

**Independent Reporting Commission**

# **Independent Report on Paramilitary Group Transition to Disbandment**

Presented to Parliament pursuant to Regulation 3(1)  
of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and  
Implementation Plan) Act 2016 (Independent Reporting  
Commission) Regulations 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on  
13 October 2026



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Fleur Ravensbergen

September 2026

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# Introduction from the Independent Reporting Commission

In several of our reports, we have outlined that ending paramilitarism requires more than the existing ‘twin-track’ approach of policing and criminal justice responses, and measures to address the socio-economic challenges facing communities. We have consistently maintained that a further dimension is needed, namely direct engagement with the Paramilitary Groups themselves to bring about Group Transition. In our Fifth Report, we therefore recommended the appointment of an Independent Person to explore the prospects for paramilitary group transition in Northern Ireland.

Following this recommendation, on 17 September 2025, the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) received a formal request from the two Governments to produce an Ad Hoc report focused on Group Transition. This request was made under Article 4(2) of the Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland establishing the IRC. In making this request, the two Governments appointed an Independent Expert to undertake the work required autonomously. The role of the Independent Expert, set by the two Governments, was to carry out a scoping and engagement exercise to assess whether there is merit in and support for a formal

process of engagement to bring about paramilitary Group Transition to disbandment.

As a result, Fleur Ravensbergen was appointed as the Independent Expert on 22 September 2025. She has worked independently of the Commission in the production of this report. The Commission is now submitting her report, unedited, to the two Governments as an Ad Hoc report, in fulfilment of the request made under Article 4(2).

The recommendations in this report are the result of extensive engagement under the terms of reference set by the two Governments. We recognise that, were the Governments to accept the recommendations, a further tranche of detailed work would be required by them, in consultation with key relevant stakeholders, in regard to their implementation. This work would include ensuring that all relevant mandates were respected in that regard, drawing on the precedents of previous mechanisms involving the two Governments and other public bodies in both jurisdictions.

We wish to thank Fleur Ravensbergen and all who engaged with her in the production of this report. We support this Independent Report's findings and urge that the two Governments accept its recommendations.

John McBurney, Monica McWilliams, Tim O'Connor, and Mitchell Reiss

Commissioners, Independent Reporting Commission

October 2026

# Executive summary

In September 2025, I was appointed jointly by the UK and Irish governments as Independent Expert to carry out a short scoping and engagement exercise to assess whether there is merit in, and support for, a formal process of engagement to bring about paramilitary group transition to disbandment, and if so, to make recommendations on how such a process might be established. I have not been asked to conduct a security assessment of paramilitary groups.

To fulfil my exercise, I have engaged extensively with the stakeholders specified in my Terms of Reference, and in a way that reflects the diversity of perspectives that characterise Northern Ireland today. I have remained independent throughout this exercise and the findings and conclusions in this report are my own, informed by my engagements and my expertise in conflict and post-conflict societies. As my engagements were carried out on a confidential basis, I do not name any of the individuals or organisations I met with in this report.

My consultations lead me to conclude that there is sufficient merit in and support for a formal process of paramilitary group transition, and that a time-limited opportunity exists to pursue it. I found moderate but sufficient support for a formal process among stakeholders, significant willingness to engage among loyalist and republican paramilitary groups, and broad agreement across stakeholders regarding the outcomes transition should seek to achieve. The

central recommendation of this report is therefore the establishment of an independent and time-bound transition mechanism.

## **Paramilitarism in 2026**

The Northern Ireland of today is profoundly different from the Northern Ireland that emerged from conflict. The peace process has delivered notable political, economic and social change. At the same time a consistent picture emerged from my consultations of incomplete normalisation, uneven progress across communities, and continuing harm associated with coercive control, organised crime and a residual paramilitary influence.

Manifestations of paramilitarism have changed, as have the paramilitary groups themselves, but the wider infrastructure associated with paramilitarism has proven more persistent than many had anticipated. Stakeholders described the increasing prominence of drug-related crime, extortion, illegal money lending, exploitation and other forms of criminal activity in areas where a paramilitary presence remains, though I heard different views about the extent of the involvement of paramilitary groups. Stakeholders expressed concerns that residual paramilitary structures can attach themselves to contemporary challenges, including criminality and, in some instances, growing anti-immigrant sentiment. I heard concerns that the unmanaged fragmentation of paramilitary groups could create additional instability and harm.

There is a continuing national security threat from some dissident republican paramilitary groups which requires significant policing and security resources. The threat to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland related terrorism is currently SUBSTANTIAL, meaning an attack is likely.

The nature, extent and impact of paramilitary influence vary considerably between paramilitary groups, communities and geographical areas. However, it is clear that residual paramilitary structures continue to cause harm in some communities. My exercise is therefore not just about dealing with remnants of the past but also about reducing future risks.

## **A formal process of group transition**

Stakeholders expressed a range of views on the prospect of a formal process of group transition, from strongly opposed to fully supportive. On the whole, I found that the majority were willing for the governments to explore something new, including direct engagement with paramilitary groups via a formal process, provided certain conditions were met. These were:

- Credible monitoring and verification of progress;
- A robust law enforcement and criminal justice response; and,
- No financial rewards for paramilitary groups.

Importantly, a diverse range of stakeholders gave moderate and conditional support to exploring a group

transition process, including some victims and survivors and some policing and security stakeholders.

A significant finding of this scoping exercise was the willingness among loyalist and republican paramilitary groups to engage and discuss transition and its implications. Engagement was overall constructive and serious. Significant differences exist between paramilitary groups in terms of organisational cohesion, leadership capacity, attitudes towards transition, relationships with communities, involvement in criminality, and previous participation in elements of the peace process. It became clear that paramilitary groups should not be treated as one uniform category. None of the paramilitary groups I engaged with brought up direct financial payments or early release from prison as a condition of transition or of accelerating progress towards it.

The Terms of Reference for my exercise refer to “paramilitary group transition to disbandment”. In my engagements with paramilitary groups, there was limited support for the term disbandment as the endpoint of a paramilitary group transition process. However, objections to disbandment appeared to be less about what transition should achieve and more about the wording. In my view, agreeing the transition process, milestones and end-state of group transition is more important than terminology.

Based on these findings, this report identifies eleven milestones that together provide a framework for a transition process. These milestones establish a shared understanding of the outcomes being sought and provide

a basis through which progress can be monitored, assessed and verified.

## **Benefits and challenges**

Any formal transition process would face significant implementation challenges. Progress is unlikely to be linear, uniform or uncontested and success is not guaranteed. Different paramilitary groups may participate at different times, move at different speeds, and encounter different challenges. A future process would therefore need to manage uneven participation, fragmentation, internal disagreement, unexpected developments, legal complexities, and changing political circumstances while maintaining confidence in its overall direction.

My consultations identified a number of important barriers and enablers which would influence the prospects of success. These include the need to strengthen communities, opposition to rewarding or legitimising paramilitary groups, organised crime, policing and criminal justice, lack of institutional capacity and low trust, uncertainty about internal paramilitary group cohesion and leadership, and unresolved legacy issues. Any process of group transition will need to take account of these challenges, many of which would require attention irrespective of whether a formal transition process is pursued.

Notwithstanding these challenges, I have concluded that the risk of the persistence of paramilitary structures, continued drift and unmanaged fragmentation outweighs

the risks associated with attempting a structured and time-bound transition process. Inaction is not a neutral option. My consultations suggest that a window of opportunity exists to pursue further progress, but that this may weaken over time.

A formal transition process would bring the advantage of establishing a shared understanding of the outcomes being sought and how they can be assessed. A common framework would make it easier to assess progress, identify obstacles and build confidence that concrete change is taking place.

## Conclusions

What emerges from this scoping exercise is not a case for replacing existing efforts with a formal group transition process: it is a case for building on these efforts and strengthening them in an evidence-led way, whilst introducing a pathway for paramilitary group transition as a complement to existing efforts.

While the risks associated with a formal process are real, I believe the principal risks lie less in the concept of transition itself and more in the complexity of implementation. The key question is whether change will happen through a structured and accountable process, or in a more fragmented and uncoordinated way. Without a recognised framework, there would be no agreed means of monitoring and assessing progress.

The essential elements required for a viable process of paramilitary group transition are present: sufficient

support among stakeholder groups, significant willingness to engage among paramilitary groups, and a shared understanding of what outcomes transition should seek to achieve. I therefore conclude that there is sufficient merit in and support for a formal process of paramilitary group transition and that a time-limited opportunity exists to pursue it.

## Principal recommendation

Based on my engagements, **I recommend the establishment of an independent, time-bound transition mechanism without delay. The UK government and the government of Ireland should work together to develop this mechanism.**

Its purpose would be to provide a structured and accountable framework through which progress towards paramilitary group transition can be facilitated, monitored and verified. The mechanism would have three core functions:

a. Authorised contact point

The mechanism should provide an authorised point of contact through which issues relating to transition can be raised, clarified, and advanced.

b. A common transition framework

The mechanism should oversee the development of structured transition arrangements with paramilitary groups who engage in the transition process. This should be based on agreed commitments, indicators

of progress, timelines, reporting, monitoring, and defined end-states.

c. Monitoring, verifying and reporting

The mechanism should provide independent monitoring and verification of progress, including modest periodic public reporting. This would improve transparency, strengthen accountability and help build public confidence in the process.

## Considerations for implementation and further recommendations

A formal process of paramilitary group transition would not operate in isolation. Throughout my consultations, it was consistently emphasised that effective policing, robust criminal justice responses and strong and resilient communities are not only a crucial goal in themselves but also enabling conditions for a formal transition process.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) commands community confidence and is able to police with communities in ways that communities experience first-hand.

Neighbourhood policing is particularly important in this respect. **I recommend strengthening neighbourhood policing so that officers can maintain a sustained focus on their core role within the communities they serve.**

Another policing issue which came up frequently in my engagements was the importance of a police service that reflects the communities it serves. I encourage the PSNI to continue to improve recruitment and retention of officers from communities which are currently under-represented within the service, including people from Catholic, ethnic minority, and working-class backgrounds.

Stop and search was another important issue, particularly for Catholic, nationalist and republican (CNR) communities, and I encourage the PSNI to give further consideration to how it can build public trust that stop and search powers are used fairly and proportionately.

Throughout my consultations, stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of strengthening those communities most affected by paramilitary harm, without reinforcing gatekeeping, dependency or coercive control. Amongst other community strengthening initiatives, **I recommend targeted and sustained initiatives aimed at benefitting young people.** This is particularly important for looking ahead and furthering a sense of optimism in communities affected by paramilitary harm. This should include initiatives that:

- Empower young people in the communities most affected by paramilitarism;
- Support future community leadership;
- Strengthen pathways into education and good jobs;
- Encourage participation in civic and democratic life; and,

- Reduce vulnerability to criminal recruitment and exploitation.

