

Further work required:	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
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	<p>paramilitary groups. This change in approach should also apply to other public community bodies and public representatives.</p>
<p>Comment</p>	<p>We recognise that engagement with paramilitary groups continues to be a sensitive issue. We continue to see merit in a structured discussion about the limited circumstances in which engagement with groups could be justified, for example in relation to threats to life, avoiding public order issues, and encouraging transition.</p> <p>We also believe that there can be an unhelpful scepticism about restorative practice and a reluctance to allow former paramilitaries to move on and be involved legitimately in community work, including activism. We believe that a more mature political dialogue and policy approach is required, which neither legitimises proscribed organisations nor demonises those seeking to move on with their lives.</p> <p>In the Overview, we refer to the need for a formal, structured process of engagement to bring about disbandment of the groups.</p>

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

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.

B14	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.
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	<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. <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.
IRC comment	We welcome the ongoing commitment of the two Governments to keep the need for any such mechanism to deal with any future decommissioning of residual weapons or material under review.

C3	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.
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

<p>Updates received</p>	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>The NIO continues to keep under review UK legislation to ensure it remains effective in supporting NI Executive-led efforts to tackle 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 Northern Ireland-specific non-jury trial Provisions contained in the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 are time-bound and expire after two years unless renewed by an affirmative Order approved in both Houses of Parliament. These provisions are due to expire in July 2025 and the Northern Ireland Office intends to conduct a public consultation to inform the Secretary of State’s decision on whether to seek to renew these provisions for a ninth time. In 2021 a Non-Jury Trials Working Group identified indicators that could be used to determine when the provisions would no longer be necessary. In addition to the consultation responses, these indicators will contribute to the evidence base that will inform the Secretary of State’s decision on this matter. The Working Group will be consulted to ensure that the indicators remain relevant and that no new indicators need to be included.</p> <p>The UK Government continues to give careful consideration to the IRC’s recommendations on potential mechanisms to support the transition of paramilitary groups to disbandment, in close consultation with the Government of Ireland and the main NI political parties. We will continue to review relevant legislation to ensure that it remains in step with any related developments.</p> <p><i>Irish Government update:</i></p> <p>An Independent Review Group carried out a comprehensive review of the law in this area and the majority and minority reports of the Group were published in June 2023. Since then, officials have engaged in detailed consultation on the recommendations of the Review Group. Further work is required before bringing proposals to Government for approval.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>We welcome the continued commitment of both the UK Government and the Irish Government to keep relevant legislation under review.</p>

<p>C5</p>	<p>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</p>
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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	The UK Government
Updates received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>UK Government funding supports the NCA and HMRC to continue to operate in NI and the NCA's most recent annual report outlines a number of successes in NI. In addition to their direct successes in NI, their work to tackle organised crime across the UK and internationally has an impact on the activities of organised crime groups operating in NI.</p> <p>In addition to directly supporting the work of the NCA and HMRC in NI, UK Government funding (c.£8m in financial year 24/25) for the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime has also supported ongoing work by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF). Over the period from April 2023 to March 2024, the PCTF made 107 disruptions, 83 arrests, charged/reported 115 people and conducted 175 searches. The PCTF seized drugs with a street value of £1,300,941 and illicit tobacco with a street value of £2,856,292.80, along with 41 firearms/weapons of which eight were explosive devices.</p> <p>The UK Government has committed a further £8m to the Executive Programme in financial year 25/26.</p>
IRC comment	We welcome the funding support that the UK Government provides to the NCA and HMRC to enable them to work collaboratively with the PCTF in NI to combat the harms of paramilitarism. There are growing indications that this collaborative, multi-agency law enforcement approach is frustrating and disrupting paramilitary activity, and we continue to urge all involved to focus on how problems can be addressed in partnership. It is vital that this work continues to receive appropriate priority into the future. We also welcome the UK Government's continued commitment to the Executive Programme for 2025/26.

