



Department of
Justice
An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Männystrie O tha Laa
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04 September 2024

REFERENCE: FOI\24\100

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your request for information received by the Department of Justice on the 20th August 2024, detailed below: -

Dear FOI Team:

FOI request relating to comprehensive data and harm collected through work of the tackling paramilitarism programme Sponsor Group

With reference to the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme ("the Programme"), the Sixth Report of the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC), published December 2023 sets out at paragraph 3.4 that a "senior **Sponsor Group** is chaired by the Head of the Civil Service, bringing together senior leaders from various Departments and agencies responsible for [the work of the Programme]. It continues [emphasis added] "Sponsors are responsible for championing the Programme in their business areas and for considering and addressing relevant factors that will either accelerate or slow progress towards outcomes, including the broader policy landscape, strategic enablers, risks and obstacles. Sponsors have specific responsibilities to address gaps or blockers to progress, informed by evidence and data.

Areas they have been working on in the past year include:

data and evidence gathering: comprehensive data on vulnerability and harm being collected, shared and assessed more effectively to enable a joined-up approach to tackling paramilitarism,..

This is a freedom of information request from CAJ asking for the following:

1A: Does the Department hold a document setting out the scope (for example the a terms of reference document) of the 'data and evidence gathering' work set out above.

1B: A copy of the document(s) captured by request 1A.

2A : What data on vulnerability and harm does the Department hold that has been collected (and possibly shared and assessed) as a result of the above process.

2B: A copy of the document(s) captured by request 2A.

The date range of the request is from 1 January 2023 to present. The request excludes from scope the personal data of junior officials that may appear on such documents, which we are content to be redacted.

Section 16 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 states: "16 Duty to provide advice and assistance. (1) It shall be the duty of a public authority to provide advice and assistance, so far as it would be reasonable to expect the authority to do so, to persons who propose to make, or have made, requests for information to it." Accordingly, we would appreciate any advice and assistance in our request, should it be necessary to clarify scope. We are presently unsighted as to the amount of material in particular the second request may capture and could narrow the request accordingly as to the specific details we are seeking. In particular we are interested in obtaining data on paramilitary harms and vulnerability related to victims of intimidation.

The same FOI request has been submitted to TEO.

Daniel Holder

Director

Request

Response

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives you two rights of access when you write to us asking for information. You have the right to know whether we hold recorded information falling in scope of your request, and you have the right to receive this recorded information subject to cost limit or exemption.

In relation to the information you have requested, please be advised that the Department does not hold any recorded information in scope of your request. This is because the Sponsor Group is for the cross-Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) rather than the Department of Justice.

The EPPOC Programme Team has provided the following information related to your request. We hope it is useful in setting out the broad, iterative work underway within the Programme and how the Programme is seeking to bring more clarity to a highly complex issue, as well as setting out the nature, volume and many different sources of information that the Programme collects and draws upon.

If, further to receiving this information, you feel a meeting and/or a more detailed discussion with the Programme Team would help you to refine a further request, or you would like to receive a briefing on the Programme as a whole, or specific aspects of it, the Programme Team would be happy to do so.

Background to the Programme

The Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme (the Programme) was established in 2016 to deliver 38 commitments for the Northern Ireland Executive from The Executive Action Plan. A total of £50 million was pledged over five years to support delivery of the Action Plan. Delivery involved Government Departments, law enforcement agencies, local councils and community and voluntary sector partners working together.

A review of the Programme in 2020 captured achievements to date. The review is available at [tackling-paramilitary-term-review.pdf \(endingtheharm.com\)](https://tackling-paramilitary-term-review.pdf(endingtheharm.com)). It noted that most of the original Executive Action Plan commitments had been addressed in full or in part, although some were delayed due to the absence of an Executive. This review took account of the extensive learning to date and set out a proposed new approach for the next Phase of the Programme. This was then agreed and jointly funded by the NI Executive and UK Government up to March 2025.

The review noted:

As the Programme has developed there has been learning developed through projects delivered. There has also been greater awareness of the issues which need to be addressed and the evidence base which could apply. There is a clear need to bring that fully to bear to develop initiatives which test some of that evidence and best practice in the Northern Ireland context. In recommending a research function, the reviewed noted it should have the aim of:

- promoting greater understanding of complex issues;
- agreeing and measuring the scope of paramilitary activity;
- identifying new solutions;
- identifying local areas and issues; and
- generating new learning.

