Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime: Department of Justice

9 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Ms Joanne Bunting (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Ciara Ferguson
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Ms Adele Brown	Department of Justice
Ms Joanne Doherty	Department of Justice
Ms Claire Hazelden	Department of Justice

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I welcome Adele Brown, programme director, Claire Hazelden, research analyst, and Joanne Doherty, strategic partnerships manager. We are looking forward to hearing what you have to say to us. As usual, I will hand over to you for about 10 or 15 minutes, after which there will be some questions. It is great to have you with us. Go ahead.

Ms Adele Brown (Department of Justice): Thank you very much for having us here today. We are delighted to be here. We have provided you with some fairly lengthy briefing material; apologies for that. It contains an outline of how we approach this work and a dossier of the projects in which we currently invest. I am conscious that we want to give as much time as possible to questions from Committee members, but I thought that it might be useful to very briefly pull out some points that might be relevant. We will try to keep this very brief.

The first thing to say is that there continues to be a need to do this work. We know that because we now have a much better understanding of the extent and prevalence of paramilitary and paramilitary-linked harm in Northern Ireland. We know from researching data something that we did not know at the start of the programme, which is that up to 45% of young people are still affected by paramilitary-linked harm. Among adults, that figure is around 20% to 40%. It is also a very localised issue: in some places, that figure can rise; in some areas, at about 80%, it is almost double. So, this is a really localised and intractable issue that we need to continue to look at.

You can see from the slide in front of you that we are trying to get a much better understanding of all the different facets and aspects of paramilitary harm. Traditionally, we have focused on understanding of and, indeed, investment in the top part of the triangle: some of the more overt aspects of paramilitarism. Part of the programme's role is to try to understand all of that and try to work our way down the triangle to some of the more hidden harms that, traditionally, we have not talked about. We

have not had research and data on those, and therefore we probably have not invested in or understood them as well as we could have. That is an ongoing process. We have definitely made progress in phase 2, and we can talk to you about that, but there is still much more work to be done in that respect.

If there is a need, there also needs to be an innovative approach. This has been going on for a long time, and it is a complex, wicked issue, so we need an innovative and creative evidence-based and data-driven approach in order to address it. We have set that out in some detail in the written material that we provided. The programme invests currently in over 100 interventions that range from early years — indeed, from birth — right through to old age and at all the key intervention points throughout life, ensuring that people are less vulnerable to exploitation by criminal and paramilitary groups. We have adopted a public health approach to violence reduction. Again, that is detailed in the written material that you have, and we are happy to talk in more detail about that as the session goes on.

What we do is really important, and I would like to acknowledge the amazing work that is done by delivery partners across many different sectors. They are working in really difficult circumstances, doing some really challenging work and, in many cases, achieving incredible outcomes. It is worth saying that, in some sectors, there is world-leading practice that is viewed internationally as a model of how to do things, which is really encouraging to hear.

How we do things is also really important. In front of you, at the top right of the screen, you will see what we call our strategic enablers. Those are the things and the ways of working that are really important in ensuring that we have long-term impacts for this work beyond the funding life cycle. A lot of that is about collaboration. No single project, no matter how good, can address the issue, so we need to ensure that we join up efforts across the board and across sectors and professions. It is about having good governance, ensuring that the money goes to where it is needed and being driven by evidence, research and best practice. Another really important point is this: because this is such a highly localised problem, it is about having a highly localised response that can be differentiated depending on the area. There is also a comms issue, in that we need to ensure that we discuss issues that have not been discussed previously or that have become normalised. The big thing that we need from everybody, including our elected politicians, is leadership. Again, it is really important for the programme that people are able to talk about these complex issues in a constructive way.

The next slide is very confusing. We tried to simplify it, and then we thought that, actually, this is the reality of what we are dealing with in the programme. We try to ensure that we intervene at the right times. At the bottom of the triangle on the slide, we put an example of some of the work that we are doing to prevent harm. That is population-level work. It is about preventing harm taking place. If harm happens, we move into secondary interventions, which are about stabilising the harm and stopping it getting worse. If we cannot do that, we move into tertiary, late-stage interventions, which are about crisis management. They are bespoke, and the outcomes can be less certain. It is probably worth noting that, collectively, a lot of effort across the public sector is focused on crisis intervention. How we move to earlier intervention is one of the things that we are looking at.

Impact is really important: there is no point in doing this work if it is not working. We have lots of evidence to suggest that, in many respects, it is starting to have an impact on people's lives, communities and society as a whole, which is shown in the conversations that we have. It is about not just the reduction in deaths, bombings, shootings and paramilitary-style assaults that you see in the graph on the slide but the impact on community and collective resilience. It is about ensuring that people who are on the receiving end of moneylending or coercive control are provided with support. It is much broader than the graph shows, but we have a good story to tell, and we are happy to talk about that.