# 1. Introduction and background

- 1.1. In September 2025, I was appointed jointly by the UK and Irish governments as Independent Expert to carry out a short scoping and engagement exercise to assess whether there is merit in, and support for, a formal process of engagement to bring about paramilitary group transition to disbandment, and if so, to make recommendations on how such a process might be established.
- 1.2. My appointment reflected recommendations made by the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) in successive reports to appoint an Independent Person to scope out the feasibility of direct engagement with paramilitary groups to assist with group transition, based on its assessment that a residual political dimension remains within contemporary paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. This appointment also built on the 2024 recommendation by the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that, “The Government should conduct a scoping exercise to assess public support for such a process which should include dedicated engagement with

those who have suffered violence and harm from paramilitary groups.”<sup>1</sup>

- 1.3. This scoping exercise took place in line with the broader objectives of the IRC to promote progress towards ending paramilitary activity and support long-term peace and stability in society and stable and inclusive devolved government in Northern Ireland. I have carried out this scoping exercise with the hope it can contribute to achieving the commitments set out in the Fresh Start Agreement to work collectively to achieve a society free of paramilitarism and the renewed commitments made in New Decade, New Approach.
- 1.4. My Terms of Reference (see Appendix) asked me to consider barriers and enablers to paramilitary transition; the feasibility and advisability of a formal process; willingness to engage in such a process; expectations of participation; issues likely to arise during implementation; and the contribution such a process could make towards achieving the objectives of the Fresh Start Agreement.
- 1.5. I have not been asked to conduct a security assessment of paramilitary groups.

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1 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, “The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland”, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43124/documents/214542/default/>

# Language

- 1.6. Language in this area is contested, including the continued use of the term paramilitary. For consistency and ease of reading, I use specific terminology throughout this report. As my Terms of Reference require engagement with representatives of paramilitary groups, I use that term throughout. I also refer to loyalist and republican paramilitary groups, while distinguishing clearly between paramilitary activity and the legitimate political traditions of loyalism and republicanism, which are overwhelmingly pursued through peaceful and democratic means.

## Approach to engagement

- 1.7. The Terms of Reference for this exercise tasked me with considering a range of issues and engaging with a wide variety of stakeholders, in particular:
- Representatives of communities affected by paramilitarism, including victims of paramilitary activity;
  - Representatives of wider society in Northern Ireland;
  - Representatives of the statutory agencies likely to have a role in aspects of implementation of a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at facilitating their disbandment; and

- Representatives of paramilitary groups who have an interest in ending the violence and wider harms caused by paramilitary groups.

- 1.8. The Terms of Reference also stipulate that, “the Independent Expert will engage the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and respective law enforcement agencies, the NI Executive and other statutory agencies, local councils, political parties, communities, and civic society organisations in order to understand their perspectives on the issue.”
- 1.9. To fulfil my exercise in accordance with the Terms of Reference, I have met representatives of all these categories of stakeholders. I have engaged extensively since my appointment in September 2025. I met with people across Northern Ireland, as well as holding meetings in Ireland and speaking with stakeholders and experts from outside the island of Ireland. I have aimed to engage widely and in a way that reflects the diversity of perspectives that characterise Northern Ireland today. I also want to acknowledge that some people were reluctant to meet with me.
- 1.10. I owe a debt of gratitude to all those who gave their time and shared their views throughout the course of this work. People described painful experiences of harm, trauma and loss. Some were afraid, and many were exhausted and frustrated. Yet I also encountered much courage, strength, resilience, care and determination to build a better

future, which was heartening. Despite my best efforts, given the tight timeframe for this exercise, I will inevitably have missed some people and perspectives, which I regret. However, I have heard a wide range of voices and views, and my conclusions reflect this.

- 1.11. As my engagements were carried out on a confidential basis, I will not be naming any of the individuals or organisations which I met with in this report. This approach was necessary to allow me to have frank and honest conversations about sensitive subjects. I am deeply appreciative of stakeholders' willingness to speak to me honestly about the enduring problems associated with the presence of paramilitary groups.
- 1.12. I have remained independent from both governments and the IRC throughout my exercise. The findings and conclusions in this report are my own, informed by my engagements and my expertise in conflict and post-conflict societies.

## 2. Key findings from my engagements

- 2.1. I heard a range of views on the prospect of a formal process of group transition to disbandment, from strongly opposed to fully supportive. There is no one stakeholder or organisation which can speak for all communities, for all victims, for all statutory services, or for all political parties. I have summarised below the issues raised with me in my stakeholder engagements and the levels of support I encountered for a formal process.
- 2.2. There was a significant cohort of stakeholders who were reluctant to support any measures that would seem to reward or legitimise paramilitary groups. There was also widespread recognition that the current situation is not acceptable, and that whilst the current approach is reducing the harm caused by paramilitary groups, more could be done to tackle the enduring presence of paramilitary structures. On balance, I found that the majority of stakeholders were willing for the governments to try something new, including direct engagement with paramilitary groups via a formal process, provided certain conditions were met, such as:
- First, a process would require credible mechanisms capable of monitoring and verifying progress.

- Second, since criminality is a concern, any transition process should take place alongside a robust law enforcement and criminal justice response aimed at protecting communities and reducing criminality. A transition process must strengthen the rule of law, not weaken it.
- Third, there was strong and consistent opposition to any approach that would financially reward paramilitary groups or their members. In some cases, opposition to a transition process appeared to be based on the assumption that it would involve incentives or rewards for those responsible for harm. Across the board, such approaches were described as ineffective, counterproductive and damaging to public confidence.

2.3. During my engagements with representatives of communities affected by paramilitarism and representatives of wider society, the issues raised with me most often were effective policing, criminality and drug dealing, exploitation of young people, violence, coercive control, low trust, and failure by the state to adequately support communities. Stakeholders also pointed out that different cohorts in society experience different forms of paramilitary harm, such as children and young people, women and girls, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The nature, extent and impact of paramilitary influence varied considerably between communities

and geographical areas. I heard fatigue and disappointment that more progress had not been made in the years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In some communities there was a sense that not all had benefitted equally from the peace. I heard different perspectives in support of and in opposition to a formal group transition process. Support was often stronger for practical transition measures to reduce harm rather than for any predetermined model of transition. Some considered that progress did not need to be all-or-nothing and that even partial reductions in harm, increased transparency, or the creation of pathways away from paramilitary involvement were worthwhile.

- 2.4. During my engagements with victims, survivors, their families, and supporters, I was struck by their grace, their strength, and their focus on the future. This diverse group of people consistently voiced that they wanted to see an end to harm and suffering. I heard about the harms paramilitary groups have inflicted, and people talked to me about a lack of justice. Some were sceptical about the prospect of group transition and the sincerity of paramilitary groups and were adamant that a formal group transition process should not reward paramilitary groups in any way. Many were open to exploring different ways of achieving an end to paramilitary harm. Some supported a group transition process because of what they believed it could contribute to peace in the future, provided the

key conditions outlined above were met and victims had a voice. While this scoping exercise was not focused on legacy matters, many people brought them up during our conversations. It is clear to me that more needs to be done to support victims, survivors, and their families and to help them get answers about what happened to their loved ones.

- 2.5. During my engagement with representatives of statutory and law enforcement agencies and with officials, many of the same themes were raised with me. People had doubts that paramilitary groups were sincere about transitioning and some people told me that paramilitary groups were now effectively organised crime groups, something I also heard from some people working in the community. Even so, many people were still open to exploring a group transition process. Some people told me that a group transition process would help law enforcement to focus on those causing the most harm by separating those who are sincere about transition from those who remain committed to criminality.
- 2.6. During my engagement with political parties, I heard scepticism about the sincerity of paramilitary groups and concern that a process would legitimise these groups or reward them. There was significant emphasis on the need for a robust, effective criminal justice approach that was visible in communities. There was also some support for a transition process, with conditions.

- 2.7. Overall, engagement by paramilitary groups was serious and constructive. I found a significant willingness among paramilitary groups to engage and discuss transition and its implications. I encountered significant differences between paramilitary groups in terms of organisational cohesion, leadership capacity, attitudes towards transition, relationships with communities, involvement in criminality, and levels of previous participation in elements of the peace process. It became clear through my engagements that paramilitary groups should not be treated as one uniform category. None of the paramilitary groups I engaged with brought up direct financial payments as a condition of transition or of accelerating progress towards it. A recurring argument was made that the willingness of these groups to engage with the state must be considered in the context of the wider relationships between the state and the communities in which these paramilitary groups are active. It was argued that this issue cannot be reduced solely to a question of change by the paramilitary groups.
- 2.8. The Terms of Reference for my exercise relate to “paramilitary group transition to disbandment”. In my engagements with paramilitary groups, there was limited support for the term disbandment as the endpoint of a paramilitary group transition process. However, objections to disbandment appeared to be less about what transition should achieve and more about the wording. In my view, agreeing the

transition process, milestones and end-state of group transition is more important than terminology.

- 2.9. Loyalist paramilitary groups were willing to seriously discuss current circumstances, future pathways, practical outcomes and the possible shape of a formal transition process. I found little opposition to the idea of transition or engaging in a potential formal process, and often a clear appetite for it. That said, support for such a process was contingent on how it would be designed and implemented. Loyalist paramilitary groups had questions about how progress might be achieved and what conditions would be required. Frequently raised themes included history, cultural celebrations, identity, what happens to the name of the group during transition, pressures facing communities, policing, organised crime, opportunities for young people, legacy, demonisation of loyalist communities, the feasibility of transition, and the need for independent monitoring and verification.
- 2.10. Engagement with republican paramilitary groups was more mixed. Some were more open than others to engagement. Overall, discussions were serious, predominantly constructive and provided a basis for continued engagement. In these conversations, republican paramilitary groups identified a number of issues, primarily relating to the actions and legitimacy of the state, and wanted to understand what a possible transition

framework would look like. None of the republican paramilitary groups I engaged with brought up early release from prison as a condition of transition or of accelerating progress towards transition. There was considerable discussion of policing and stop and search, MI5, prison conditions, remission, and Multi-Agency Review Arrangements (MARA), as well as their aspirations to carve out a political path of their own.

### 3. Key features linked to the presence of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland in 2026

- 3.1. A question that surfaced repeatedly throughout this exercise was how Northern Ireland could have come so far and yet still find itself grappling with residual issues from the conflict almost thirty years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The recently published Northern Ireland Peace Index 2026 found that paramilitary activity had fallen 44.7% since 2019.<sup>2</sup> However, in the latest Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, 30% of people agreed or strongly agreed that paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour in their area<sup>3</sup> and 21% of people agreed or strongly agreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in their area.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.2. This does not mean that progress has failed. The Northern Ireland of today is profoundly different

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2 <https://nipi.economicsandpeace.org/data/Northern-Ireland-Peace-Index-2026.pdf>

3 [https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Community\\_safety/PGCRIME.html](https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Community_safety/PGCRIME.html)

4 [https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Community\\_safety/PGFEAR.html](https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Community_safety/PGFEAR.html)

from the Northern Ireland that emerged from conflict. Even taking account of under-reporting, violence has reduced substantially. Successive political agreements have contributed to a more peaceful and stable society, and many of the threats and restrictions that shaped everyday life during the conflict no longer form part of daily experience for most people.