Some of the ways in which these aims could be realised are:

- research and best practice papers;
- collection and analysis of data;
- commissioning new experimental initiatives more in keeping with the original ambition of the Action Plan to seek and apply innovation.

The design of phase 2 of the Programme was a collaborative effort between the Programme Team and delivery partners. Drawing on literature from prevention and countering violent extremism, gang, and youth violence interventions, as well as the practical and lived experiences of delivery partners, a public health approach to violence reduction was developed¹. A key element of a public health approach is refining interventions and solutions drawing on data, research, evaluation and lived experience. It also looks at the risk and protective factors relating to vulnerability and harm.

Understanding Paramilitarism, vulnerability and harm in Northern Ireland

The 2020 review acknowledged that “there is no single view on what paramilitarism or a paramilitary is in contemporary times”. For many years, security situation statistics from PSNI² were the primary method used to measure the extent of paramilitarism in NI. While useful, these provided only a partial glimpse into a complex multi-faceted situation. From 2021, when Phase 2 of the Programme started, efforts have been made to gradually expand the collective understanding of paramilitarism. This has focused on gathering more information, both qualitative and quantitative, on paramilitarism/ organised crime and vulnerability and harm.

Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is a complex phenomenon that causes many types of harm. Some are obvious and visible and have been well documented through research

¹ [Violence Prevention Alliance Approach \(who.int\)](https://www.vpa.ie/violence-prevention-alliance-approach)

² <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/security-situation-statistics>

and statistics (the top layers of the typology triangle below at Figure One). Some harms are less visible but still have a substantial impact on communities and individuals (the middle layers of the triangle). Some are much more subtle and less obvious (the bottom parts of the triangle). The Programme aims to address all these issues, drawing upon international evidence of what works and combining it with innovative local practice. It should be noted that the typology is likely to evolve over time and become more detailed as more information is gathered.