Sometimes, numbers — the quantitative impacts — are really important, but quotes from people who have been affected by the programme can be far more powerful. We have both. We have that data at project, programme and population level. We are confident that many of the projects have been, as quotes suggest, life-changing for participants.

I will stop there. Over to you. I hope that that has been a helpful introduction to what we are working on, which is a really complex problem.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thank you very much, Adele. You have been so brief, perhaps because your document is spectacular, that you may not have done yourself justice, but at least that gives us a good opportunity to explore.

Mr Beattie: Thank you for that, Adele. I know that you have worked on this for a long time. I have also been working on it. A couple of things jump out at me. They are long-term things, not necessarily from your presentation. First, we have talked an awful lot about changing the language that we use. As you know, something that I have driven an awful lot is a change of language from that of paramilitaries to that of organised crime, criminality or child abuse and getting away from giving them that flag of convenience. Even the term "paramilitary-style attack" undermines what actually happens. Has the discussion about trying to change that language continued? We have raised it many times over the years. That is the first question.

I will quickly ask you another question, if I may. I am looking at all the organisations that you fund to deliver for you. I count 18 of them. They deliver soft and hard approaches. The paramilitary crime task force (PCTF) takes a pretty hard approach, whereas some of the others, such as community safety, might take far softer approaches. There are 18 organisations. How on earth do we coordinate it all, along with HMRC, UK Border Force, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and, if necessary, MI5? What is the coordination — command and control — element in all that and for the vast amount of information that must come in your direction?

Ms Brown: Yes. I will start with the language. We have made significant progress on that issue. Not too long ago, the terminology commonly used was "punishment attack". It is still used, but not commonly. It moved from that to "paramilitary-style attack". On the basis of discussions with people working in the community who deal with that sort of violence all the time, we have managed to move the term again. If the issue is to do with young people, we talk about child abuse or grooming. We talk about its impact in terms of injuries, not just to the victim but to their peers, their community and their family and the impact on first responders and public services. It has opened up into a much bigger discussion.

From our perspective, the evidence shows that many of the groups that continue to be proscribed have moved into organised criminality of the type that we see in other major cities and jurisdictions, whether it be Dublin, London, Manchester or Glasgow. In many cases, therefore, it is right to talk about organised criminality or criminality. Where that involves young people, it is important to move the language into safeguarding terminology. I do not think that there is a settled view on this yet. Some people still believe that using the word "paramilitary" is important because it explains that something else, in addition to organised criminality, lingers on — perhaps an ability for groups to get people out on the streets or to engage in activity beyond what would be seen in other organised groups. We are definitely moving in the right direction, however. It is good that we are having a discussion about it. That is an important development.

Mr Beattie: It is. In part, I agree with you on the language issue, but, in reality, some people, particularly young people, still have a romantic notion of what this is. When they see a flag going up or a mural being painted, which is quite jingoistic in its way, that can drive them towards it. That is because we have given them the "paramilitary" banner as opposed to saying, "You are an organised drug gang", which, ultimately, is what they are. Then, when we do all the hard work and put them into jail, they end up going into a separated prison regime in which they are given the title "brigadier", and, afterwards, they come back out into the community to be lauded for what they did. There is real concern about that. If you look at the same issue down South, you see that the groups there are not called paramilitary groups. They are named, whether that is "the Kinahan gang" or something else. It is very clear, and everybody knows that they are talking about a criminal, organised, drug-dealing gang. I do not think that people, particularly young people, get the sense of that up here. That is my concern, but I accept your point.

Ms Brown: We in the programme have been keen to be led by the experts and our delivery partners to talk about safety, vulnerability and harm. The other thing that we find with the word "paramilitary" is that it can be off-putting and can limit the number and type of people and professions that want to engage with the issue. As I said, we need to be able to engage with lots of sectors and professions. An association is made when people talk about paramilitarism, and it becomes a justice issue. It needs to be much wider than that. Young people in particular get pulled into criminal activity and are exploited by gangs because of vulnerabilities and harms. That extends far beyond the justice sphere. Being pragmatic about the issue and finding terminology that allows people to engage with it has been driven forward by the programme in a really effective way, but there is a considerable way still to go.

Mr Beattie: Fair enough.

Ms Brown: On your point about coordination, it is important to say that the programme is not engaged in the operational side of things. An appropriate distinction has to be made between operational activity and the programme's more strategic approach. We have very consciously designed a programme that allows operational partners to engage with other sectors. We have governing structures in which different professions, such as law enforcement, probation workers, youth workers and community workers, can all come together, engage on the issues and ensure that they are sharing best practice and learning. At a strategic level, the coordination of this is one of the most challenging aspects. You will have seen in your briefing pack some of the work that Jo has been leading to map out the strategic landscape in which we are operating. It is highly congested. It is very difficult to make sense of all the activity and to navigate our way through it. It is incumbent on us in the programme and on everyone else to try to streamline it to make it easier for public services to be delivered to people where they need them most. There is a lot of complexity that needs softened. Jo, do you want to come in on that?

