

Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee

Inquiry into Policing in Northern Ireland

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I wish to thank the Committee for its invitation to submit views in this Inquiry.

My remarks will be based on my experience in previous and current roles:

- as Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements for Northern Ireland until 2024;
- Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2005, until 2024;
- ongoing experience of supporting paramilitary transition in Northern Ireland from 2021 and latterly with International Peace Education Resources (IPER).

IPER is a small registered charity focused on supporting paramilitary transition in Northern Ireland with a range of international expertise in armed conflict, peacebuilding, conflict resolution and community development. IPER's work is documented in annual reports and regular reports to the Independent Reporting Commission and these are available on the IPER website.

The main focus of our work is on building pathways to paramilitary transition. This involves working closely with those associated with those in paramilitary groups who are intent on transition out of paramilitarism on the one hand, and the PSNI and housing authorities on the other. Since July 2025, this also includes work in Ballymena prior and subsequent to the recent riots. At the request of the local PSNI and in the absence of other sources of support, we have worked directly with some of those who have been protesting.

Issues in ending paramilitarism

Paramilitarism will be ended by, *inter alia*, building trust and confidence between the police and marginalised communities where people continue to turn to paramilitaries to perform local ‘policing’ functions. The police and housing authorities work together with some of the most marginalised and fragmented communities to build relationships of trust and establish clear lines of communication in order to improve community safety. One of the anxieties of those associated with the armed groups who are motivated to transition is that, should they leave the field, organised crime gangs and other criminals will move into territory where they have previously been gatekeepers. Our work is to establish relationships between those in these groups, their communities and the authorities so that as the paramilitary groups step back, the police and other authorities step forward.

As the work of targeting drug dealing, intimidation and violent disorder progresses, it has become clear that policing structures and policies do not always serve this work, and the shortcomings and lost opportunities within policing become ever more clear. Those shortcomings notwithstanding, there are dedicated, talented and resourceful officers at every level in the PSNI determined to take this work forward and to implement change where it is required.

At this stage of the work, it has now possible to begin to develop a formal policy for Policing Paramilitary Transition based on the experience of the last few years. Some of that policy has to do with internal policing matters and the complexities of relating lawfully to proscribed organisations, and that is a matter for the PSNI.

A particular priority is to improve the reach and credibility of policing in the most marginalised and disengaged communities. Confidence in all state agencies is virtually non-existent in the communities in which we work. Their experience of policing, as they describe it, is one of being the target of law enforcement activity on the one hand and of non-response when called upon by the community on the other.

Marginalisation and disengagement from most, if not all authorities are *necessary*, if not *sufficient*, characteristics of communities affected by paramilitarism. Authorities working to engage these communities serve several functions. They (gradually, as they gain trust)

replace paramilitary ‘authority’ with that of the legitimate authorities of the PSNI and other agencies. This equips the community with functioning relationships with the appropriate agencies, whilst improving the understanding of those agencies of the needs and priorities of those in the community. It also empowers and builds social capital in communities where it has been sadly lacking.

From discussions both with the PSNI and individuals and groups in the community, it is clear that certain policing policies and processes currently in operation do not serve our common goal of ending paramilitarism. Some arrangements impede the work of the PSNI in spite of their strong commitment and dedication to building these networks. In a number of places, the police have earned trust in some of the most alienated communities. The changes proposed here arise out of the lessons we have learned by working in those communities alongside the PSNI. The amendments that we propose aim to improve the effectiveness of those working to improve confidence in police and community engagement more generally.

The remainder of this paper will address:

1. Policies and practices and
2. Broader policing structures.

It will conclude by addressing two issues:

3. The effectiveness of the National Crime Agency, PSNI and other agencies in tackling organised crime and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland;
4. The risks and opportunities associated with a process for the disbandment of paramilitary groups which the forthcoming independent scoping exercise should consider; And the lessons should be learnt from previous attempts at paramilitary disbandment.

1. Policies and practices

1.1 We advocate:

- a. Exponentially enhanced investment in community policing as the primary method of policing. Locally based community policing should be the primary interface with the general public.
- b. Target and prioritize marginalized communities, high crime areas and areas affected by multiple deprivations for enhanced community policing allocations and community relations interventions such as leadership training for young people, etc.
- c. Create career pathways for community policing **as community policing officers** to avoid losing community knowledge and expertise by officers moving in order to get promotion.
- d. Aim for a geographically stable police force. Local community knowledge is specialist knowledge, relationships of trust with the community are a policing resource. Stop moving officers around - it disrupts relationship building and prevents the growth of trust and confidence

1.2 Ensure that the district commander is the most senior operations officer – all policing interventions in his or her district are under his or her control and he or she is accountable for them. This includes centrally operated units such as the Paramilitary Crime Task Force.

1.3 Allied to this, review all policies in relation to intelligence sharing within the PSNI. Currently, District Commanders are not briefed on all PSNI operations in their District. The sharing of information, power and control should be determined by policing goals, not by officer kudos. This lack of communication can lead to mistakes, such as going to the wrong address and undermines collegiality.