C8	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
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	part of their efforts to deal with Northern Ireland-related terrorism.
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 Northern Ireland Minister of Justice and the Irish Minister of Justice 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>
Lead responsibility	UK Government, NI Executive, Government of Ireland and law enforcement agencies in both jurisdictions.
Updates received	<p><i>UK Government update:</i></p> <p>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. However, given the overlaps in relation to some of the drivers of terrorism, paramilitarism and criminality and the nature of organisations involved in this activity, there are areas of interdependence in the responses that are required to bring a sustainable end to the threat and harm posed to communities in Northern Ireland. None of these threats can be dealt with sustainably in isolation. A whole of system response is required. 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 Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, 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 Northern Ireland Justice Minister and the</p>

	Chief Constable on matters of interest. UK Government and the Government of Ireland officials regularly discuss shared security challenges.
IRC comment	The continued join-up between the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Office, and the various agencies involved in tackling the “shared ecosystem” of organised crime, paramilitary crime and national security continues to good effect. Collaboration and effective joined-up working are crucial to success, and while we recognise the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Justice have separate areas of responsibility, we welcome that there are mechanisms in place to ensure close coordination, and we urge that these mechanisms are continuously reviewed to make sure there are no gaps and that problems are addressed collectively.

D3	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.
Action Plan commitment (2016)	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.
Lead responsibility	The UK and Irish Governments
Updates received	<p><i>The UK Government update:</i></p> <p>The UK Government has committed to repeal and replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (the Act), and to implement mechanisms to address the legacy of the Troubles that fully comply with human rights.</p> <p>On 29 July 2024, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland laid a Written Ministerial Statement in the UK Parliament to provide an update on the UK Government’s approach to the Act. In summary, it sets out that the Government had formally abandoned all of its grounds of appeal against the declarations of incompatibility with the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) that were made by the Northern Ireland High Court in relation to the Act in February 2024. This includes the provisions relating to immunity, which were opposed by all of the Northern Ireland political parties and by many victims and survivors, as well as being found by the Court to be incompatible with the ECHR.</p>

The statement also affirmed the UK Government's commitment to reverse the current prohibition on bringing new civil proceedings - a bar which was subsequently found by the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal to be incompatible with the ECHR and to propose measures to allow legacy inquests previously halted to proceed, where that is the preference of families. This is in recognition of the fact that, while the coronial process is not without its challenges, including in relation to disclosure and its ability to consider sensitive information, it has helped to provide a number of victims and survivors with information, and a sense of justice or accountability that they might not otherwise have obtained.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's statement to the UK Parliament also made clear the UK Government's intention to retain the Independent Commission for Reconciliation & Information Recovery (ICRIR), but to reform it, including by considering measures to further strengthen its independence and its powers. It is important that the ICRIR builds public confidence in its work, so it is able to successfully deliver justice, accountability, and information to victims and survivors of the Troubles. Under the leadership of Sir Declan Morgan as Chief Commissioner, the UK Government has confidence in its ability to do so.

On 20 September 2024, the Court of Appeal handed down its judgement in Dillon and others. In its judgement, the Court recognised "the wide powers of ICRIR and the benefit of having investigations placed within one body which is well-resourced", and further noted that the ICRIR has "unfettered access to all information, documents and materials as it reasonably requires in connection with a review". The Court concluded that such powers "cannot be criticised, nor should they be underestimated".

However, the Court also found that "issues arise in relation to effective next of kin participation and the role of the Secretary of State for NII in relation to disclosure in cases where, previously, an inquest would have been required to discharge the state's article 2 obligations". The Government laid a further Written Ministerial statement in Parliament on 7 October 2024 providing an initial response to the judgement.

On 5 December 2024, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland confirmed that the UK Government would appeal the Court of Appeal judgment, noting that the findings raise crucial points of

principle for the UK Government which require legal clarity from the Supreme Court.

On 5 December 2024, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland laid a proposal for a Remedial Order under the Human Rights Act to take the first steps in fulfilling the UK Government's commitment to repeal and replace the Act. If adopted by Parliament, the Order will remedy several legal deficiencies in the Act identified by the Northern Ireland Courts, including all of the deficiencies found by the High Court in February and one issue from the Court of Appeal judgment in the case of Dillon and Others in September. It will remove all provisions from the Act related to immunity from prosecution and enable all civil proceedings prohibited by the Act, including future cases, to proceed. The Secretary of State also confirmed that the UK Government will introduce primary legislation when parliamentary time allows. This legislation will implement the UK Government's promise to restore inquests, starting with those that were previously halted by the Legacy Act.

It will also, in direct response to the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal's findings, amend the disclosure regime so that it is fair, transparent, and - crucially - allows for the greatest possible disclosure of information, following very closely the model for statutory inquiries and other established processes.