Ms Joanne Doherty (Department of Justice): I will come in on the very specific justice-related strategic coordination. We work with the organised crime branch in the Department of Justice, and we are a partner on the organised crime task force. It sits on our governance structures as well, and a really important objective for both of us over the next year is to work together to understand what might be possible once the current phase of the programme ends in March 2025 and the one-year addendum to the organised crime strategy ends in 2025. We are conscious that the policing plan aligns with that too. We are very conscious of that, and actively trying to identify where we can better align and streamline things is really important as well.

Mr Beattie: I can see the difficulties that you have. My concern is ensuring that there is no replication and that one programme does not counter another. That comes back to the hard and soft approaches. The paramilitary crime task force can be quite a blunt tool at times — sometimes, it has to be — but my concern is about how it interacts with the developing women in the community project so that they do not counteract each other. I do not envy you your task.

Ms Brown: I talked about the structures that allow different professions and sectors to work together. We have tried to facilitate that. It is really heartening to see those relationships starting to take place and those connections becoming more embedded outside the programme as well. There is a lot of operational interaction. In fact, operationally speaking, it is quite slick, but, when we step back to think strategically and start to get into all the different strategies, policies and initiatives, which are well intentioned but not necessarily coordinated, it becomes more difficult. As one of the few programmes that have a helicopter view across the Executive and the public sector, we are keen to share our learning on that. It is really important that we share that so that other people can take up the responsibility of streamlining where they can.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I will follow up on the point, Adele, that you made about the very cluttered slide. It has really stuck with me, because it highlights how many strategies in Northern Ireland contribute to tackling paramilitarism and the extent to which there is duplication and therefore duplication of cost. It demonstrates immeasurably the extent of silo working. I come back to the business of moving from producing ships to producing strategies. Will you elaborate on how many strategies feed into this one subject?

Ms Doherty: I must say that the slide is imperfect. It is almost impossible for it to be perfect, given that there was no one place to go to find a single list of all the strategies that exist across the board. We have identified about 70 at the minute, but I come across a new one every week. That slide could be updated very regularly. There are 70 strategies that currently exist and on which action is under way. As we said, various Departments, agencies and voluntary and community partners — we are particularly conscious of them — have to report back on different measures to different strategic leads for work that essentially, furthers the same aim. The amount of wasted resource on that is quite shocking. What was the second part of your question?

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): You have pretty much covered it. I am concerned about whether that information has been shared. Currently, people are highly engaged in developing a Programme for Government. You set out the principal concerns: there is no single place from which to get a list of strategies that exist in Northern Ireland, the extent of duplication and the numbers. That is horrendous for an outcome-based approach, because it is just a mess. It really needs to be simplified. Has that been fed up the chain?

Ms Brown: Yes, it has. The first stopping-off point was our sponsor group, which is a group of senior officials from the Executive, agencies that we invest in and others that have relevant interest, and it is chaired by the head of the Civil Service. That was the first place to say, "This is some of the learning". Those sponsors will go off to their individual Departments or agencies armed with that information.

In addition to that, we have been working very closely with the Programme for Government team and others to help them to understand and share that learning. It is learning about the strategies and also learning from the evidence that we are getting back on why it continues to be a problem and what other Departments can do about it. There is a limit to what the programme can do. If we want to get a long-term effect from this work, we need other Departments to pick up the learning, evidence and research and adopt them as part of their business and continuous improvement.

Ms Doherty: I will just add that 70 strategies are active at the minute, and another 20 are emerging.

Mr Easton: Thank you for your presentation. The document that you have put together is an amazing source of information, so thank you for that. Some of your stats are quite frightening. Some 45% of young people are affected by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, and 50% of young people do not feel protected by the PSNI and the justice system.

Those quite staggering figures are really worrying. I will pick up on a comment from Doug about paramilitarism. That word, to me, should not be used, because it is like a badge of honour for some individuals. In my opinion, it would be much better if they were referred to as criminal gangs, but that is just my feeling on it. What effective impacts have there been to help to address some of those issues?

Ms Brown: Anybody connected to the programme will share your concern about the extent to which young people are affected by the issue. I will give you some other stats that are particularly concerning. More than nine out of 10 young people on our programme are experiencing complex trauma when they enter it, 97% have seen a family member hit, kicked or punched at home, 12·5% have been attacked by paramilitaries, 33% have been threatened by paramilitaries, and 62% have seen a paramilitary attack. Those are staggering figures and a real indictment.

One of the really encouraging stories and areas where Northern Ireland is leading the way is in the responses that have been developed to be able to address that. If it is helpful, we can point to and give you lots of detail separately on some of the incredible work that has been done with some of the most complex young lives in Northern Ireland.

I will give you one indication of how effective that has been. We saw intent to engage in violence on the part of young people at the start of a programme sitting at 43%. By the end of the programme, it had dropped to 3%. That is just one statistic.