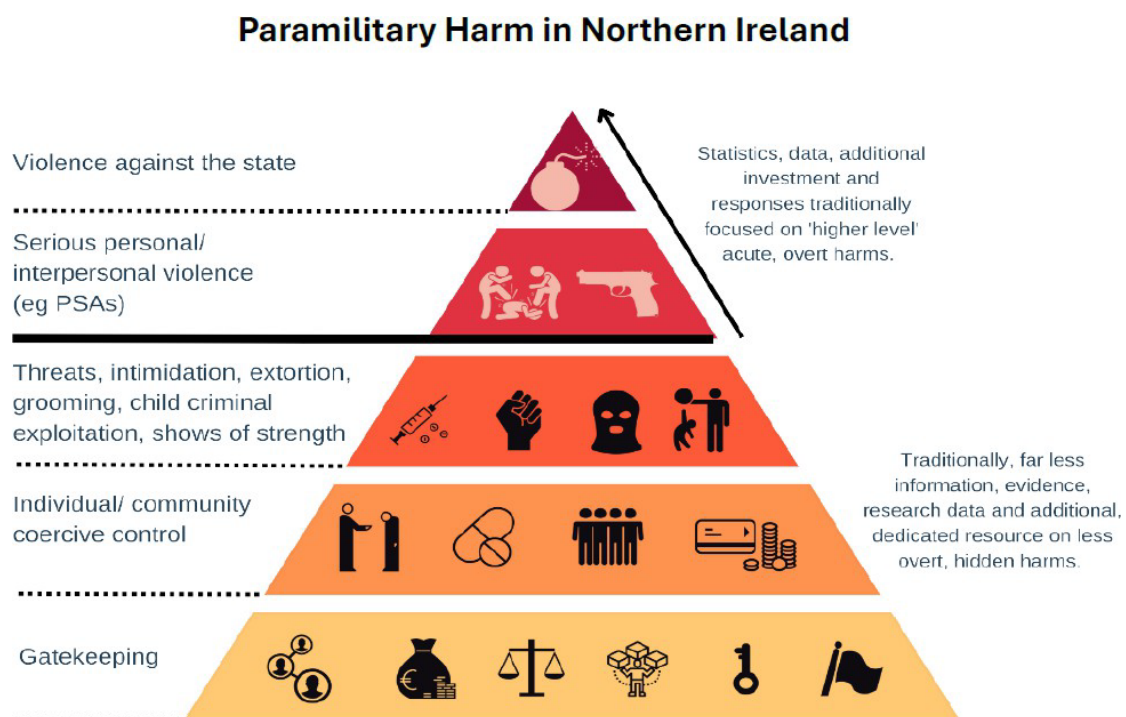


Figure One: Typology of Paramilitary Harm

During Phase 2 of the Programme, the Programme Team has been analysing different sources of information to better understand the complex issue of paramilitarism and associated harm and vulnerability in the context of a public health approach. There has been a strong focus on gathering qualitative data to understand the risk and protective factors for both individuals and communities. This is not something that can be achieved quickly – it is a constant process of sense-making and building understanding, drawing

on different sources of information. By encouraging and facilitating collaborative working across the Executive, the Programme is developing a more comprehensive understanding of the types of harm caused by paramilitarism and organised crime and what works best to address it. This ranges from strategic discussions about how to ensure that vulnerable individuals access support, and the role investment and collaboration plays in that through to more granular project-level detail about vulnerability / harm (i.e. when young people are most likely to present in A&E because of paramilitary harm (and, therefore, when statutory services are likely to be in greatest demand³). More information on this can be found below.

Population Level Data and Information

Since 2017 the Programme has commissioned questions relating to paramilitarism and community safety in the NI Life and Times Survey and Young Life and Times Survey⁴. These are robust measures of population-level attitudes.

Paramilitarism remains a pervasive but relatively localised phenomenon, at least in terms of serious, acute harms (violence against the person). Very few areas of Northern Ireland have not seen a paramilitary incident, or the presence of paramilitary groups. Data from the NI Life and Times Survey shows that paramilitary harm continues to affect 20-40% of the adult population and 20-45% of young people. This can rise to as much as 80% in some areas⁵. Amongst young people in NI, 11% agree that paramilitaries have control in their area and 10% agree that young people are influenced too much by paramilitary gangs (14% of adults believe the latter to be true⁶).

The Programme plans to continue to examine and refine our understanding of population level data. Some of these measures are reflected in the Programme End Benefits, or

³ Walsh, C. (Accepted/Inpress). *Connect. A relational, youth work hospital based violence intervention programme in Northern Ireland*. Education Authority for Northern Ireland.

⁴ <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/comsafety.html> and <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/results/yltcomsafety.html>

⁵ [Communities in Transition Area Reports - Co-operation Ireland \(cooperationireland.org\)](https://www.cooperationireland.org/)

⁶ <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/comsafety.html> and <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/results/yltcomsafety.html>

population-level outcomes. These are the long-term outcomes which the Programme has limited direct control of or influence on, but which are monitored as one way of determining strategic progress over time.