1.4 In the interests of improving community relations and in the light of funding realities (NI Policing costs £300 per capita pa/ England and Wales £200 per capita pa. and the vanishing likelihood of more funding) encourage communities to take responsibility for community safety by:

- 1.4.1 Establishing and promoting schemes that involve civilians in community safety work either as volunteers or as paid staff
- 1.4.2 Enhancing and extending the roles of community safety wardens and encourage proactive patrolling and liaison with the statutory services including the police

- 1.4.3 Encouraging volunteering in the community on community safety, such as community first responders and community schemes such as Heart of Foyle first responders
- 1.4.4 Encouraging those currently engaged in community safety work (including former combatants) to establish and participate in formal schemes such as these.

2. Broader policing structures: accountability

Mechanisms for policing accountability in Northern Ireland, whilst well designed offering great potential for a partnership approach to policing, have not entirely delivered on their promise. They are complex, with three bodies, the PSNI, the DOJ and the Northern Ireland Policing Board in a tripartite relationship. Whilst this appears to be work at one level, these arrangements are at the mercy of the dysfunctionality of politics in Northern Ireland where control of policing has long been a political football.

The Sweeney review¹ of the central accountability mechanism, the Northern Ireland Policing Board, (NIPB) found that:

‘The real or perceived dominant political culture of the Board is impeding the maturation of collective responsibility, cohesion, common purpose and corpocracy within the Board.’

Pointing to the Scoffield judgement² Sweeney emphasised the importance of operational independence of the PSNI. This operational independence requires constant vigilance in a system where the overall accountability systems include politicians as divided as those in Northern Ireland.

The domination of public sessions of the NI Policing Board by politicians at the expense of the participation of the independent members was also remarked on by Sweeney who

¹ Paul Sweeney: REVIEW OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD Submission to the Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA 20th January 2025

² Scoffield, J: Reference [SCO12247](#). Delivered 29th August 2023. In the matter of an application by “JR 168” and “JR168A” for Judicial Review.

pointed out that “the political representatives ... often focus on partisan or constituency issues.” Sweeney also makes a range of practical and sensible recommendations about the relationships between the PSNI, the NIPB and the Department of Justice (DOJ) aimed at resolving other ongoing relational difficulties between these entities. He also recommended changes to the appointment process.

The potential for the accountability systems of policing to impede progress on ending paramilitarism by additional mechanisms is substantial. We have already seen prominent politicians vocally decry the appointment by the two governments of the Independent Expert as ‘madness’³.

2.1 Policing Community Safety Partnerships PCSPs

Patten’s Police Community Safety Partnerships at district level offer the prospect of strong links between the police and local communities through working in partnership with local councils and community organisations. The promise of these systems has yet to be fully realised.

Where local political representatives engage closely in their constituencies and bring local issues into PCSPs, and where PCSPs see their role as a bridge between the police and the local community, the system works well. Here too, however, party political issues disrupt the realisation of this function, distracting and diverting energy away from the practical issues of policing as a public service. Whilst there are also examples of good practice as a result of excellent local leadership both on the part of the PSNI and the willingness of local leaders to take risks, substantial improvements could be made. We suggest that PSCPs:

- Train members in policing functions, challenges and their role, both as induction training and in-service training.
- Build in reporting and recording mechanisms whereby PCSP members are required to feed back to their constituencies and raise their constituencies’ concerns.

³ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/unthinkable-and-madness-long-blasts-governments-plan-for-formal-talks-on-paramilitary-transition/a1248176215.html>

The Committee also asked that a number of specific questions, two of which we address here.

3. How effective is the National Crime Agency in tackling organised crime and paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, working in cooperation with the PSNI and other agencies?

As was set out in my three reports⁴ to parliament as Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act (2005) the policing of paramilitarism has succeeded in **containing**, but not **ending** paramilitarism, which was the stated goal of the Fresh Start initiative. It is clear that paramilitarism will not end through arrest and prosecution alone, although law enforcement plays a key role in this containment, especially where paramilitarism overlaps and is enmeshed in organised crime. The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) comment in their fifth report:

“... the reality is that there remains much to be concerned about, and much work to be done in ending paramilitarism definitively. We remain concerned about the risks posed to society by the continuing existence of paramilitary structures and groups which can be harnessed for the purposes of violence or the threat of violence.⁵”

To end paramilitarism definitively will require engagement with the paramilitary groups and a fresh initiative aimed at their disarmament, demobilisation and civilianisation. We anticipate the report of Fleur Ravensbergen as the Independent Expert who will report on the issue of paramilitary transition.

⁴

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63170c188fa8f5021841c4ca/E02756398_IRJSA_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf;
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64fb1164572780000d251804/15th_Annual_Report_of_Independent_Reviewer_of_Justice_Security.pdf;
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6707e0c2366f494ab2e7b6ab/E03213039_IRJSA_Report_2024_Web_Accessible_2.pdf

⁵ <https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2023-03/IRC%20Fifth%20Report%20-%20Web%20Accessible.pdf>

4. What are the risks and opportunities associated with a process for the disbandment of paramilitary groups which the forthcoming independent scoping exercise should consider? And what lessons should be learnt from previous attempts at paramilitary disbandment?