- 3.3. At the same time, the challenges that remain have proven slower, harder and more complex to address than was once hoped. While the peace process has delivered in many ways, many people pointed out that the quality of the current peace falls short of what was envisioned and hoped for. It is therefore important to keep working at sustaining and strengthening that peace, rather than accept it as is. Throughout my consultations a consistent picture emerged of incomplete normalisation, uneven progress across communities, and continuing harm associated with coercive control, organised crime and residual paramilitary influence, which, while markedly different from the forms they took in the past, still have a political dimension.
- 3.4. Many stakeholders pointed to multiple long and costly political, community-based and governmental efforts that have been pursued to reduce paramilitary harm. The view was that while significant progress has been made, paramilitary groups continue to exist and cause significant harm.

- 3.5. As a result, there remains understandable uncertainty regarding what the goal of any further transition effort in Northern Ireland should be, how progress should be assessed, and what a successful outcome would look like.
- 3.6. The persistence of residual paramilitary structures also raises a practical question: transition to what? When it comes to transitioning away from violence after conflict, a political vehicle can offer one route. That pathway is currently either absent or insufficiently viable for the remaining paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.
- 3.7. Transforming into a community organisation can also be a path forward. This approach has been pursued in Northern Ireland with mixed results. In some instances, it has created opportunities for positive engagement, leadership and community development. In others, stakeholders told me that the distinction between community development activity and residual paramilitary influence has become blurred. Several stakeholders referred to the risk of individuals operating as a “community worker by day, paramilitary by night”, pointing out that even isolated incidents can significantly undermine confidence in progress and transition efforts away from violence.
- 3.8. A common view emerging from consultations was that any potential future group transition effort should be practical, targeted and accountable, and

should be focused on a defined end-state rather than participation in a process alone.

## **The changing nature of paramilitary influence**

- 3.9. The manifestations of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland today have changed alongside the groups associated with it. While paramilitary groups have evolved, weakened and fragmented, elements of the wider infrastructure associated with paramilitarism have proven more persistent than many had anticipated. These residual paramilitary structures can adapt and attach themselves to contemporary challenges in ways that perpetuate harm and are difficult to address.
- 3.10. When asked about their experiences, stakeholders rarely focused primarily on residual political violence. Instead, they focused on effects on everyday life. Community, civil society and statutory stakeholders repeatedly described informal authority structures, local influence networks, systems of coercion, criminal exploitation, child criminal and sexual exploitation, barriers to reporting crime, and relationships that continue to influence or control aspects of community life. Much of this remains difficult to observe because it is often tacitly understood, rarely discussed openly, and frequently not reported to authorities. Many stakeholders told me there was an unwillingness to report concerns to the police. The reasons

varied and included fear of repercussions, negative historical experiences, low confidence that information would be acted upon, opposition to policing in principle, and community pressure. These perspectives help explain why informal authority structures continue to retain influence in some locations despite wider societal progress.

- 3.11. Stakeholders repeatedly described the increasing prominence of drug-related crime, extortion, illegal money lending, exploitation and other forms of criminal activity in areas with a paramilitary presence. While views differed regarding the extent of the involvement of paramilitary groups, many expressed concern about the growing impact of organised crime.
- 3.12. People also pointed to other contemporary challenges. These include racism and anti-immigrant sentiment, public disorder, declining trust in institutions, persistent deprivation and increasing pressure on public services. While none of these issues are unique to Northern Ireland, many argued that residual paramilitary influence can amplify them and complicate efforts to address them.
- 3.13. In line with this, some expressed concern that unmanaged fragmentation of paramilitary structures could itself create additional risks. Rather than producing stable, peaceful communities, unmanaged decline and fragmentation may create opportunities for criminal actors, splinter groups or

individuals motivated by profit, grievance or status to occupy the resulting space.

- 3.14. Taken together, these findings suggest that the case for further action rests not only on harms that continue to occur today, but also on the risks posed by residual paramilitary infrastructure if left to an unmanaged decline. The issue is therefore not simply one of addressing remaining legacies of the conflict. It is also a matter of reducing future risks associated with organised crime, coercive control and the persistence of informal systems of authority.

## **A highly uneven issue**

- 3.15. The highly localised nature of contemporary paramilitary influence was a consistent theme. The nature, extent and impact of paramilitary influence were described as varying considerably between organisations, communities and geographical areas. In some areas, people described limited day-to-day impact. In others, coercive control, intimidation, organised crime and informal authority structures remained a significant part of everyday life. Northern Ireland is a small place, and sometimes there were vast differences between places that were just a few streets away.
- 3.16. The gendered dimension of coercive control came up frequently. Many stakeholders spoke poignantly about the impact of paramilitary-linked domestic violence and coercive control on

women.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, stakeholders referred to the consequences of harmful cultural expectations relating to masculinity.

- 3.17. Concerns regarding young people also emerged consistently. I often heard the view that some children begin life at a significant disadvantage and need greater support, opportunity and empowerment if cycles of exclusion, disenfranchisement and exploitation are to be broken.
- 3.18. Victims and survivors described experiences that emphasised the deeply personal and intimate nature of violence in close-knit communities and the painful path they had to chart to find a way forward. Many stakeholders told me that victims and survivors had sacrificed much in the name of peace.
- 3.19. Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) figures show that the number of race hate crimes in the 12 months leading up to 30 June 2026 is the highest in over twenty years. In June 2026 alone, PSNI

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5 For a deeper examination of these issues, see Aisling Swaine's 2024 report, *'When you know what they are capable of': Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control* [https://foylefamilyjusticecentre.org/app/uploads/2024/09/Full-Report\\_Para-Coer-Control\\_Swaine-FWA.pdf](https://foylefamilyjusticecentre.org/app/uploads/2024/09/Full-Report_Para-Coer-Control_Swaine-FWA.pdf)

recorded 512 race incidents.<sup>6</sup> 65% of participants in the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey said there was more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland now than there was five years ago.<sup>7</sup> I heard from civil society representatives and members of minority communities about the impact of the riots this summer and the fear and harm they caused. They were particularly concerned about the impact this was having on children and young people. Their fears were heightened by perceived connections to loyalist paramilitary groups. Chief Constable Jon Boutcher told the Northern Ireland Policing Board that the picture was inconsistent with regard to the paramilitaries: some loyalist paramilitaries were involved in directing the violence at a number of locations but the PSNI also had information that some paramilitary members had dissuaded their members from getting involved in the disorder.<sup>8</sup> Many civil society and community stakeholders were troubled by the potential for residual paramilitary networks to be used for mobilisation which could contribute to public disorder in to the future.

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6 <https://www.psni.police.uk/system/files/2026-08/1959439321/Hate%20Motivations%20Bulletin%20Period%20ending%2030th%20June%202026.pdf>

7 [https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Minority\\_Ethnic\\_People/RACPREJM.html](https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2025/Minority_Ethnic_People/RACPREJM.html)

8 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cewq70x427ko>

3.20. What I encountered during this exercise suggests that contemporary paramilitary influence in Northern Ireland today is still a highly uneven and hyper-local phenomenon that causes significant harm. Any analysis of transition, and any future effort to support it, must recognise these differences rather than assume a common experience across Northern Ireland.

## **Incomplete normalisation**

3.21. While Northern Ireland has moved far beyond the conflict in many respects, normalisation remains incomplete. This at times goes unnoticed because it affects familiar features of everyday life. Yet some of what people described to me, often in passing, would still be regarded as unusual in most democratic societies. From my perspective, this emerged as a striking theme throughout this exercise.

3.22. Almost three decades after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, I met police officers who continue to check under their cars for explosive devices before travelling to work, and whose families do not know what they do for a living. I visited police stations that appeared more like fortresses than public buildings. I met people reluctant to report relatively minor incidents because of perceived paramilitary connections. Peace walls continue to separate communities, and people still grow up, study, work and socialise largely within their own communities.

I also heard from some stakeholders about the barriers to full participation in normal society which continue to affect some ex-prisoners and their families. These facts serve as a reminder that aspects of the conflict's legacy continue to shape everyday life in ways that would surprise many outside the most affected communities.

- 3.23. Perhaps most notably, consultations revealed a tendency in some settings to downplay certain forms of violence, intimidation and coercion in comparison with the standards of the Troubles, rather than assessing them on their own terms. This is unsurprising in a society shaped by conflict for as long as Northern Ireland has been. However, it risks obscuring the harm caused by continuing violence and coercion and suggests that some of the assumptions and attitudes formed during the conflict continue to shape responses to violence today. This tendency was not confined to communities directly affected by ongoing paramilitary activity but appeared across a range of settings and perspectives.
- 3.24. Many stakeholders argued that the presence of paramilitary groups both contributes to, and is sustained by, social conditions and assumptions that would be regarded as unusual elsewhere. From that perspective, transition is not simply about reducing the influence of paramilitary groups and instead forms part of an ongoing historical and political process of normalisation.

# The remaining national security dimension

- 3.25. Although large-scale political violence has reduced substantially, the threat to national security has persisted. The threat to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is currently SUBSTANTIAL, meaning an attack is likely. As of 31 August 2026, there had been no security-related deaths since January 2024.<sup>9</sup> However, republican paramilitary violence remains a reality and continues to require significant attention and resources from policing and security agencies.
- 3.26. This review was conducted during a period in which attacks and attempted attacks on police stations, police officers, and staff continued to occur, albeit at a markedly lower level than during earlier decades. During the course of my exercise, in March 2026 there was an attempted bomb attack on Lurgan PSNI station, and in April 2026 an attack on Dunmurry PSNI station by dissident republicans. In July 2026, An Garda Síochána (the Irish police service) seized a significant explosive device in Co. Monaghan as part of a planned operation into dissident republican activity.

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9 <https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2026-09/Security%20Situation%20Statistics%20to%20August%202026qw1.pdf>

3.27. The existence of a continuing dissident republican threat reinforces the case for the state exploring just and human rights-compliant mechanisms capable of reducing violence and supporting long-term stability. Any future transition process should not be a substitute for policing or security responses. Rather, it could provide an additional mechanism through which movement away from violence, coercion, criminality and paramilitary structures may be encouraged, assessed and monitored.

## **Differing starting points and pathways**

3.28. Consultations with both broader stakeholders and paramilitary groups highlighted the risks of treating paramilitary organisations as a single category. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to significant differences between paramilitary groups in their structures, trajectories, levels of cohesion and involvement in criminality.