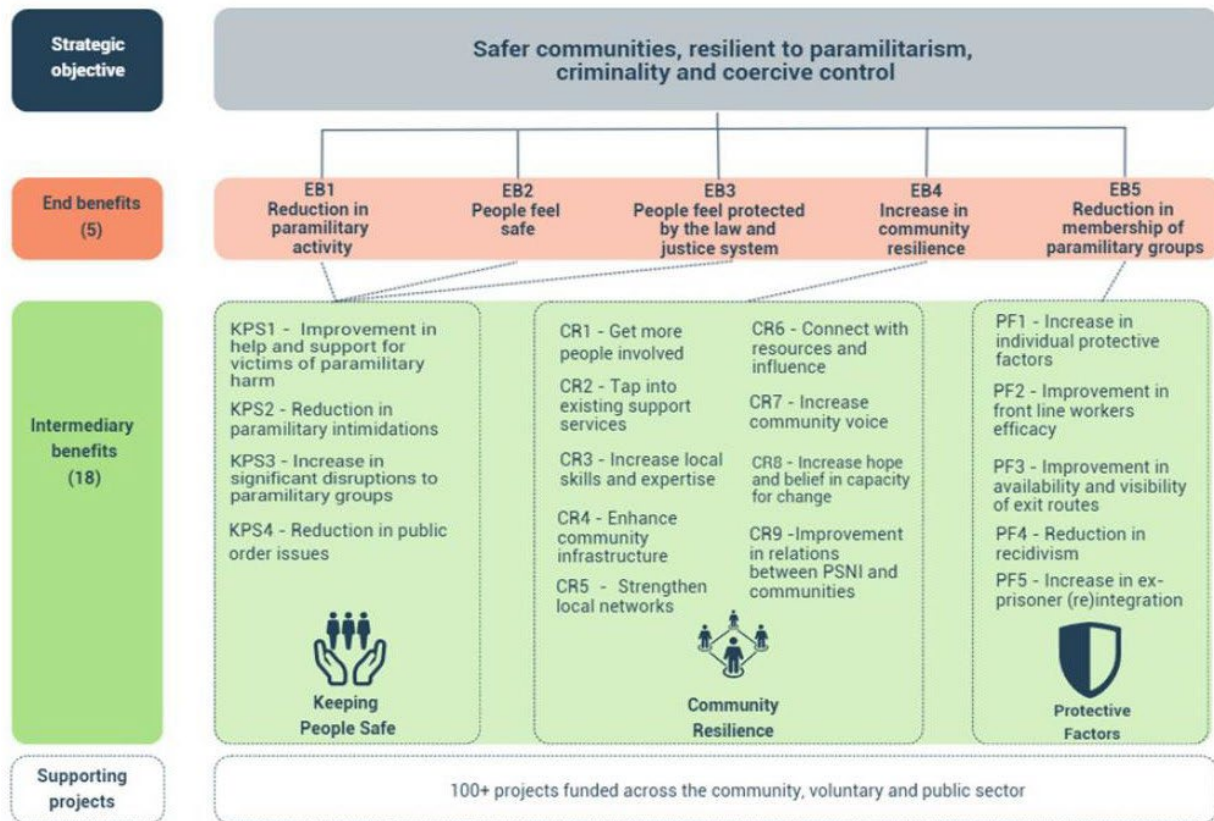
These outcomes are:

- Reduction in paramilitary activity (NILTS Question *Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation*)
- People feel safe (NILTS Question *I feel safe living in this area*)
- People feel protected by the law and justice system (NILTS Question - *People feel protected by the law and justice system*)
- Increase in community resilience (NILTS Question - *Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence*)
- Reduction in membership of paramilitary groups (NILTS Question - *Paramilitary groups influence young people*)