We could talk about reduction in trauma. We could talk about all sorts of different indicators that show that this work is really effective. We could talk about the number of people who, through a hospital navigator project, have been supported on two sites over the past year. I think that it is around 1,600, as well as many of their peers and other people who might have been pulled into it.

There is a really strong story, qualitatively and quantitatively, to tell about what is happening to young people. It is not just the Education Authority and community and voluntary sector youth work; it is some of our community organisations, it is probation, it is social work, and it is health officials. This is a real team endeavour across the board, and I genuinely think that this is one of the areas where we are making real progress. We might not see the longer-term impact of that in figures or outcomes until much later, but we are starting to see, on an individual level and on a programme level, some real success stories.

Colleagues, do you want to come in with some more statistics or if you have anything helpful on mental health or trauma?

Ms Claire Hazelden (Department of Justice): Adele gave you a flavour of some of the difficult information that we get from the people on some of our programmes. Even at population level, analysis of the youth well-being study that was carried out a few years ago across Northern Ireland showed that young people who had been threatened by paramilitaries were three times more likely to have a mood or anxiety disorder, nine times more likely to screen for post-traumatic stress, five and a half times more likely to self-harm and seven times more likely to have suicide ideation or to attempt suicide. When we think about the figures of the young people on our programmes, with 12% or 13%

reporting consistently that they had been threatened by paramilitaries, the impact of that on not just the individual but their friends, families and communities is staggering.

As Adele said, we cannot always do everything, but we are committed to understanding what works and why. One research project that looked at youth work showed real improvements. There was not only a decrease in the intent to engage in violence, as Adele talked about, but an improvement in mental health and well-being, in aspiration, in school attendance — across a range of indicators. We try to see what within that practice led to those improvements. A lot of it came down to the role of social support and just being consistently surrounded by that support. For some of those young people, that is not a reality of their day-to-day lives. Having that evidence and understanding can then inform other interventions that we do. Our developing women in the community project, which is led by the Department for Communities, also draws on that method of social support and has seen similar improvements in participants' mental health and well-being.

Jo, do you want to speak to that?

Ms Doherty: The developing women in the community project is a good example of bringing people together and social connectivity. Delivery leads get the women together for the first session of the programme. It might be a 12-week programme that they attend each week. A lot of them will not have known each other beforehand, even though they live close by. That speaks to the isolation that they feel in the communities that are impacted by paramilitarism. They get together and design the programme. They are asked what issues they are facing at the time. There is a lot of what we hear regularly at the minute: cost-of-living crisis, drug addiction issues, mental health issues and issues with their children's special educational needs.

The delivery partners then go to voluntary and community sector partners to deliver educational pieces. However, a lot of what has come through in the evaluations of the developing women in the community projects in particular is the value of connectivity and the support and empowerment that it gives to those women to enable them to make a positive contribution to their communities.

I visited the east Belfast project not too long ago. It was inspiring to see the talent coming out of those women. They had not felt able to show or develop that until they participated in those programmes and got to know one another. An important element of the developing women in the community project is that the women are then able to pass the confidence, skills and learning on to their children. An example that I gave when I visited them was that the women had been concerned about how they dealt with their own emotions and, therefore, with their children's emotions. They were given a simple presentation about how cortisol works and on bringing down their own cortisol level before they can then help their children to emotionally regulate. To me, that was a clear example of how those programmes are helping the future generation to be more emotionally resilient and more connected to each other. As Adele said, that will be seen in time.

The statistics showed a reduction of 39% in probable PTSD in the women who participated in one of those programmes. We have those quantitative impacts, but what really matters is the personal stories and experiences of people turning their life around. However, that is seen in a big combination that includes all the other projects that are going on under the banner of the programme. As we said, there is no one programme that is a panacea, but, through working together, hopefully, it will make a difference over the longer term.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Alex, do you have anything further?

Mr Easton: No. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): May I just follow up on one of those points? I have also been out to visit a project a couple of times. The women may fulfil their 12 weeks, but my fear is about what happens next. There should be a viable pathway that women continue to progress along. They may well have made friendships and connections that will last, but there still needs to be a focus for them. How do we ensure that those women are not left behind? When another new batch of women come in for their 12 weeks, what happens to the women who have left? You cannot start women off on a journey and then just abandon them after three months. That is wrong, so how do we ensure that people are not left behind and that there is a path for them to continue along?

Ms Doherty: That is largely down to how the programmes are delivered and who delivers them. I can speak from having visited only the east Belfast project, which is run through a family centre. That

family centre is there. It is open every day; there are no closed doors after the programme finishes. The cohort of women that I visited had taken on a very significant project to improve the green space around the family centre. They made a sensory garden that they could go to with their children, noting all the benefits of green space on mental health and the fact that a lot of them do not have a garden or anywhere like that to go to. When you run a programme through a centre like that, you will have the connection throughout. Do you want to say anything else about the other women's projects, Adele? There is a good example in Rathcoole.