Based on the evidence of previous attempts at ending paramilitarism and on discussions with those currently closely associated with the remaining groups, there are a number of risks and consequent lessons that are associated with attempts at ending paramilitarism. First, the splitting of paramilitary groups occurs in the ordinary course of events, through rivalries, territoriality and internal power struggles and is part of an international trend amongst armed groups elsewhere. I set out an assessment of paramilitary groups and sub groups in Northern Ireland in my evidence⁶ and a later submission⁷ to a previous Select Committee Inquiry in 2022 and much of that analysis still holds good.

The landscape of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is already highly fragmented, with even the groups that claim the greatest cohesion, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) parting company with their East Belfast company in recent times. This fragmentation has resulted in a diminution of knowledge and intelligence about the identity and membership of groups, their goals, capacity, orientation and disposition towards other groups. Paramilitarism is also highly differentiated by geography, with levels of violence two or three times greater in the Belfast area than in the rest of the province. Table 3 shows the per capita rates of violence in Belfast compared with the rest of Northern Ireland (Source: PSNI / Breen-Smyth and Dean, 2025)

Table 3: Per capita rates of paramilitary attacks: Belfast -v- rest of Northern Ireland.

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/11925/pdf/>

⁷ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/117412/pdf/>

All Attacks Per 10,000 population Belfast -v- rest of NI 2001-2022				
Year	Region	Attacks	Population	Attacks per 10,000
2015	Belfast	40	340,194	1.18
	NI	48	1,514,900	0.32
2016	Belfast	45	341,111	1.32
	NI	40	1,525,000	0.26
2017	Belfast	43	341,915	1.26
	NI	58	1,533,200	0.38
2018	Belfast	29	343,690	0.84
	NI	39	1,542,500	0.25
2019	Belfast	23	345,391	0.67
	NI	62	1,553,200	0.4
2020	Belfast	21	344,994	0.61
	NI	36	1,555,500	0.23
2021	Belfast	15	344,992	0.43
	NI	36	1,559,500	0.23
2022	Belfast	10	348,005	0.29
	NI	23	1,562,400	0.15

The prospect of the demise is likely to exacerbate pre-existing tensions within the group, on top of which new tensions arise from the potential differences in disposition of members towards the prospect of the group's disbandment. Thus, some degree of further fragmentation can be anticipated.

Lessons from previous processes indicate that time spent by leaders in extensively preparing, consulting and persuading with their membership is necessary to mitigate the risks of such splitting. This consultation and persuasion is an important function of leaders throughout the time the arrangements for disengagement are being agreed and put in place. Efforts to keep members in the tent is a function of leadership, who require the understanding of the authorities and outside observers. In past processes, leaders undertaking such consultations were characterised by some as laggardly and reluctant. Deadlines and the ability to meet them will be an important aspect of any future process, as it was in past processes. However overly rigid adherence to tight deadlines risks the collapse of the entire process. Balancing these factors is a complex and delicate challenge, requiring both the power to provide or withdraw incentives, knowledge of the parties to the process and the skills to negotiate and mediate complex processes.

Paramilitary groups have in the past relied on criminal activity to raise funds for their operations. Any transition process will require all criminality on the part of the transiting group to end. Disaggregating the politically motivated cadres from those intent on personal gain and criminality presents a further challenge. Here, community intelligence in addition to existing sources may be an asset. Alongside this, it is also essential that the PSNI improve and extend their investigative capacity in order to establish a live intelligence picture of paramilitarism in all its complexity. An unequivocal approach to criminality and the ability to effectively enforce the ordinary criminal law as part of the transition process will provide positive incentives for those paramilitants who are ambivalent about the prospect of disengagement.

It is also inevitable that some paramilitary members will choose to remain on the wrong side of the law, for reasons of personal gain or as dissenting political actors. It is essential that the issue of taking weapons out of circulation is addressed at as early a stage as possible and is done simultaneously across all groupings participating in the transition process. The lessons of the past indicate that dealing with the issue of weapons with one cohort whilst delaying (for years) addressing it with others is likely to have adverse consequences in the long run.

There are several important implications of any transition process for policing policy and practice. Even a moderately successful paramilitary transition process will entail a shift in police enforcement from the Terrorism Act 2000 to the ordinary criminal law. Should members of transitioning groups fail to take an opportunity to transition and opt to take a criminal path, this will require an adjustment in policing practice to take account of the less extensive powers available under the criminal law. Those paramilitary groups who can be transitioned in more or less intact form will present less of a policing challenge. It will also allow criminality to be represented as such, without a flag to hide behind. It will also allow policing and the criminal justice system to focus on addressing new, emerging and challenging forms of political violence and terror, such as that emerging from the Far Right both on social media and on the streets.

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