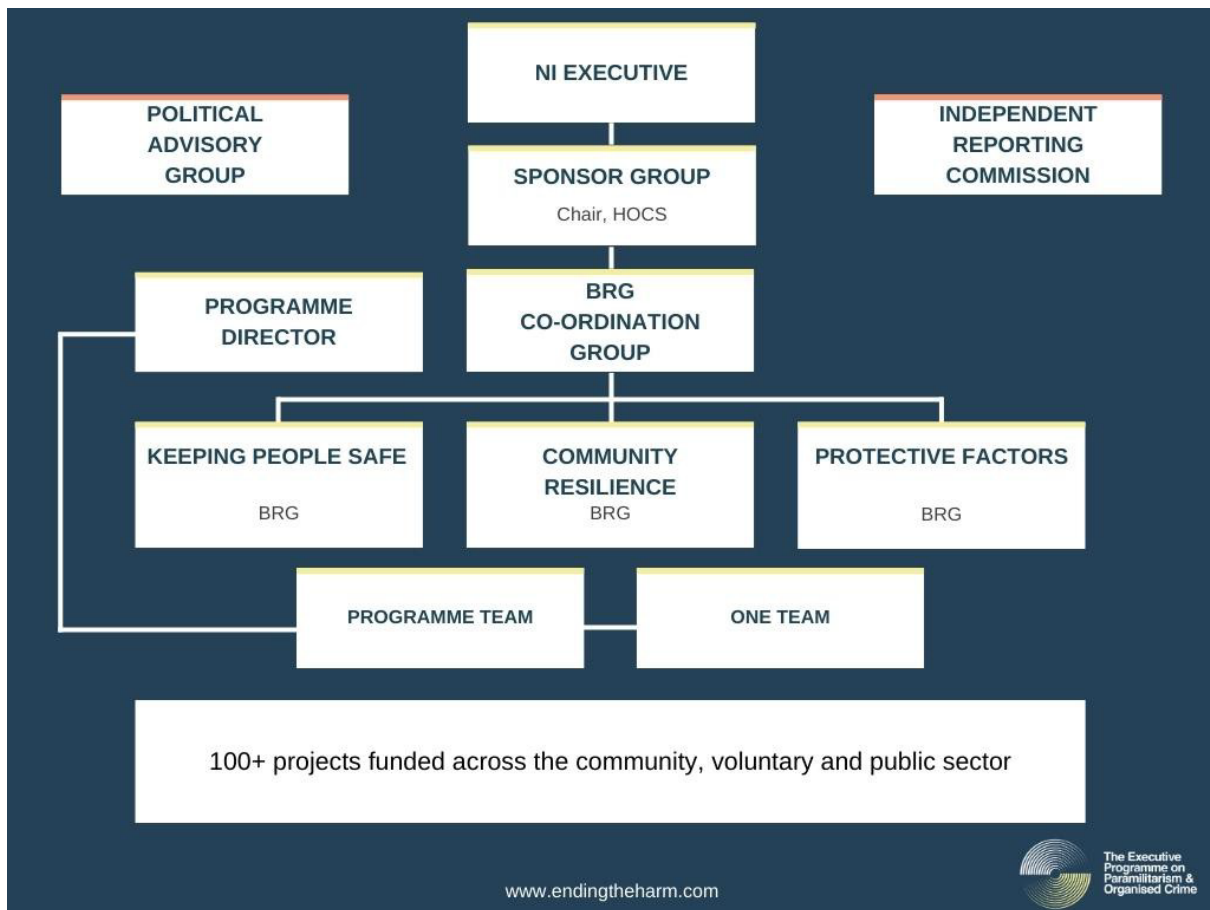
An example of a population level data gap the Programme is currently attempting to address is in relation to the prevalence of adversity in childhood (ACEs), including childhood exposure to violence. Conscious of the ongoing impacts of the conflict on individuals, communities and societies, it is important to understand how Northern Ireland compares to other countries in terms of ACEs and other important health, wellbeing and mental health outcomes. A population-level prevalence study (comparable to similar studies in other jurisdictions) is currently underway, with headline findings expected before the end of 2024.

Programme Level Data and Information

Since 2021, the Programme has required projects to work together to deliver shared and measurable objectives (intermediary benefits) The diagram below shows how these project outcomes (in green) link to the longer-term benefits / outcomes described above:



The outworkings of this are discussed on an ongoing basis through the Programme's Governance structures:



Projects working to deliver the same outcomes meet regularly within these structures to share learning and ultimately to improve collective understanding of vulnerability and harm.

The Programme seeks to enhance this shared understanding through robust evaluations of projects. The Programme has designed and commissioned an Action Research Project with Queen's University, Belfast with the purpose of informing both practice and research. Academics help projects to refine and improve services in real-time as well as at the end of project phases. Project evaluation has included measures of vulnerability and harm, including mental health, exposure to violence and self/group efficacy.

This work suggests that living in areas with elevated rates of violence and being exposed (even indirectly) to paramilitary related harms, increases mental health issues and risk-

taking behaviours⁷. It also reduces community connectedness. This points to the systemic impact of exposure to paramilitary related harms; it shows that this exposure not only increases the risk of involvement with the justice system, but also increases the need for access to healthcare and exacerbates educational under attainment.

Extensive and robust qualitative evidence on vulnerability and harm can be found in a range of project and thematic evaluations and research which can be found on the Programme's website⁸.

Project Level Data and Information

The Programme is also seeking to understand risk and protective factors at project level. Through a mix of innovative local expertise and internationally recognised methods, projects are helping people at risk of paramilitary exploitation through early, preventative interventions, as well as providing bespoke support and signposting for people already suffering harm.

The Programme operates throughout NI and projects vary in scale, focus, location, target group and methodology depending on assessed need. Projects must offer some form of 'additionality'. They are delivered through a network of NI Civil Service Departments, statutory agencies, public sector bodies and community/ voluntary sector partners and are required to work together to deliver shared and measurable medium and long-term objectives (described above). Further information on projects is available on the Programme's website. Work is currently underway to measure outcomes across the range of intermediary benefits.