Ms Brown: Yes. There are a number of different women's projects. The challenge has been almost in holding back in order to make sure that whatever is done is manageable, because, in many cases, there are groups that are really keen to take those projects forward themselves. You are right; it is about the sort of support that we can provide them with. You have struck on a bigger problem at a programme level. For example, how do we make sure that there is continued impact from the work beyond the funding life cycle? That is very much about saying from the outset, "This work will need to continue. It may not necessarily continue being funded by the programme, but where is the best fit for its funding or the best fit for that to happen?". If we can identify alternative funding sources or alternative means by which that work can be supported and sustained over the longer term, that becomes a critical part of our work. As we approach the end of our funding cycle, it is vital that we do that. We must make sure that successful work is not lost and that we do not march people up the hill and then say at the end that there is nothing else. That is at the forefront of all delivery partners' minds, and, certainly, from a programme perspective, it is for us too.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): That is one of my questions off the list for later.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, everybody. I will go back to a question that the Chair asked or made comment on about the raft of strategies that are out there. If we had a Programme for Government, would that help to quantify what is out there and to end the sort of criticism — the criticism is in the word "silo" — of the columns that run alongside each other but do not mix? Who would take the lead in looking at all those programmes, at what delivers and at where there is duplication and make a decision to do something about them all? What decision-making powers do you have that allow you to say, "That is a great idea, but it is being duplicated" or, "That is not such a great idea, because the evidence shows that it has not worked very well, but another Department is doing it. It is ours, you are not getting it, and we think that it is brilliant". How will we get to the point of refining all that and putting it together so that we can move forward?

I agree with the evolving analysis on moving the language away from paramilitarism to organised crime and all that. How can all those well-intentioned strategies be refined, who will ultimately be the decision maker and what is the decision-making vehicle that will deliver it? Would it, could it and should it be a Programme for Government that says, "This is our agenda. All of you will have to cooperate and deliver it, and we will be looking for the outcomes as time progresses".

I will pick up on Doug's point about flags, emblems and the communities of people that they surround. We, as politicians, are not great at that thinking either. If you listen to recent debates in the Chamber about flags, you will hear politicians reverting to their silos and communities. We need to step up as well and say that those things are wrong, and we need to support the groups and organisations that work to change and modify communities that are working to try to take away the paramilitary murals from the walls. If you see those at the bus stop when you go to school every day, they will influence you. That kind of group will be what you maybe want to join, as opposed to looking at the wider context of life.

Ms Brown: I will start with your final point. The front-line delivery workers, who do some really hard graft in challenging circumstances, would appreciate political support on all those issues, because it would make their life considerably easier. I do not underestimate the challenges, and, again, that is for our elected representatives to work through. I do not think that we want to say much more about flags, emblems and physical manifestations. If we go back to the triangle that we talked about, we are getting to the point where those are the things that probably have not been dealt with and that we need to find a collective position on. We are very happy to support you, as elected representatives and Ministers, in doing that.

On the point about how we make it all work, we can offer our experience only from a programme perspective. Our reflection and observation is that there is no end of well-intentioned and very good projects out there. There are thousands of projects, and there is an understandable and very commendable desire for people to get interventions out there quickly. Collectively, as a system, we

often do not get the time, space or support to spend time understanding the problem and the context in which we are working or identifying and taking the time to understand our shared outcomes.

It is all very well for one Department to have a series of really good outcomes and another to have equally good programmes, but how do they link? That is where our delivery partners should be inserted into a Programme for Governments. We had a workshop on that yesterday, and it was emphatic about the fact that there needs to be shared outcomes. Our starting point is not the projects, however good they are; our starting point should be the shared outcomes, and we should work back to see what investment in particular projects, quantities, types and methodologies are needed.

The programme has done that over phase 2, and, while it is far from perfect, we can offer with some confidence the idea that a Programme for Government with shared outcomes across Departments, respecting departmental boundaries and responsibilities, is possible. You can collaborate across those silos, Departments and responsibilities if you have clear shared outcomes. In order to support that, you need collective data and evidence. I will go back to Mr Beattie's point about how you interrogate and share the information and make sure that it is useful for everyone. It is possible. Our experience from the programme is that it is very hard work. It is very easy to say, "Collaboration", and it is very difficult to do, but it can be done. All the projects that we are investing in have felt the benefit of the ability to bounce questions and problems off other people in order to try to figure out ways through. Our delivery partners are absolutely incredible at problem-solving. We need to get over saying that we cannot do something and think about what we can do in that space. Shared outcomes and a Programme for Government are a critical part of that.

Mr Dickson: I have noticed that, in some voluntary and community sector organisations that I work with and meet, there is element of mistrust between them, including delivery bodies, particularly when it comes to, unfortunately, how much money people get and how much influence they think that they may have in getting that resource. How do you get around that?