3.29. Important differences also emerged regarding paramilitary leadership, capacity, relationships with communities, willingness to engage and attitudes towards transition. Some paramilitary groups face or were perceived to face more substantial challenges relating to fragmentation, criminality, internal authority or legitimacy. These differences existed both within and between traditions and groups. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to

important distinctions between specific (sub-) groups and rural and urban areas and cautioned against assuming that a common approach or common pathway would be appropriate in every case. Stakeholders highlighted differing rates of change between groups and, in some cases, within groups themselves.

- 3.30. Paramilitary groups are starting from different positions and are therefore unlikely to move at the same pace, require the same forms of engagement, or follow identical pathways. These differing trajectories emerged repeatedly throughout the review and have important implications for how progress should be understood, assessed and supported.

## 4. What does transition mean?

- 4.1. Throughout my consultations, I encountered confusion and curiosity about what is meant by transition. However, as I discuss in more detail below, regardless of the language used or the end-state, in my wider engagements with community, statutory and political stakeholders as well as paramilitary groups, there was agreement regarding what the paramilitary groups should stop doing: violence, intimidation, exploitation, criminality, and coercive control.

### Transition to disbandment

- 4.2. The Terms of Reference for my exercise relate to “paramilitary group transition to disbandment”. In my engagements with paramilitary groups, there was limited support for the term disbandment as the endpoint of a paramilitary group transition process. However, some loyalist paramilitary groups suggested alternative language to describe the end-state for a transition process such as transformation, civilianising, dismantling, dissolution, or simply transition.
- 4.3. Objections to disbandment appeared to be less about what transition should achieve and more about the language and associations attached to the term itself. For loyalist paramilitary groups,

concerns were typically rooted in questions of parity with republican paramilitary groups, history and identity. Many of the loyalist paramilitary groups I spoke to argued that “disbandment” implied the erasure of a past they continue to regard as important.

## **Deproscription**

- 4.4. Deproscription mostly came up in discussions with loyalist paramilitary groups and people working with Protestant, unionist and loyalist (PUL) communities, though it was not a priority issue. Some loyalist paramilitary groups expressed a tentative interest in considering it in the future as part of a transition process.

## **Defining and agreeing a transition process**

- 4.5. Three questions emerged which can provide a framework for understanding transition and for identifying indicators by which progress towards an end-state could be monitored and verified. These are: What stops? What changes? What emerges?

### **What stops?**

- 4.6. Across my consultations, I found a degree of consistency on the behaviours and activities that must stop for transition to be credible. In their

Fourth Report,<sup>10</sup> the IRC outlined a non-exhaustive list of milestones which would take place during a group transition process, and these continued to come up in my engagements:

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

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10 [https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2022-12/IRC%20Fourth%20Report%20web%20accessible\\_0.pdf](https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2022-12/IRC%20Fourth%20Report%20web%20accessible_0.pdf)

- 4.7. In addition to these nine milestones, many stakeholders also talked about the importance of:
- Dealing with physical signs of paramilitary influence in communities; and,
  - Ending all paramilitary-linked criminality.
- 4.8. There was broad recognition that paramilitary groups seeking to transition must commit fully to democratic and lawful means and stop exercising forms of authority, control or influence which properly belong to the state and its institutions. This would also require others to stop asking or expecting paramilitary groups to perform such functions, including where it may serve a purpose that is seen to be constructive.

## **What changes?**

- 4.9. Beyond ending illegal activity, paramilitary groups described a transition process that also involves organisational transformation. I want to emphasise that any remaining military structures would need to be dismantled as part of a transition process. Former members of paramilitary groups could participate in civic life through community, cultural, political or other lawful avenues, or simply cease their involvement in paramilitary structures. With a group transition process, relationships with communities would become non-coercive, and authority and accountability would move fully into democratic and legal structures.

- 4.10. Several paramilitary groups expressed a desire to continue acts of commemoration, historical reflection and mutual support, alongside ending paramilitary activity. They regarded this as important and, in some cases, necessary for a successful transition process. The relevant question is not whether these activities take place, but whether they are conducted lawfully, responsibly and without causing harm. This could be an indicator of successful transition. I also heard from some representatives of paramilitary groups and some community stakeholders about positive community development activities that members of paramilitary groups are involved in. There should be lawful channels for these activities to continue in a non-coercive way that benefits communities.
- 4.11. It was evident that indicators of progress and a timeline for monitoring and verifying change are important. Consultations with community, statutory and political stakeholders as well as with the paramilitary groups repeatedly highlighted this issue. Suggested indicators included the removal of paramilitary murals, addressing paramilitary flags, safe and positive cultural celebrations and bonfires, ending recruitment, and ending paramilitary-style attacks. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of assessing broader behavioural changes, including reductions in coercive control and harm within affected communities, as well as ending involvement in or benefitting from illegal activities.

## What emerges?

- 4.12. Views varied on what organisational structures, if any, should exist after a transition process. Possibilities included complete organisational retirement involving no legal successor structure, lawful community organisations, or what the loyalist paramilitary groups described as veterans' organisations or old boys' clubs. These organisations were described as vehicles for commemorations and remembrance, providing a space to socialise and share collective memory, or supporting constructive community development. Some republican paramilitary groups expressed an interest in political vehicles or working for the benefit of their communities. No single end-state emerged from consultations and for some, the ideal outcome remained vague. This is not to say paramilitary groups are not willing to transition to other entities, but simply that this is where an authorised point of contact and formal process for group transition could assist to provide guard rails for those who want to move on.
- 4.13. In several cases, organisations which fulfil these functions already exist. Any alternative structures should be lawful entities engaging in lawful activity which represent a genuine transition to civilian activity. They should not be a continuation of paramilitary influence through different means.
- 4.14. At times, there appeared to be a tacit assumption that transition requires the creation of a successor

organisation. Yet some paramilitary groups seemed less interested in establishing new structures than in ceasing to operate as paramilitary organisations. Some people may simply wish to stop their involvement in paramilitarism, and I heard from many community and civic society stakeholders, as well as paramilitary groups, that this can be difficult in the current situation.

- 4.15. What these options had in common was that the organisation would no longer function as a paramilitary group. It would dismantle its military structures, disengage from criminality, and end the exercise of coercive control within communities. This is critically important.

## 5. Barriers and enablers to group transition

- 5.1. My engagements pointed to the existence of strong enablers for a group transition process, while also highlighting various barriers. What emerged repeatedly throughout consultations was a general frustration that Northern Ireland is stuck. Many stakeholders acknowledged that although good work has been done and progress made, something else is needed to advance progress towards achieving this goal. Stakeholders consistently emphasised that strong, resilient communities and effective, trusted policing contribute to the conditions capable of supporting paramilitary group transition, as well as being valuable ends in their own right.
- 5.2. The principal barriers to moving forward with a group transition process which emerged from my consultations were the need to strengthen communities, opposition to rewarding or legitimising paramilitary groups, organised crime, policing and criminal justice, lack of institutional capacity and low trust, uncertainty about internal paramilitary group cohesion and leadership, and legacy. Any process of group transition will need to take account of these barriers. These are significant challenges, many of which would require attention irrespective of whether a formal transition process is pursued.

Given the nature of some of the barriers, it cannot be assumed that all of them can be fully overcome. That said, most stakeholders did not consider their existence a sufficient reason not to explore the possibility of a formal transition process. Addressing these barriers would increase the likelihood of group transition delivering positive results, and I make a recommendation below for further consideration.

## **Community strengthening, renewal and empowerment**

- 5.3. Throughout my consultations, it was impossible to discuss paramilitarism for long without talking about deprivation, social class, education, housing, health, employment, collective and individual trauma, youth provision, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, minority communities, and community resilience. Again and again, conversations that began by talking about coercive control, criminality or paramilitary influence quickly became conversations about the broader conditions in which those problems persist. There was a strong sense that some communities felt left behind.
- 5.4. This does not mean that paramilitarism can be explained solely through deprivation, exclusion or inequality, or that ongoing socio-economic challenges somehow justify the continuing existence of paramilitary structures. It does,

however, help explain why so many stakeholders regarded community strengthening and renewal as essential components of any lasting solution.

- 5.5. Northern Ireland has a strong and thriving community and voluntary sector and organisations continue to deliver against a backdrop of funding pressures. In engagements with representatives from the community and voluntary sector, I encountered many who were struggling with the impact of funding cuts, as well as delayed release of funding, short grant periods and limited flexibility within grants to adjust activities based on new developments. This vital sector has already made a significant contribution to social transformation and can help sustain the conditions needed for a formal group transition process.
- 5.6. Some stakeholders argued that community development and paramilitary group transition should be understood as interconnected processes. In their view, long-term positive changes are more likely when communities experience growth in confidence, wellbeing, opportunity and resilience alongside a reduction in paramilitary influence. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the complex dynamics in communities where there is a paramilitary presence, it is vital not to stigmatise or blame communities for this situation. A recurring theme throughout my consultations was that complete paramilitary group transition is unlikely to result from paramilitary groups changing in

isolation. Community, academic, political and civil society stakeholders emphasised the importance of parallel strengthening of communities and local institutions so that positive change can be sustained and reinforced over time.

- 5.7. Much work has already been done on this over the years. In particular, the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) and Communities in Transition have allocated funding to a range of projects which have had real impact in communities. These initiatives and others like them have generated significant experience and evidence of what works. I urge decision makers to use these findings to inform future efforts aimed at strengthening communities in ways that are empowering, locally grounded, sustainable and evidence-led. This is particularly important because the mandate for EPPOC ends in March 2027.
- 5.8. Statutory, civil society and academic stakeholders also highlighted the importance of taking a trauma-informed approach. It is important to recognise that different cohorts experience the consequences of paramilitary harm differently, in particular, women, children and young people, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- 5.9. Ultimately, what emerged from this scoping exercise was that community strengthening is not simply an additional benefit of successful transition but something that is fundamental to a peaceful society. Many stakeholders viewed continued

investment in communities as one of the necessary components of making transition achievable and sustainable. There was a strong view from stakeholders that building resilient communities, strengthening policing, and efforts that directly support paramilitary group transition are most effective when they reinforce one another. What emerges from this scoping exercise is therefore not a case for replacing existing efforts with a formal group transition process: it is a case for building on these efforts and strengthening them in an evidence-led way, whilst introducing a pathway for paramilitary group transition as a complement to existing efforts.

- 5.10. It is clear from my consultations that investment in communities most affected by paramilitarism remains essential. I encourage the implementation of evidence-based measures to strengthen the communities most affected by paramilitarism, which focus on community resilience, reducing deprivation and exclusion, supporting community renewal, developing local leadership, empowering women, supporting trauma-informed approaches, and creating an environment where difference and diversity are welcomed. Any support should strengthen communities themselves and avoid reinforcing gatekeeping, dependency or coercive influence. Initiatives should be transparent, evidence-based and focused on achieving sustainable outcomes for communities. Where possible, any public investment should be designed

to provide greater stability, longer-term planning horizons and sufficient flexibility to respond to local circumstances and needs.