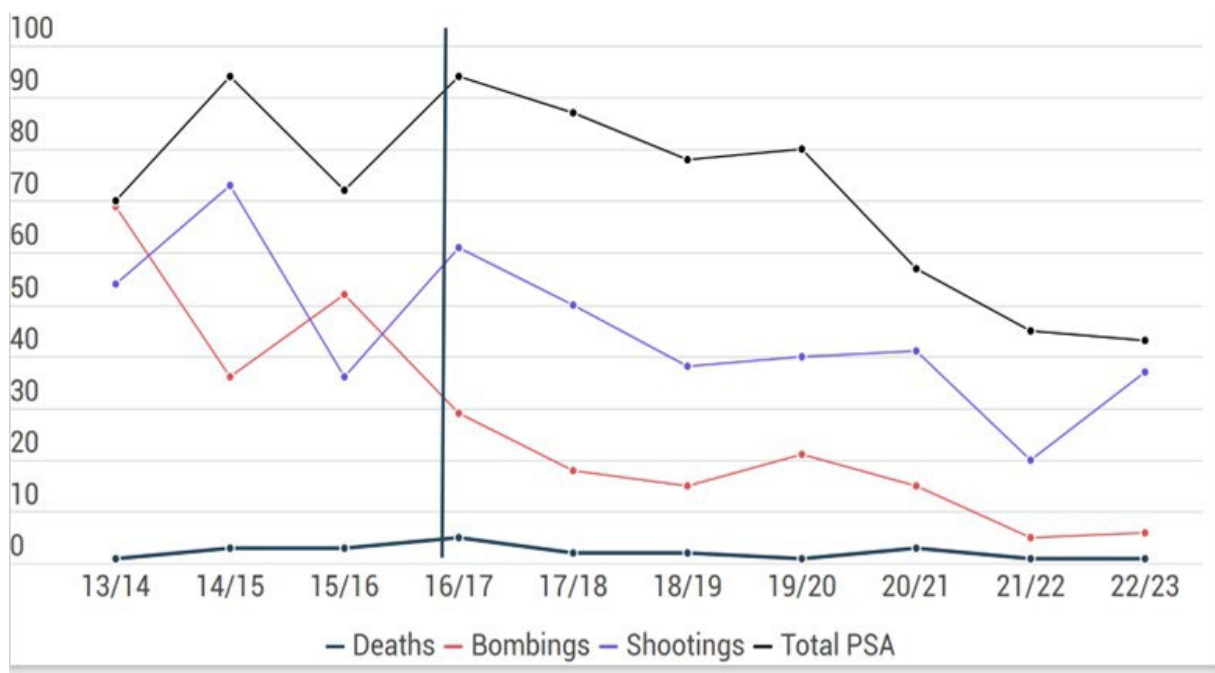
Examples of project level data and information on vulnerability and harm include:

⁷ Walsh, C. (2022). Accelerators: Targeted Youth Services' Contribution Towards the Attainment of Multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Queen's University Belfast and Education Authority.

⁸ [News & Research - Ending The Harm](#)

- 93% of young people and 60% of women presenting to Programme interventions screen positively for complex trauma⁹. Trauma breeds violence and harm and costs NI somewhere in the region of £0.75bn per year¹⁰. The prevalence and aggregated cost of all types of violence and harm is not known. This is a data gap that extends beyond the scope of the Programme.

Programme Team analysis also helps the Programme evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. This shows there is a downward trend (seen in multiple data sources) in the number of intimidations and in the types of paramilitary activity that cause the highest harm, including murder and violent assaults and shootings. The graph below shows the downward trajectory of Security Statistics (as measured by PSNI), including Paramilitary Style Attacks since the Programme began in 2016/17. The number of attacks against under 18s has reduced significantly.



⁹ Walsh, C. (2022). Accelerators: Targeted Youth Services' Contribution Towards the Attainment of Multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Queen's University Belfast and Education Authority and Walsh, C. (2023). *Developing women in the community. Programme evaluation*

¹⁰ This figure is a provision estimate, based largely on the cost of crime and is, therefore, likely to be at the very bottom range of costs that could properly be attributed to this problem.