Ms Brown: I am sorry, but I am not —.

Mr Dickson: There are some groups that take the view that, if you have a connection with a paramilitary organisation through a delivery mechanism, that will get you more money or resource to do things with your group, as opposed to those groups that genuinely see through it all and say to themselves, "We're not in this to support paramilitary groups", which are still the gatekeepers of the projects that are delivered in the community. There are some groups that genuinely do not want anyone involved in that type of activity but want to deliver projects in a more positive way — I was going to use the word "neutral" — than would the gatekeepers. I can give some examples locally, although I do not particularly want to, of where resource is targeted because people have some vague paramilitary connection or criminal connection in the community.

Ms Brown: That is a really challenging issue. The programme is based on the pledge of office and is about actively challenging paramilitarism. If we find any projects that are not adhering to those values and that value base, we will look into them. There is also a behaviours framework for specific projects in particular parts of the programme that are based in communities. That is part of a contractual arrangement for receiving investment. The Minister is on record as being very keen to discuss the possibility of rolling out more broadly that behaviours framework, or some version of it, for grant-making or procurement. That goes back to the point that we are all obliged to adhere to that pledge of office and the commitment to address paramilitarism. We do not have a single answer to that particular challenge. We had that discussion some time ago at the political advisory group. With the Assembly and Ministers back, we would be very happy to continue to do that and to have a further discussion on that.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, Adele, Claire and Joanne. I loved your take on emotional resilience and connection. We could all benefit from growing our emotional resilience and being more connected.

On the public health piece, you stated:

> *"The desire to get interventions 'out the door' has meant that previously and collectively we have ... failed to spend enough time understanding problems or considering the right sets of data and evidence, leading to a cycle of well-intentioned funding that does not deliver positive change over the longer term."*

Will you expand on that, please?

Ms Brown: That speaks to the very congested landscape that we all operate in. It is about taking time to understand that what looks like a problem in a particular sector is one that needs to be addressed by lots of different people in lots of different sectors and professions. The public health approach places a real emphasis on taking time to understand that problem. Our experience is that we have gained significant benefit from taking time to do that. Our action research, which Claire mentioned, has helped us to understand what needs to be done when designing and delivering intervention.

I will give you one very brief example of that. We have a hospital navigator project that I mentioned that is relatively new in its delivery. Initially, when that project was rolled out, with the very best of intentions, people thought that we might need to have hospital navigators in emergency departments at particular times of the week in order to support young people and, therefore, to be able to signpost them on. That was done with the best of intentions. By taking the time to look at the evidence of what was actually found once that project was up and running, the researchers managed to identify that having youth workers at different times of the week would be far more effective. If we were in a project that was rigid and did not allow people the scope to do that, to move around and to rethink the project in real time, we could find ourselves in a situation where we had a project that was partly successful but that could be more successful. With all the projects that we have, we try, wherever possible, to give scope and flexibility to people to take time to do that, build in learning and professional expertise and give flexibility to change things as we are doing them. We evaluate them as we are going so that we can make sure that we are confident about our assessments. Claire, do you want to say something about the action research project and how it walks alongside that?

Ms Hazelden: Yes, absolutely. The other thing that I was going to add is that that public health approach is not a linear process. After evaluation, the next stage is to go right back to the first stage and look at what new data you have. We are always learning more about all the issues, and it is important to have that circle constantly going around. That is partly why we have invested in this action research project over the last few years. It is delivered through Queen's University in Belfast and takes a different approach to research. Traditionally, you might think of researchers having some distance from a project, especially one that they are evaluating. This project very much involves, as Adele said, walking alongside the practitioners. We have already talked about some of the amazing and world-leading practice that we have in Northern Ireland across all sorts of different sectors, and this project enables that to be captured and shared. Some of the reports have been published in international journals, and we are really keen to share that practice and amazing learning.

Ms Brown: Very quickly, the other thing that we have seen a lot of people do is really good-quality mapping exercises, for example. Those exercises are to try to help those researchers understand what, in their own sector and field, might be the determinants of violence or health inequalities or whatever it is. From our perspective, we have not necessarily seen all that being coordinated. If you have really complex problems, you want to be able to tap into lots of different types of data, information and evidence so that you can see the problem from lots of different angles. While lots of really good work is going on in particular sectors, pooling that together, aggregating it and then making sense of it is something that we could do a lot more of. That is difficult to do given the day-to-day business of trying to do things quickly and efficiently.

Ms Doherty: I have one more final point on the public health approach in that context. You will have seen in your pack that the last stage before you go back to the start of the public health approach is to ensure widespread adoption of what you have learned. As we said, this phase of the programme is coming to an end in March 2025. There have been various recommendations in reports by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the Independent Reporting Commission and others on what should happen next. We are working on and considering that, but what is really important is that the good learning and practice are not beholden to a temporary programme, that they are embedded in the system and that the way that we tackle problems like this changes for good.