5.11. Stakeholders consistently talked about the importance of prioritising young people. They repeatedly described the interaction between collective and individual trauma, deprivation, educational disadvantage, criminality and limited opportunity which can blight young lives. **I recommend targeted and sustained initiatives aimed at benefitting young people.** This is particularly important for looking ahead and furthering a sense of optimism in communities affected by paramilitary harm. This should include initiatives that:

- Empower young people in the communities most affected by paramilitarism;
- Support future community leadership;
- Strengthen pathways into education and the professions;
- Encouraging participation in civic and good jobs; and
- Reduce vulnerability to criminal recruitment and exploitation.

5.12. These initiatives should include young people at risk of recruitment into paramilitary groups as well as young people at risk of harm, violence and exploitation at the hands of paramilitary groups.

# Financial rewards and legitimisation

- 5.13. Everyone I spoke to was clear that paramilitary groups should not receive direct funding to transition. Some community stakeholders were opposed to a group transition process largely because they believed this would inevitably involve direct funding to paramilitary groups. None of the paramilitary groups which I spoke to said that their willingness to transition was conditional on receiving funding, though many talked about the need for investment in the communities they live in, as did virtually all stakeholders.
- 5.14. Some political, statutory and community stakeholders believed that any engagement with paramilitary groups would legitimise them. Some political stakeholders stressed that it was important that a transition process would not inadvertently prolong the existence of the paramilitary groups. Broader stakeholders indicated that paramilitary groups already possess varying degrees of influence, recognition and authority within communities.<sup>11</sup> From my experience working in conflict and post-conflict areas around the world, there are forms of engagement that can be legitimising but there are also ways of engaging

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11 The 2024 ARK Working Paper, *Understanding the persistence of armed/paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland*, discusses this complexity: <https://ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-09/pgroups.pdf>

that do not confer legitimacy on paramilitary groups. This is an important consideration for the design of any formal group transition process.

## Organised crime

- 5.15. Stakeholders expressed concern that criminal networks are connected with individuals, structures and networks associated with paramilitarism. While views differed on the extent of these links, there was broad agreement that organised crime and paramilitary structures are often mutually reinforcing at the expense of communities, and that for a group transition process to be credible, all paramilitary-linked crime must stop. Many statutory, political and community stakeholders and some in law enforcement argued that paramilitarism has already transitioned into organised crime. Some were frustrated that criminals use the names of paramilitary groups to exploit a veneer of legitimacy.
- 5.16. Many law enforcement, statutory and community stakeholders argued that links to criminality create incentives that are fundamentally at odds with meaningful transition of paramilitary groups. Criminality can provide income, influence, status and control, reducing incentives for change. Broader stakeholders also questioned whether paramilitary group transition on its own would significantly reduce criminality, warning that individuals and networks involved in criminal activity may continue to operate under a different label.

Stakeholders were clear that criminality cannot be separated from discussions of transition. Any credible transition process would require sustained progress in addressing criminality and the incentives that sustain it.

## Policing

- 5.17. I engaged extensively with law enforcement officers in various roles and locations across Northern Ireland. Engagement was constructive and open. I met many dedicated and talented people who care deeply about their roles and the communities they serve, and who face challenges in delivering the kind of policing services that communities rightfully expect.
- 5.18. One of the clearest findings throughout my exercise was the extent to which stakeholders regarded strengthened policing, particularly neighbourhood policing, as indispensable to addressing paramilitary harm and as an important enabler of further paramilitary group transition. Dealing with the harm and criminality linked to the presence and activities of paramilitary groups extends beyond the work of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force.
- 5.19. A paramilitary group transition process requires confidence that the responsibilities of the state are exercised by the state. Effective policing and successful transition were frequently presented as mutually reinforcing. Communities cannot be left to police themselves; responsibility for maintaining

safety and upholding the rule of law rests with the state.

5.20. Concerns regarding police visibility, responsiveness, local knowledge, community engagement, high staff turnover rates, and the make-up of the PSNI workforce emerged repeatedly throughout my consultations. While views differed somewhat on the causes and extent of these issues, there was broad agreement that they had damaged relationships, reduced local knowledge and decreased community confidence. Stakeholders, including some within the PSNI, regarded greater confidence in the PSNI and a better-resourced police service as key enablers of further group transition.

## **Neighbourhood policing**

5.21. As of 1 August 2026, PSNI had 6,432 officers,<sup>12</sup> significantly below the 7,500 officers recommended in the Patten report and re-committed to in New Decade, New Approach. A PSNI written submission to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in November 2025 said:

“Under its previous Neighbourhood Police Team (NPT) model the Police Service had planned for 952 neighbourhood officers; it currently

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12 <https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/our-publication-scheme/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/workforce>

has 450. NPTs have been amalgamated and a commitment to provide 16-hour daily NPT coverage has had to be removed. *In some parts of Northern Ireland neighbourhood policing exists in name only.*<sup>13</sup> [emphasis added]

- 5.22. During this scoping exercise, I frequently heard from PSNI neighbourhood officers themselves what this reduction in numbers means in practice. To give one example, in an area which had previously operated with several community policing teams, because of restructuring, cuts, unfilled vacancies and unavoidable staff absences, there were no neighbourhood police officers available to deploy on the day of my visit.
- 5.23. I am not alone in pointing out that neighbourhood policing in Northern Ireland is essential yet operates significantly below intended levels, though I do not doubt the commitment of the PSNI's senior management to neighbourhood policing. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found in 2025 that the PSNI's budgetary challenges were negatively affecting neighbourhood policing.<sup>14</sup> Last year, the IRC said that neighbourhood policing was

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13 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/152258/html/>

14 <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/psni-inspection-of-police-effectiveness-and-efficiency-2025/>

vital to effectively dealing with paramilitarism. The IRC pointed out that over the previous five years, the number of neighbourhood police had consistently fallen, and in parallel, the percentage of respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey who agreed that the PSNI kept their community safe had dropped from 55% to 34%.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, in 2024, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland highlighted concerns about the temporary reassignment of officers away from their core functions (abstraction) and the drop in numbers of neighbourhood officers.<sup>16</sup> It is vital that steps are taken to address these well-evidenced concerns. **I recommend strengthening neighbourhood policing so that officers can maintain a sustained focus on their core role within the communities they serve.**

- 5.24. Many stakeholders also emphasised the need to strengthen other parts of PSNI, including response policing. At the same time, many indicated that a reduction in neighbourhood policing has a negative, reverberating impact on broader policing. In part, this is because it has an important function in preventing the need for response policing in the first place, and also because it is important for people's

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15 [https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2025-12/E03468506\\_IRC%20Eight%20Report\\_Web%20Accessible.pdf](https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2025-12/E03468506_IRC%20Eight%20Report_Web%20Accessible.pdf)

16 <https://www.cjini.org/reports/community-safety-and-local-policing-arrangements-in-northern-ireland/>

confidence in policing, which impacts the way and extent to which they interact with the police service.

## **Community confidence in policing**

- 5.25. Stakeholders across Northern Ireland told me that when police do not act on concerns or information shared with them by the community, which they felt happened often, confidence in policing is damaged. There was a perception that policing responses to issues such as anti-social behaviour or petty drug-dealing were often limited or delayed. I also heard views across communities about what was regarded as two-tier policing. A wide range of stakeholders from across traditions, including political and community stakeholders, expressed concern about the intelligence activities of the PSNI and security services in Northern Ireland, including the use of informants.
- 5.26. CNR community workers, civil society stakeholders and republican paramilitary groups all raised concerns about policing in CNR communities, particularly the impact on children and families, the use of stop and search powers, and what was at times experienced as heavy-handed and escalatory police responses to public order or paramilitary-related matters in CNR areas. Some community workers and civil society stakeholders acknowledged that in some cases the PSNI had made efforts to shift away from this, for example, by using drones to monitor contentious parades.

These issues were repeatedly raised by CNR stakeholders as factors contributing to low confidence in the police and reluctance to engage with the state.

5.27. The Northern Ireland Policing Board's Human Rights Annual Report has consistently raised the issue of stop and search.<sup>17</sup> While the PSNI's use of stop and search powers, including those in the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act, has been on a downward trajectory since 2015,<sup>18</sup> this issue still matters greatly to CNR communities and the perception that these powers are not being used fairly or proportionately is undermining trust in the PSNI. In his most recent report, the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 found the PSNI had made significant progress in terms of documenting the community background of those who are stopped and searched.<sup>19</sup> I hope that further progress in improving transparency and data collection in this area will help to strengthen

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17 <https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/files/nipolicingboard/2025-09/Final%20-%20Human%20Rights%20Annual%20Report%202024%2025.pdf>

18 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a2fb853c39255c595b5082c/IRJSA\\_-\\_18th\\_report\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a2fb853c39255c595b5082c/IRJSA_-_18th_report_Accessible.pdf)

19 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a2fb853c39255c595b5082c/IRJSA\\_-\\_18th\\_report\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a2fb853c39255c595b5082c/IRJSA_-_18th_report_Accessible.pdf)

transparency and public confidence in PSNI. I encourage the PSNI to give further consideration to how it can build public trust that stop and search powers are used fairly and proportionately.

## **Representation in policing**

5.28. Political, community and law enforcement stakeholders frequently told me that a police service that reflects the communities it serves is a critical part of strengthening confidence in policing. Many emphasised the need to improve representation from cohorts that are currently under-represented within the PSNI. This includes people from Catholic and ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as people from working-class backgrounds, which was particularly emphasised in my engagements. This issue was also considered by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in their report on Policing and security in Northern Ireland earlier this year, and I agree with much of the Committee's analysis.<sup>20</sup> I encourage the PSNI to continue to improve recruitment and retention of officers from communities which are currently under-represented within the service, including people from Catholic, ethnic minority, and working-class backgrounds.

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20 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/53253/documents/297859/default/>

# Criminal justice

5.29. Political, community and statutory stakeholders, including some people working in the criminal justice system, told me that the criminal justice system is often unable to respond effectively to organised crime. I heard the same thing from representatives of paramilitary groups. In their reports, the IRC has analysed these issues as they relate to paramilitarism in more detail, looking at court delay, bail decisions, appropriate sentences, restorative justice, the experiences of witnesses and victims, prison and probation, amongst other issues.<sup>21</sup> I am aware work is underway to address these issues, including the creation of new offences of directing and participating in organised crime, and believe it is critical that this continues at pace. A more effective and responsive criminal justice system which communities, victims and defendants can have greater confidence in is essential in its own right and it would also enable a formal process of group transition.

5.30. Republican paramilitary groups and some CNR community workers argued that while progress has been made, certain commitments in the 2010 Agreement between the Northern Ireland Prison Service and republican prisoners have not been

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21 <https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2025-02/IRC%20Seventh%20Report.pdf>

fully implemented. Another key issue was the operation of MARA, which were introduced in Northern Ireland in 2021 to assess and manage the risks posed by individuals convicted of terrorist-related offences. Some called for an independent review of MARA which would look at whether it was proportional and compatible with relevant legal standards and the principles of conflict transformation and fit for use in the specific context of Northern Ireland. An assessment of MARA falls outside of the remit of my exercise. I note that in June 2026, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland (CJINI) published a review of MARA and found that overall it provided an appropriate framework for managing the risks posed by individuals convicted of terrorist-related offences, but made a number of recommendations for improvement.<sup>22</sup> Careful attention must be paid to ensure that MARA reduces risk rather than entrenches resistance and does not feed a narrative that the state does not treat people from CNR communities fairly.