- Thousands of victims of paramilitary violence have been supported through projects. This includes young people supported in multiple ways: through youth work, including by 'navigators' in two hospital emergency departments; a multi-agency support hub; a bespoke project for victims of paramilitary violence; and those signposted through projects.
- Thousands of young people have been supported through youth work based diversionary and wider support projects. In that cohort, 58% had a reported mental health issue, up to 40% showed indicators of PTSD and most had witnessed violence. At endpoint, there was a statistically significant reduction in likely PTSD¹¹.
- Hundreds of boys and young men at risk of paramilitary harm and/or involvement have been supported through social work, mentoring and mental health/substance use support. This project promotes life and social skills development, and offers bespoke mental health and substance use support. Clients find improvements in their mental health, wellbeing, drugs, alcohol, use of time and offending behaviours. There has been an increase in the ability of these young men to live a crime free life, with 93% noting the support has helped them resist negative influences within the community.
- Thousands of young people have participated in a range of activities including sport, wellbeing, community safety, active citizenship and a community development diploma.
- Multiple projects have provided an opportunity for people in communities to get involved in community life, empowering people and groups to take part in local projects that have a positive impact on themselves and their community. This has

¹¹ Walsh, C. (2022). Accelerators: Targeted Youth Services' Contribution Towards the Attainment of Multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Queen's University Belfast and Education Authority.

included tens of thousands of participants in social action projects, volunteering and community events.

- The Programme has also delivered a series of public awareness campaigns¹² that highlight organised crime and paramilitary activity and how this can have a devastating impact on victims, their families, local communities and wider society. The current campaign highlights how paramilitary gangs use illegal money lending to control and coerce vulnerable people.
- The Programme is the sole funder of the Safeguarding Board's (SBNi) trauma informed approaches work¹³ which seeks to embed an ACE-aware and trauma-informed approach across Health, Social Care, Education, Justice and the Community and Voluntary sectors through provision of training and the application of a trauma lens to all strategy, corporate planning, policy and practice. The aim is a whole-system response that supports children and adults across the course of their lives.

Sharing Learning across the Executive

An example of the more strategic work undertaken by the Programme is a 2023 study funded and commissioned by the Programme, which captured lived experiences of child criminal exploitation (CCE¹⁴). Findings included that young people were often unaware of the ways they are exploited. Young participants in the study described being groomed over prolonged periods, taking increasingly dangerous risks to undertake more serious forms of crime. They described violence, intimidation, extortion, property damage and the concealment of weapons – forms of child criminal exploitation that are not well recognised and highly under-evaluated. Some of them believed that the presence of

¹² [Ending The Harm - Northern Ireland campaign to stop the harm from illegal money lending.](#)

¹³ [Trauma Informed Approaches \(safeguardingni.org\)](#)

¹⁴ Walsh, C. (2023). *From contextual to criminal harm: Young people's perceptions and experiences of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland*. Department of Justice (Northern Ireland). <https://www.endingtheharm.com/research-papers/from-contextual-to-criminal-harm/>

paramilitary groups provided a protective function and that they were generally safer with those networks in place. This study is informing a larger body of work across multiple Departments, which is aiming to develop policy and actions to comprehensively address CCE. This data and research is available on the Programme's website.

As noted by the IRC, the Programme's Sponsor Group involves senior officials from across the Executive. Drawing on learning about individual and community trauma from research¹⁵ and projects, Sponsor Group members have been considering how best to implement trauma informed approaches across the NICS.

We hope this information has been helpful and reiterate our willingness to engage with you on this, or further requests, if you would find this helpful. There is a large amount of information within the 'About Us' section of the Programme's website www.endingtheharm.com that may be of interest.

Final considerations

If you are unhappy with the result of your request for information you may request an internal review within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you request an internal review, please do so in writing stating the reasons to the address above.

If following an internal review, you were to remain dissatisfied you may make a complaint to the Information Commissioner and ask the Commissioner to investigate whether the DOJ has complied with the terms of the FOIA. You can write to the Information Commissioner at:

¹⁵ Mooney, S., Fargas, M., MacDonald, M., O'Neill, D., Walsh, C., Hayes, D., & Montgomery, L. (2024). 'We are on a journey': implementing trauma informed approaches in Northern Ireland - Executive summary report. Queen's University Belfast.

Information Commissioner
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The Commissioner will not investigate a complaint unless an internal review procedure has been carried out.

Further details on the role of the Information Commissioner and the handling of appeals can be found at: www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

Records & Information Manager