Mr McNulty: Thanks. You three people, who have been at the coalface of paramilitarism, will know directly what its mental, emotional and physical impacts and otherwise are through the harm that is visited on people, communities and families. To what extent have you consulted the Troubles permanent disablement scheme? During the Troubles, tout placards hung around necks of the corpses of dead bodies. There was tarring and feathering of women and girls, human proxy bombs, rape and families being intimidated out of their homes and communities. Maiming and murder were widespread. That was the norm, and whilst physical scars have been visited on thousands of people, as well as death, obviously, the mental scars are enormous. To what extent were you consulted, and to what extent do you feel that it is appropriate that the Troubles permanent disablement scheme does

not include people who have mental injury as a consequence of what they and their families experienced?

Ms Brown: We have not been involved in those discussions.

Mr McNulty: That is quite incredible. This is an Executive programme on paramilitarism and organised crime. To what extent do you feel that it is an issue where there might be contradictions in that one part of the Executive Office feels that it is appropriate to celebrate the work and deeds of paramilitaries as noble and honourable and to which there was no alternative? How does that stack up with where we stand now in tackling paramilitarism?

Ms Brown: I am not sure that we are best placed to comment on that, to be perfectly honest. If there is a question for the Executive Office, we would rather that it respond to that. I am not sure that we can offer much on that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): This programme, Justin, sits at the side of the Department of Justice. I think that that question is certainly valid, but I suspect that it is not one for departmental officials; it is, rather, one for elected people. It is a difficult position to put the ladies in at this point. However, I understand your frustration.

Is there anything else that you want to ask?

Mr McNulty: That is all, Chair. Thank you.

Ms Ferguson: First of all, I apologise for being late. I was at another committee meeting, which was in Dungannon, and I underestimated the extent of the traffic in the city. I apologise for that. I welcome Adele, Joanne and Claire. Thank you for your detailed report. I declare that, in my previous job, I worked in and oversaw one of the projects, WRAP Education and Family Support, in the greater Shantallow area. I was manager of the area partnership, so I am quite familiar with the work. Likewise, Joanne, I know that the project on developing women in the communities was fantastic. That was in Derry, and I went to a number of the graduations and saw the transformation of the women. It was an excellent programme. I know that, recently, a number of the groups were in the Long Gallery, and we had two fantastic events there, so thank you for that.

I have a couple of questions on the details of the report. As we are well aware, one of the core principles was the twin-track approach of incorporating a criminal justice response alongside a community empowerment building/community resilience approach. Have you any idea what percentage of the programme spend went on each of those approaches?

It is great to hear, Claire, about the work that is being done through action research. I am conscious that that has always been weak in a lot of programmes, because, at the tail end of every programme, there was maybe a commitment to look at or invest in research. Action research is critical as part of the learning process. What was the spend on research, and what was the communication between the partners? That is my first question.

My second question is about a section in page 30 of the report that states:

> *"Some projects or ideas will have reached the end of their natural lifespan while others have demonstrated such value that they should be part of mainstream provision."*

Could you elaborate on that statement and reveal which projects, in your opinion, may have reached the end of their lifespan and which have demonstrated value?

You touched already on my third question. I am well aware that the programme is a huge project. You have 100 projects ongoing, with numerous partners, which is proper order, because it is a partnership approach. No one project or organisation can deliver on this. Is there any structured basis in how you engage with people at the grassroots? It is critical, because it is about the lived experience. That is how we all learn. Through that lived experience, we learn what the needs are and how a support package can be put in place. What is the level of engagement at grassroots level, and how is that fed up through the programme?

Ms Brown: We will try to work through that. We will start with the twin-track approach. We have moved on from that. The public health approach allows us to do something that is a bit more integrated. Although the twin-track approach is lovely and beautiful as a concept and is easy to understand, the problem with it is that it still has the idea that there are two parallel streams of activity, when what we know is that this is a really integrated issue, so our response needs to be integrated. The public health approach that we have adopted has three linked areas. The first bundle of activity is about keeping people safe through projects that not only put pressure on perpetrators of criminal activity but support their victims. Then we have a cluster of projects that look to increase protective factors for people who are vulnerable to criminal exploitation. We then have another bundle of projects that is focused on increasing community resilience. All three bundles are very much linked. We have made good progress on that approach, and we want to continue to refine it over time.

Was there something specific? Oh sorry, you asked about the twin-track case.

Ms Ferguson: It was more to do with the balance. Where is the weight placed in the organised crime and the early intervention/resilience piece? I know that that is difficult to answer. Will the current investment evolve and change as a result of learning over the years?

Ms Brown: The investment should reflect the evidence and data on what is working. On the investment split between the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector, £9·3 million goes to the community and voluntary sector and £7·6 million goes to the statutory sector. We are very keen to make sure that we draw upon people who have amazing expertise in communities and who can help design and deliver effective interventions, and that the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector can work closely together across those three linked areas.