5.31. In my engagements with stakeholders within the criminal justice system, I also heard about the challenges facing the Northern Ireland Prison Service and I appreciate the difficulties of operating in a volatile environment. An effective prison system is another crucial element to ensuring the

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22 <https://www.cjini.org/reports/a-review-of-the-multi-agency-review-arrangements-in-northern-ireland/>

criminal justice system works and builds confidence with those who interact with it, and I believe the importance of this is well understood.

## **Lack of institutional capacity and low confidence in public institutions**

- 5.32. Lack of institutional capacity and confidence in institutions emerged repeatedly as a barrier to transition. Stakeholders frequently talked about their lack of confidence in the government, policing, and public services.
- 5.33. Many stakeholders linked confidence in any transition process to wider confidence in Northern Ireland's political institutions and political parties. While many acknowledged the historic achievements of the peace process, frustrations relating to political instability, high levels of politicisation and polarisation, periods without functioning institutions, slow decision-making and the ability of government to respond to long-standing challenges arose repeatedly as a significant barrier to creating an effective, formal group transition process.
- 5.34. Low trust was found across the board, but it emerged somewhat differently between traditions. PUL stakeholders expressed frustration and at times a sense of hopelessness and pain about how policies affecting the communities they live in are

developed and implemented. A recurring perception was that decisions are frequently made about their communities rather than with them, and that they are being looked down on. Representatives of loyalist paramilitary groups and loyalist community representatives felt that loyalist working class communities were demonised by the media and that there were virtually no good news stories about their areas.

- 5.35. Paramilitary groups argued that group transition could not be a one-sided process: the state must also make changes. For some republican paramilitary groups, the cause of these issues stretches back to the foundation of Northern Ireland, which no process of group transition would be able to address.
- 5.36. Both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups told me that the political parties in Northern Ireland do not represent their communities and generally did not see a feasible route for them to transfer their energies into exclusively political channels, though some expressed political aspirations. Some representatives of paramilitary groups commented that they had tried electoral politics in the past, with limited success.
- 5.37. Taken together, these findings suggest that confidence in efforts on group transition is linked to wider confidence in institutions. Many stakeholders argued that transition is not only about changing paramilitary groups, but also about confidence that

lawful institutions are willing and able to respond effectively to community concerns and manage change in a credible and consistent manner. Where that confidence is weak, support for transition becomes harder to build and sustain. Low levels of trust also help explain why questions of monitoring, accountability and demonstrating progress emerged repeatedly throughout consultations.

## **Paramilitary group coherence, leadership and sincerity**

- 5.38. Many stakeholders argued that the challenge is not just whether paramilitary groups are sincere about transitioning but also whether they still have sufficient authority, cohesion and organisational control to deliver it. To varying degrees, community, statutory and law enforcement stakeholders questioned whether paramilitary leaders possess the influence necessary to commit the groups to change and ensure decisions are implemented consistently. Community, political and statutory stakeholders often described structures that have become increasingly fragmented, localised and less capable of collective action than in the past.
- 5.39. A related concern was whether paramilitary leaders who support transition would be able to bring others with them. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted differences in outlook, incentives and priorities between generations, local groupings and those involved in criminality, with the risk that change at

leadership level may not translate into change on the ground.

5.40. This was closely linked to concerns regarding fragmentation and splintering. Many stakeholders warned that transition may not proceed uniformly and that some individuals or factions could remain involved in criminality, coercive control or other harmful activity even where significant progress is achieved elsewhere. Stakeholders argued that this risk cannot be eliminated but a process of group transition could still reduce harm in communities even if some members of paramilitary groups do not participate. There was also a view that if a transition process was available to those who genuinely want to transition, law enforcement would be better able to focus its resources on those who continue to engage in criminality.

## Legacy

5.41. Throughout my consultations, a wide range of stakeholders, including victims and survivors and paramilitary groups, raised issues relating to historical investigations, legacy processes, information recovery, future prosecutions and the potential legal consequences of engagement in any group transition process. These issues were often viewed as interconnected questions that would influence whether group transition was considered credible, safe and worth doing.

- 5.42. Some political and community stakeholders who were sceptical about paramilitary group transition were concerned that such a process would be for the benefit of paramilitary groups and contrasted this with the difficult situations of many victims, survivors and their families for whom legacy processes have not delivered.
- 5.43. Some stakeholders, including paramilitary groups, argued that for the purposes of information retrieval, it would be better if paramilitary groups retained some non-military structures and cohesion. It is important to emphasise that dismantling of military structures is a necessary part of group transition. Engaging with legacy bodies is one of the milestones which I am recommending as part of a formal transition process. Supporting victims, survivors and their families must be the guiding principle.

## **6. Advantages of a formal process of paramilitary group transition**

### **Greater clarity and a shared definition of success**

- 6.1. During this exercise, paramilitary groups and stakeholders who are engaging with the groups described practical transition actions which the groups had taken unilaterally. However, a broad range of stakeholders were sceptical of claims about positive changes. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the need to distinguish between those genuinely seeking to move away from paramilitarism and those whose activities should be labelled solely as organised crime. For many stakeholders this was both a matter of accountability and a means of enabling a more effective criminal justice response.
- 6.2. This suggests that one of the principal challenges is not necessarily willingness to engage in a formal transition process, which was sufficiently present in most paramilitary groups I engaged with, but rather clarity on what a process could look like, including how progress can be implemented, monitored, verified and assessed against realistic indicators of change.

- 6.3. A formal process could help establish a shared understanding of the outcomes being sought and how they should be measured. This would make it easier for paramilitary groups, communities, governments and the wider public to assess progress against agreed criteria. Such a framework would not eliminate disagreement. However, it could provide a clearer basis upon which progress, setbacks and success could be understood and assessed.
- 6.4. Independent monitoring and verification could help by providing greater transparency regarding commitments, activities and outcomes. For many stakeholders, independent monitoring was viewed as essential to building public and political confidence that claims of progress were credible, evidence-based and subject to appropriate scrutiny.
- 6.5. Several stakeholders suggested that confidence in such monitoring would depend not only upon its independence, but also upon the ability of the monitoring body to draw upon a sufficiently broad range of evidence and perspectives.

## **An authorised point for contact**

- 6.6. Another recurring theme discussed by paramilitary groups and some wider stakeholders was the absence of a recognised, authorised mechanism through which issues relating to transition could be raised, clarified or advanced with governments.

- 6.7. I heard about situations, ranging from relatively minor to more significant, in which uncertainty regarding who paramilitary groups could approach in relation to transition issues contributed to confusion, delay, and uncertainty on how potential progress could be discussed or furthered.
- 6.8. This suggests that the absence of an authorised point for contact for paramilitary group transition has had an impact. While the consequences varied, a range of stakeholders believed that opportunities to encourage, support, clarify or assess progress on transition had at times been constrained by the absence of a recognised point for contact on this. A formal mechanism could address this absence by including a contact point for questions and clarifications on transition as one of its functions.

## **A structured pathway**

- 6.9. While a further effort on paramilitary transition would inevitably involve risks and difficulties, where a credible opportunity exists to support an orderly movement away from paramilitarism through a fair, transparent and accountable process, it is worth making a genuine effort to pursue it. Based on my consultations, I have concluded that this opportunity currently exists in Northern Ireland.
- 6.10. In the absence of a framework, change occurs unevenly, informally and often without wider awareness or verification. A formal process would not eliminate all the difficulties and challenges

that will no doubt arise along the way, but it could provide greater clarity and a more coherent means of managing these challenges. A formal process has the potential to help manage decline, fragmentation, uncertainty, and opacity around drug-related and organised crime, with a more orderly, transparent and accountable transition.

## 7. Issues likely to arise

- 7.1. Even where paramilitary groups are willing to engage, and sufficient stakeholder support can be secured, a formal transition process would face a number of significant implementation challenges. Progress is unlikely to be linear, uniform or uncontested. Different groups may participate at different times, move at different speeds and encounter different challenges. These challenges are not necessarily arguments against transition in themselves: they reflect the complexity of managing a process involving paramilitary groups with different histories, structures, levels of readiness and relationships with communities and institutions.

### Participation challenges

- 7.2. From my consultations, it's clear that engagement by paramilitary groups is unlikely to occur uniformly or at the same pace. Some community stakeholders suggested that paramilitary groups which choose not to engage at the outset may seek to participate in a group transition process later. Paramilitary groups which are ready to sign up to a formal group transition process should be encouraged to do so without delay, and any group which wants to participate at a later stage should still be able to do so, within an agreed timeframe.
- 7.3. Different paramilitary groups have different relationships with and attitudes towards state

institutions. Issues relating to the rule of law, policing and national security, legitimacy, and confidence in public authorities emerged more prominently in some consultations than others. Such differences do not necessarily prevent engagement, but they may influence expectations, confidence-building requirements and perceptions of fairness during implementation. However, for any formal process to be credible, groups need to experience the same monitoring and verification throughout. Where a group is willing to engage in a formal transition process, the non-participation or reluctance of other groups should not prevent or delay their involvement.

- 7.4. Throughout my consultations, claims have been made regarding what proportion of organisations or individuals would ultimately engage in a future process. Despite good access and cooperation, I found such claims impossible to verify within the scope of this review. In practice, even partial progress can have meaningful impacts where it contributes to reducing violence, coercion and harm. Any future process should assume a degree of uncertainty regarding the scale and nature of participation. There will almost certainly be some level of non-participation if a process is established. The scale of that challenge will depend upon a range of factors, including the design of any process, wider political and societal developments and organisational dynamics. This will require active management throughout any future process.

# Organisational and operational challenges

- 7.5. Concerns regarding paramilitary group cohesion arose repeatedly throughout consultations. Stakeholders frequently questioned whether all paramilitary groups retain sufficient internal unity to sustain transition over time. Several noted that transition requires significant internal consultation, organisational change and a degree of collective decision-making. Based on my engagements, some paramilitary groups currently appear better prepared to undertake such a process than others.
- 7.6. Several stakeholders noted that transition may require paramilitary leaders and members to make difficult decisions regarding influence, authority, organisational structures and future purpose. In some cases, paramilitary leaders may be required to relinquish positions of authority, and existing structures will need to be substantially transformed or dismantled.
- 7.7. A recurring concern was that leadership support for transition may not necessarily translate into implementation at local level. Differences in outlook, incentives and priorities between generations, local structures and individuals involved in criminality created concern that transition could proceed unevenly even within paramilitary groups. Several stakeholders warned that poorly managed transition processes may widen divisions between those

prepared to engage and those unwilling to do so, increasing the risk of fragmentation, disengagement or the continuation of harmful activity by some individuals or factions.