While the courts have found the ICRIR to be sufficiently independent to conduct Article 2 compliant investigations, the confidence of families in its work is paramount. The Government will make further changes to strengthen the ICRIR's independence, powers and accountability. As part of this work, the UK Government will consider provisions previously included in the draft Stormont House Agreement legislation, as well as learning from the experiences of Operation Kenova.

This approach seeks to ensure compliance with the ECHR, and deliver on what the UK Government has promised - the removal of conditional immunity, the reinstatement of legacy inquests halted by the Act, restoring civil claims and reforming the ICRIR, whilst enabling it to continue working on behalf of the families who have already sought its help.

Finally, the UK Government is undertaking a period of wide engagement with interested parties, including the Northern Ireland

	<p>political parties and, importantly, victims, survivors and families, to seek their views regarding a practical way forward that can command support across communities in Northern Ireland and beyond and to help determine what provisions should be included in primary legislation. The UK Government is committed to working in partnership with the Government of Ireland as they undertake this process.</p> <p><i>Irish Government update:</i></p> <p>The Government of Ireland remains committed to working with the UK Government, political parties in Northern Ireland, and victims, survivors and families, to address the painful legacy of the Troubles. Our consistent position has been that any path forward on legacy must command the support of victims and families and be compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights. On 17 January 2024, the Government filed an inter-State case against the United Kingdom with the European Court of Human Rights, arguing that certain provisions of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 are incompatible with the United Kingdom’s obligations under the Convention. The Government has welcomed the commitment made by the new British Government since taking office in July that it would repeal and replace the Legacy Act. To be effective, this will require a robust, thorough and ambitious process, advanced in partnership between the two governments. The Government will continue to engage on that basis with our British partners on the fundamentally important issue of legacy.</p> <p>The Government of Ireland has taken a number of steps in recent years to facilitate co-operation on legacy, including through the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 2019, as well as further instruments facilitating the sharing of information to assist ongoing legacy reviews and processes in Northern Ireland. On 30 July 2024, at the preliminary hearing of the Omagh Bombing Inquiry, the Government of Ireland made a statement affirming its commitment to supporting and facilitating the work of the Inquiry.</p>
<p>IRC comment</p>	<p>We note the positions of the UK and Irish Governments on dealing with the past, and we continue to state that while Legacy is not part of the IRC’s mandate, 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.</p>

SECTION D: RECOMMENDATIONS

In this Section, we summarise Recommendations made in this Report and consider progress against Recommendations made in our last Report.

Recommendations:

1. Sponsor Group to review membership

The Sponsor Group, which is chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, plays an important role by bringing together leadership figures in the various organisations involved in the Programme's implementation. The Sponsor Group will have a particularly central role in the design of future work after the conclusion of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime in March 2027 and finding the balance between maintaining a targeted approach to tackling paramilitarism and projects which can be scaled-up and mainstreamed. In that regard, we recommend that the Sponsor Group look again at its membership to ensure that its representation is as comprehensive as it needs to be, giving consideration to important work being done by organisations such as the Probation Board.

2. Raising awareness among Northern Ireland public servants and mapping policy links to paramilitarism

We believe that it is essential to take a whole of government approach to tackling paramilitarism, and when government policies are being developed and updated, consideration should routinely be given to how that work can contribute to tackling paramilitarism. We recommend training be developed for all Northern Ireland public servants that raises awareness of paramilitarism, describes current work and gives officials tools to consider how strategies and policies can play a part in addressing paramilitarism. We also encourage the Executive to explore introducing requirements on Departments to map the contributions and opportunities for mainstream policies to play their part in tackling paramilitarism, and to monitor delivery so that the contribution can be tracked.

3. Continuing paramilitary-focused work beyond 2027

The Programme will come to an end in March 2027, and it is vital that thorough consideration is given to what will come afterwards. We have already highlighted the importance of ensuring the maintenance of the necessary funding for this work, despite the challenging fiscal backdrop. Efforts to tackle paramilitarism beyond 2027 need to reflect the reality that this is a long-haul task which is part of the unfinished business of the peace process and must continue to build on the good learnings and progress of Phases One and Two. We strongly recommend that the kind of paramilitary-focused work which the Programme has been responsible for should

continue beyond 2027, while also ensuring that consideration is given to those elements of the work of tackling paramilitarism that could be integrated into mainstream policies. The Executive and the two Governments must ensure that work to tackle paramilitarism continues to be given a high priority beyond 2027. The work done to date must be built upon and further efforts made to tackle this issue once and for all.