## **Public confidence and visible progress**

7.8. From my engagement with stakeholders, it was clear that in addition to change, perception of change is also important for a potential future process. A recurring concern throughout my engagements was that if progress is not seen or felt by communities, confidence in the process may diminish even where meaningful change is taking place. For this reason, it is important that monitoring and verification take place and can give the public confidence progress is being made.

## **External and environmental challenges**

7.9. Political change, periods of institutional instability, changes in government priorities, pressures on policing and wider public sector resource constraints were all identified by stakeholders as factors capable of affecting confidence, momentum and the implementation of group transition irrespective of the progress being made by participating paramilitary groups.

- 7.10. Another concern raised across consultations was the possibility of a serious incident involving a paramilitary group, one of its members, or an individual claiming association with it. Such incidents could affect confidence in the wider process. Several stakeholders argued that a successful process would need to have sufficient resilience to absorb setbacks without allowing a single incident to derail broader progress.
- 7.11. Similarly, some stakeholders highlighted the possibility that episodes of serious public disorder or violent unrest could place transition efforts under considerable pressure. Stakeholders noted that such events would likely generate political and media scrutiny regarding the extent to which paramilitary groups had been involved in, influenced, facilitated or sought to prevent the activity.

## **Residual decommissioning issues**

- 7.12. Although stakeholders generally regarded decommissioning issues as unlikely to arise, they could occur during a formal transition process. This was recognised in the milestones identified by the IRC, which I have incorporated into the 11 milestones referenced in this report. Any transition process would need to be designed to allow a proportionate, effective response to any decommissioning issues which emerge.

## 8. Feasibility, advisability and merit

8.1. Having engaged extensively, my assessment is that a formal paramilitary group transition process is feasible, advisable and has merit. Such a process would not be straightforward and success cannot be guaranteed. However, the purpose of this scoping exercise was not to determine whether a formal process would be risk free or capable of resolving every remaining challenge associated with paramilitarism. It was to assess whether sufficient merit, support and willingness exist to justify pursuing such a process and whether it would represent a realistic means of achieving further progress.

### Feasibility

8.2. One of the things I found throughout this exercise was that there is more clarity than might be expected regarding both the problem and many of its potential solutions. While there is no consensus on every issue, I found broad agreement on the principal harms that remain, the barriers to progress, the risks that would need to be managed and many of the conditions most likely to support success.

8.3. I have concluded that there is sufficient support for a formal process of group transition. I encountered

a degree of scepticism, concern and caution but mostly moderate support. In my view, it is significant that some victims and survivors and some policing and security stakeholders were among the majority group that expressed moderate but conditional support. Overall, I found there was also a willingness to explore an additional approach, provided it was practical and certain conditions were met. The main conditions for support emerged clearly and can be considered in the design of any future process.

- 8.4. While outright opposition was a minority position overall, I did encounter strong and principled objections among some political, statutory and community stakeholders. Concerns included the risk of legitimising those responsible for continuing harm, doubts regarding whether a formal process reflects current realities, questions regarding value for money and competing pressures on public resources, and scepticism about whether such a process would ultimately succeed. These concerns are valid and many of the issues raised will have to be tested in practice and carefully managed in any formal process.
- 8.5. Among paramilitary groups I found significant willingness to engage with my exercise and discuss a more structured transition process. That finding is important when considering the feasibility of any future process.

- 8.6. The variations between paramilitary groups make for a complex picture which can be a challenge when designing a formal process. In this case however, there was significant agreement when discussions focused on practical outcomes, including reductions in violence, criminality, coercive control, recruitment, and informal systems of authority. This suggests the possibility of a unified framework with agreed milestones for a transition process.
- 8.7. Stakeholders also emphasised that transition should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing proposition. Partial reductions in violence, criminality, coercive control or recruitment were considered worthwhile.
- 8.8. Another important finding was the extent to which many of the conditions most likely to support success are already reasonably well understood. Community confidence and resilience, robust policing and justice, and political and community leadership were raised repeatedly throughout consultations. Some of this can be translated into elements important for a formal process to be feasible, such as independent monitoring and verification, an authorised point for contact and an agreed framework for paramilitary groups to transition.
- 8.9. Throughout this scoping exercise, a number of significant challenges were identified that are contextually relevant to any future process. Political

opposition remains significant in some quarters. Organised crime, fragmentation of paramilitary groups, institutional capacity constraints, competing policy priorities and low levels of trust all present genuine obstacles. These are serious challenges. Some can be anticipated and mitigated within an appropriately designed framework. Many also will have to be managed regardless of whether a formal process of transition is attempted. The political and institutional challenges associated with implementation should not be underestimated. Any future process would require sustained government attention, cooperation across institutions, and the ability to maintain confidence through periods of controversy and setback.

- 8.10. A formal process would undoubtedly face significant obstacles. But the findings suggest that the key elements required to make such a process viable are present, namely sufficient support, willingness to engage, an awareness of factors that can support or hinder success and an understanding of what a process could look like given the current context.

## **Advisability**

- 8.11. Advisability requires consideration not only of the costs and risks associated with transition, but also of those associated with continuing without a formal process. If it can be done, should it be done?

- 8.12. Continuing without a structured pathway for paramilitary group transition carries risks of its own. Stakeholders from all sectors pointed to organised crime, public disorder, fragmentation and continuing informal systems of authority as challenges that may become even harder to address if current dynamics continue. Concerns were raised regarding the speed with which disorder can escalate and the potential role of residual paramilitary networks and authority structures in influencing how such events develop. Many stakeholders were deeply affected by the anti-immigration unrest which has taken place in Northern Ireland over the last three years. I spoke to a range of policing, community and civil society stakeholders including people from minority communities about public disorder linked to racism and anti-immigration sentiment. I heard different views about the roles played by paramilitary groups and individuals linked to paramilitary groups in orchestrating, participating in and at times de-escalating these incidents. While paramilitary groups continue to exist in Northern Ireland, there remains a risk that paramilitary networks and structures can amplify disorder. Without an orderly end, residual paramilitary infrastructures and narratives may continue to adapt and attach themselves to emerging challenges in ways that create new risks for communities and individuals.
- 8.13. Stakeholders frequently argued that many of the conditions that make progress towards group

transition possible today may weaken over time. Support may diminish, leadership figures within paramilitary groups are ageing, organisational cohesion is changing, and opportunities can be lost when momentum dissipates.

- 8.14. My consultations suggest there is a window of opportunity to make further progress, and this window may not remain open indefinitely. While there is no guarantee that a formal process would succeed if pursued now, I believe it is an opportune moment to try given what I encountered during this exercise.
- 8.15. The question therefore is whether the risks of attempting a structured transition process outweigh those of unmanaged decline. My assessment is that they do not. Not attempting a formal transition process would mean foregoing a practical opportunity to proactively reduce harm and encourage further progress.

## **Merit**

- 8.16. The central question of this scoping exercise is whether there is merit in establishing a formal process to facilitate the transition of paramilitary groups. Efforts to reduce paramilitary harm already exist and have made significant progress. The issue is whether a formal transition process would add sufficient value to justify its establishment. Having considered everything I heard during my consultations, my assessment is that it would.

This conclusion does not rest on the assumption that such a process would be straightforward or universally supported, nor does it depend upon the belief that all remaining challenges associated with paramilitarism can be resolved through a single intervention.

- 8.17. Throughout my engagements, I rarely encountered confidence that existing approaches alone are likely to deliver all the remaining progress many stakeholders wish to see. This does not mean that existing efforts have failed. Northern Ireland has made substantial progress over many years through the efforts of communities, institutions, civic society, policing, political leadership, and individuals directly affected by paramilitary harm. Those efforts remain essential and should continue.
- 8.18. However, while considerable effort has been invested in community interventions and criminal justice measures, there has been no equivalent framework specifically designed to facilitate, monitor and assess progress towards paramilitary group transition itself. Community resilience measures and criminal justice responses remain indispensable, but they were not intended to provide what stakeholders repeatedly identified was missing: a recognised pathway through which transition can be pursued, assessed and verified. In my assessment, that absence has itself become a barrier to further progress.

- 8.19. The merit of a formal process lies not in replacing existing approaches, but in supplementing them. It would provide a mechanism through which group transition itself can be encouraged, structured, monitored and assessed while operating alongside continued investment in community resilience and robust criminal justice responses.
- 8.20. For that reason, I conclude that there is merit in establishing a formal process aimed at facilitating transition. It would provide a credible additional means through which further progress can be pursued, assessed and verified.

## 9. Independent transition mechanism

- 9.1. Based on my engagements as part of this scoping exercise, **I recommend the establishment of an independent, time-bound transition mechanism without delay. The UK government and the government of Ireland should work together to develop this mechanism.** Its purpose would be to provide a structured and accountable framework through which progress towards paramilitary group transition can be facilitated, monitored and verified.
- 9.2. A key finding of this scoping exercise was the absence of an authorised, independent and accountable route through which issues relating to transition can be raised, clarified and advanced. I encountered moderate support for and significant willingness to engage with a mechanism that is capable of addressing this gap, whilst continuing to support and strengthen existing efforts towards transition.

### Key features of the mechanism

- 9.3. The principal purpose of the mechanism would be to provide an independent, accountable and authorised body through which transition can be encouraged, supported, monitored, and verified. In doing so, it would help distinguish between

groups willing to engage credibly in transition arrangements and those who are not.

9.4. When establishing the mechanism, the UK and Irish governments should ensure that those appointed to the mechanism have sufficient credibility and relevant experience to be broadly acceptable across communities and traditions. Consideration should be given to incorporating both local and international experience and expertise.

9.5. The mechanism should:

- Be modest in scale, have a clear and focused purpose, and be time-bound;
- Be independent in order to command confidence across communities and stakeholders;
- Operate within clear legal parameters;
- Have access to policing, intelligence, government and all other relevant information as needed for monitoring and verification purposes; and,
- Ensure that community perspectives and lived experience inform its work.

9.6. The mechanism should not become a permanent institution. There should be an agreed end date by which participating paramilitary groups should have delivered on their commitments.

9.7. Consideration should also be given to the role of public statements by participating paramilitary

groups. While stakeholders throughout my engagement consistently prioritised demonstrable action over statements, a statement by paramilitary groups at the end of the transition process may provide clarity regarding commitments undertaken, progress achieved and the completion of transition. This would be additional to reporting by the mechanism on the delivery of commitments.

## **Functions of the mechanism**

9.8. The mechanism would have three core functions. While each is described separately, they are intended to operate together as part of a single organisation.

### *1. Authorised contact point*

9.9. One of the recurring themes I encountered throughout this scoping exercise was the absence of an authorised point for contact through which issues relating to transition could be raised, clarified or advanced. Stakeholders described situations in which uncertainty regarding how paramilitary groups could engage with relevant public authorities on issues related to transition contributed to delay, confusion and, on occasion, missed opportunities for progress.

9.10. Questions concerning what forms of engagement are possible, appropriate or legally protected arose repeatedly during this scoping exercise. Several stakeholders argued that an authorised point for contact could help provide greater clarity

regarding the operation of existing legal and policy frameworks relevant to paramilitary group transition.

- 9.11. The experience of this scoping exercise also suggests that opportunities for engagement do not always emerge in a predictable or orderly manner. Paramilitary groups or individuals who are initially unwilling to engage with the mechanism or sign up to the transition framework may become willing to do so at a later stage. The mechanism should therefore possess sufficient flexibility to accommodate changing circumstances while maintaining clear standards and expectations, including in relation to overall deadlines.
- 9.12. The mechanism would be an authorised point of contact through which issues relating to transition can be raised, clarified and advanced within clearly defined parameters. It should proactively engage to encourage groups to transition. This contact point should be able to engage on issues such as transition arrangements, the sequencing and implementation of transition commitments, guidance on regulations and legal frameworks relevant to transition, and anything else it deems relevant to a transition process.
- 9.13. The purpose of the authorised point of contact would not be negotiation, nor should it confer legitimacy on proscribed organisations. Rather, it would provide lawful, transparent and accountable

guidance within defined parameters in the interests of furthering progress towards transition.

- 9.14. The authorised point of contact should also be able to seek information and guidance from governments and other relevant bodies, as required, and there should be an onus to provide this information and guidance promptly once requested. As part of this, law enforcement and national security bodies should consider developing strategic guidance for their organisations on how to engage with any future transition mechanism to ensure a consistent approach.

## 2. A common transition framework

- 9.15. While considerable agreement exists regarding the practical outcomes associated with successful paramilitary group transition, there is currently no recognised process through which those outcomes can be translated into structured commitments, milestones, indicators and assessments, and, crucially, give confidence to communities.
- 9.16. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed out that geographical areas, groups and sub-groups are in different situations. A common framework is therefore necessary, but implementation must be capable of reflecting differing local realities. The framework and any associated arrangements should be shaped by the same principled commitment to ending paramilitary harm.

9.17. The mechanism should therefore oversee the development of structured transition arrangements with paramilitary groups willing to engage in the transition process. These arrangements should include agreed commitments, indicators of progress, timelines, reporting and monitoring arrangements, and defined end-states that reflect local realities while remaining consistent with a common overarching framework. Political, statutory and community stakeholders should give input to ensure the arrangements will deliver meaningful and positive change for communities.

9.18. The framework should be based on the eleven milestones for progress on transition identified earlier in this report:

- Ending recruitment to paramilitary groups;
- Giving up paramilitary structures and activity;
- Ceasing mobilisation of members;
- Ceasing to exercise coercive power and control in communities;
- Ending of all paramilitary style attacks and all other forms of violence, threat of violence or intimidation;
- Disposal of any remaining weaponry and material;
- Allowing people to exit from paramilitarism without cost or consequence;

- Publicly supporting the PSNI and criminal justice system in tackling criminality and committing to democracy and the rule of law; and
- Engaging with legacy bodies.
- Plus:
- Dealing with physical signs of paramilitary influence in communities; and,
- Ending all paramilitary-linked criminality.
- Once the mechanism is established, those overseeing the development of the framework may wish to consider additional elements.

9.19. The mechanism should recognise that transition may not occur in a cohesive or uniform manner and consideration should be given to possible group, sub-group and individual pathways that support people seeking to move away from paramilitary involvement.

### 3. Monitoring, verifying and reporting

9.20. A recurring finding throughout this scoping exercise was that claims of progress are often difficult to verify. Independent monitoring, verification and reporting, via a mechanism, would help provide transparency, public confidence and greater clarity regarding progress, while helping to ensure that progress is assessed consistently over time.

9.21. Some of the most important indicators of progress in paramilitary group transition may also be the

least directly observable. A central challenge is therefore not only determining whether violence has reduced, but assessing whether the capacity, structures and incentives that sustain coercive control are being dismantled, transformed or displaced by something more positive. In this respect, both material and behavioural transition are a part of the process, and both present challenges for monitoring and verification.

9.22. For that reason, any future mechanism should combine clear agreed transition commitments and timelines for each paramilitary group with informed qualitative analysis of progress. Such analysis should draw upon a range of relevant sources, including any available quantitative information.

9.23. To carry out its monitoring and verification functions credibly, the mechanism should have appropriate access to relevant security, policing and government information. However, its work should not rely solely on such sources. The impact and influence of paramilitary groups are experienced most directly within communities. Community perspectives, lived experience and local knowledge should therefore form an important part of the information considered by the mechanism, including input from victims and survivors. Broader engagement with stakeholders, including those consulted during this scoping exercise, should also contribute to the triangulation of information and assessment of progress.

9.24. The mechanism should publish periodic public reports. These reports should outline whether participating paramilitary groups are meeting their commitments, whether progress is on track and whether any groups have joined, withdrawn from or ceased participation in the process.

# 10. Recommendations

## Principal recommendation

- 10.1. Based on my engagements, **I recommend the establishment of an independent, time-bound transition mechanism without delay. The UK government and the government of Ireland should work together to develop this mechanism.**
- 10.2. Its purpose would be to provide a structured and accountable framework through which progress towards paramilitary group transition can be facilitated, monitored and verified. The mechanism would have three core functions:
  1. Authorised contact point  
The mechanism should provide an authorised point of contact through which issues relating to transition can be raised, clarified, and advanced.
  2. A common transition framework  
The mechanism should oversee the development of structured transition arrangements with paramilitary groups who engage in the transition process. This should be based on agreed commitments, indicators of progress, timelines, reporting, monitoring, and defined end-states.

### 3. Monitoring, verifying and reporting

The mechanism should provide independent monitoring and verification of progress, including modest periodic public reporting. This would improve transparency, strengthen accountability and help build public confidence in the process.

## Considerations for implementation and further recommendations

- 10.3. A formal process of paramilitary group transition would not operate in isolation. Throughout my consultations, it was consistently emphasised that effective policing, robust criminal justice responses and strong and resilient communities are not only a crucial goal in themselves but also enabling conditions for a formal transition process.
- 10.4. Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of ensuring that the PSNI commands community confidence and is able to police with communities in ways that communities experience first-hand.
- 10.5. Neighbourhood policing is particularly important in this respect. **I recommend strengthening neighbourhood policing so that officers can maintain a sustained focus on their core role within the communities they serve.**
- 10.6. Another policing issue which came up frequently in my engagements was the importance of a police service that reflects the communities it

serves. I encourage the PSNI to continue to improve recruitment and retention of officers from communities which are currently under-represented within the service, including people from Catholic, ethnic minority and working-class backgrounds.

10.7. Stop and search was another important issue, particularly for CNR communities, and I encourage the PSNI to give further consideration to how it can build public trust that stop and search powers are used fairly and proportionately.

10.8. Throughout my consultations, stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of strengthening those communities most affected by paramilitary harm, without reinforcing gatekeeping, dependency or coercive control. Amongst other community strengthening initiatives, **I recommend targeted and sustained initiatives aimed at benefitting young people.** This is particularly important for looking ahead and furthering a sense of optimism in communities affected by paramilitary harm. This should include initiatives that:

- Empower young people in the communities most affected by paramilitarism;
- Support future community leadership;
- Strengthen pathways into education and good jobs;
- Encourage participation in civic and democratic life; and,

- Reduce vulnerability to criminal recruitment and exploitation.

# Appendix: Terms of Reference

## Purpose and objectives

The objective of the Independent Expert is, through 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 and to produce a report by mid-August 2026.

The Independent Expert will carry out their work in line with the overarching objectives of the IRC which are:

- promoting progress towards ending paramilitary activity; and
- supporting long term peace and stability in society and stable and inclusive devolved Government in Northern Ireland.

In carrying out their functions, the Independent Expert will be mindful throughout of the overarching vision of the Fresh Start Agreement for the “continued transformation of our society,” and the goal of “the primacy of the democratic political process in Northern Ireland and the ending of paramilitarism” as well as the recommitment to tackling paramilitarism made by the parties in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement in 2020.

# Functions

To achieve their objective, the Independent Expert will carry out a programme of exploratory engagement with inter alia:

- representatives of communities affected by paramilitarism, including victims of paramilitary activity;
- representatives of wider society in Northern Ireland;
- representatives of the statutory agencies likely to have a role in aspects of implementation of a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at facilitating their disbandment;
- representatives of paramilitary groups who have an interest in ending the violence and wider harms caused by paramilitary groups.

To achieve their objective the Independent Expert will consider through this programme of engagement, inter alia, the following:

- issues that are currently perceived or presented as a barrier and issues that could enable paramilitary group transition to disbandment;
- the advantages and disadvantages of a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at facilitating their transition to disbandment;
- the feasibility and advisability of such a formal process;

- levels of willingness to engage in a formal process;
- expectations of what would be achieved through participation in such a process;
- the issues likely to arise over the course of a formal process of engagement; and,
- the extent to which such a process would substantially contribute to furthering the commitments of the Fresh Start Agreement to work collectively to achieve a society free of paramilitarism.

The Independent Expert will produce a report by mid-August 2026 setting out what could be in scope of a formal process that ensures the transition to disbandment of paramilitary groups and the levels of public support for such a process. This should include recommendations on whether there would be merit in establishing a formal process of engagement with paramilitary groups aimed at facilitating their transition towards disbandment, and if so, how such a formal process could be established to have the highest chance of success including in terms of structure, milestones, timeframe and reporting/verification arrangements.

The Independent Expert should reflect in their report, based on what they have heard through their engagement, on alternative or additional approaches which could help promote progress towards ending paramilitary harm and activity and support long term peace and stability in NI and may merit further consideration.

# Approach and delivery

In carrying out the functions described above, the Independent Expert will engage the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and respective law enforcement agencies, the NI Executive and other statutory agencies, local councils, political parties, communities, and civic society organisations in order to understand their perspectives on the issue.

The Independent Expert will have a strong focus in their work on recommendations aimed at promoting and supporting practical, comprehensive and effective trauma-informed measures and initiatives that aim to bring about the continued transformation of society envisioned in the Fresh Start Agreement.

Throughout their scoping and engagement, the Independent Expert should actively encourage the ending of all paramilitary and criminal activity. They should make clear that PSNI and their partners will continue to work to bring those involved in paramilitary criminality to justice and that group behaviours will be taken as an indication of levels of commitment to transition to disbandment, in particular, supporting the police and criminal justice system in tackling criminality, including drug dealing, extortion, and child criminal and sexual exploitation. The Independent Expert should remind their interlocutors that the IRC and others have been clear about the behaviours that would demonstrate a commitment to moving from violence and harm and these include:

- Ending recruitment to paramilitary groups;

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



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