Recommendations from our Sixth Report:

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

The draft of a new Programme for Government was published in September 2024, and we welcome that the Recommendation we made in our Sixth Report about committing to tackling paramilitarism in the Programme for Government has been followed through. This is a significant development in itself. However, the challenge will be turning intent into action. Reaching agreement on what the measure of success will be, and tracking improvement in the light of a much deeper understanding of paramilitary harm, and indeed the nature of paramilitarism overall, will be of high importance. Throughout this year's Report, we reiterate the need to continue with the joined-up, whole of government approach to tackling paramilitarism, which tallies with the overall ethos of the draft Programme for Government.

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

We are aware that considerable planning work is being undertaken by the Programme Team, the Sponsor Group and the Executive on the future approach to tackling paramilitarism as the current Phase of the Programme will finish in March 2027. It is vital that the progress delivered by the Programme is not lost both in terms of focus and outcomes delivered, so that what follows has even greater reach and impact. We reiterate our endorsement of a collective, whole of government approach and would welcome seeing it enhanced beyond 2027. The next two years will provide an opportunity to embed and upscale efforts, drive further progress across the whole system, and develop an enhanced mechanism to evaluate whole of government efforts. Lasting change will only be achieved when we also see significant progress in linked social issues and sustained political leadership and efforts to tackle paramilitarism from every quarter are vital to address this complex and challenging issue. We believe that the level of ambition for, and resources committed to, tackling paramilitarism needs to be further increased. All of these efforts will require adequate resourcing, notwithstanding the challenging fiscal backdrop.

3. Problem-solving justice

We continue to believe that problem-solving justice offers opportunities to more effectively address vulnerabilities and other issues which can lead to contact with the criminal justice system, criminality, or even involvement in paramilitarism. We welcome that the Chief Justice continues to champion problem-solving justice, and the efforts by criminal justice agencies and community organisations to take a problem-solving approach to their work are commendable. The Substance Misuse Court in Belfast, originally established as a pilot in 2018, is now embedded on a

permanent basis and the evaluation of the court has shown that it can support eligible offenders by giving them the opportunity to engage in an intensive programme before sentencing, to help tackle their addiction, stabilise their lives, change their behaviour, and reduce their risk of reoffending. We also recognise the ongoing work by the PSNI to enhance and broaden their problem-solving approach. The Substance Misuse Court demonstrates how innovation in this area can have a real impact, and we continue to believe there is scope for even more innovation in this area and we look forward to seeing additional creative strategies going forward.

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

The cost-of-living crisis continues to impact those disadvantaged communities where poverty, deprivation, and lack of aspiration, opportunity, and hope can be linked to ongoing paramilitarism. We know from experience that when economic difficulties arise, people in these communities are more likely to be exposed to paramilitary influence, and therefore the grip those paramilitary groups have on communities can deepen. We recognise the ongoing work of the Executive, NIHE, local councils and the voluntary and community sector in supporting those communities where there is greatest need. We note that the recent draft Programme for Government refers to the cost-of-living crisis and commits to implementing policies on childcare, housing, the economy, education, and participation through the introduction of social inclusion strategies as well as a significant programme of reform of children's social care services which will be focused on early intervention, addressing workforce challenges, and strengthening cross-sectoral working between the statutory and voluntary and community sectors. While we recognise the good work that is ongoing to address the issues at grassroots level, it is clear this is not enough to bring about the transformational change needed in NI, and we once again urge the Executive and the UK Government to prioritise work to tackle inequalities and make sure that everyone has the best possible opportunity to succeed in life.

APPENDIX A: 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
ARIS	Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme
ARCS	Assets Recovery Community Scheme
BIIGC	British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference
BRG	Benefits Realisation Group
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
CiT	Communities in Transition
CIRV	Community Initiative to Reduce Violence
CRN	Community Resolution Notices
CJINI	Criminal Justice Inspection NI
DOJ	Department of Justice
DRIVE	Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement project
DRIRP	Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Project
EA	Education Authority
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EPPOC	Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime - the Programme
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
IRA	Irish Republican Army
JATF	Joint Agency Task Force
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MARA	Multi-Agency Review Arrangements
NCA	National Crime Agency
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAC	House of Commons' Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
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
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIPB	NI Probation Board
OCGs	Organised Crime Groups
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
SBNI	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
SMC	Substance Misuse Court
SYTES	Supporting Youth through Engagement
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 B: 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 Killeedy 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. 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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