Ms Ferguson: Percentage-wise, what, roughly, is the investment level in research and communications for the programme overall?

Ms Brown: For communications this year, it is, off the top of my head, about £276,000. I will check the figures for you. Research includes a number of different things. We can get the exact figures to you. We have our action research project and our adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) prevalence study, which we are undertaking to look at the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in the adult population. We then have a number of other disparate pieces of research that we are pulling together.

Ms Hazelden: The research spend is roughly comparable to the communications budget. It is in the same ballpark. We sought guidance on best practice for the programme. You are quite right: when you are delivering a project, it is really difficult to also think about how you will know whether it has worked. I have a lot of sympathy for those who are trying to figure out a project's effect after it has happened. Obviously, I would say this, but I am passionate about making sure that best practice is built in right at the beginning of every project. It empowers the people who are delivering a project to see the progress that has been made through the great work that they do.

Like I say, we sought some guidance on the best practice in that area. The rough guidance is that it is an investment of between 1% and 10% of your overall budget. It depends on how novel your approach is. Some of our approaches are more novel than others. That is where we put our focus. Things like the hospital navigator project had never been tried before in Northern Ireland, so we wanted to look at that more closely as opposed to some of the more established methods.

Ms Brown: As for where the projects are at — again, this goes back to that public health approach — many of them have become very embedded. They have been allowed scope, time and investment to be able to do what they need to do. We are now at the point where we are thinking, "How do we, through a public health approach, embed that learning? What would some of the smaller-scale pilot projects that have proved to be successful look like if they were scaled up and mainstreamed?".

We are going through and trying to pull together all the evidence, data and research, which is a Herculean task for the team. About 40% of the team is in front of you today. The information from 100 projects has to be analysed. I am looking at Claire, because she does a lot of the heavy lifting on that. We are trying to do it quickly and efficiently, but you find that it is a big task when you start to aggregate all the data. We have looked at whether there are different ways of doing it, including AI solutions that may be able to look at the data in an innovative way in order to allow us to get through it in more detail more quickly. We will come to some conclusions later in the year. We will put them to our sponsor group and then to Ministers to make some recommendations on what needs to happen

next. In all of this, we are absolutely determined to make sure, to the best of our ability, that we do not lose the progress that has been made and do not lose the good work from projects that have been successful. We are mindful, however, of the wider public finance climate and some of the challenges that we face, so we are balancing all those factors and will look at the evidence to see where it takes us. It will then be for Ministers, having been presented with the evidence, to decide what they want to do next.

We were asked about engagement at grassroots level. We are a very small programme team for a very big programme. We all make a point of visiting and engaging with projects as often as we can. Frankly, we can read all the research and data in the world, but there is nothing like going out and seeing things for ourselves. That is a very small part of it, however. What is really important is the fact that our project delivery leads are in the community. They are the community. They are the people who are living there. They are the experts. All of that is built into project delivery and assessment, and that all comes through to us. As Claire and Jo have said, we are trying to capture and record, and not just here, the experiences of people so that those can then be shared with other people. That means that our engagement is not just on a personal level but heard and felt more widely outside the programme. We are out and about as much as we are able to be, but our delivery partners do that daily. They are in and around communities all the time, as you know.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Doug, did you want in again quickly?

Mr Beattie: No, I will leave it. I could go down a rabbit hole.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I have a couple of questions, if that is all right. Page 9 of the briefing paper that you sent us states:

> *"Cooperation in data and intelligence sharing has been challenging and more work needs to be done to find effective methods to share data."*

You touched on that in your answers to other questions. What are you finding in that field? Are people willing to share data, but the systems are not there? What is happening? We are hearing from across the board that the systems do not speak to one another.

Ms Brown: That is the challenge. I do not think that there is any lack of willingness on the part of anyone with whom we work to share data, but there is a challenge to doing that across different sectors and professions. We need to find ways in which to get much better at doing it.

Ms Hazelden: It speaks to the nature of paramilitarism as well. We were talking about hidden harms, and they are hidden for a reason in our society. We are starting to be able to learn more about them through the programme, but they are very difficult to get data on. It goes back to the point about the lifespan of projects. Although we have projects that deliver on the ground, we are trying not to consider any issue to be too difficult or to normalise any issue. When we go out, we hear repeatedly about the impact of drugs, drug-related intimidation and links with illegal moneylending. In this financial year, the programme is funding a scoping project through the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA) to look at drug-related intimidation. The programme is using learning from other jurisdictions and scoping out what happens at the minute, with the aim of being able to come up with a joint, cohesive response that makes use of structures that are already in place rather than creates something that is new and in a silo. I guess that kind of speaks to the public health approach and looking at new issues. It is very difficult to get data on people who have been intimidated by paramilitaries, because those people do not want to provide that information. It speaks to the nature of the problem and to the fact that coercive control is involved. We are using the programme to try to examine those really thorny issues in order to move forward and make progress on them.

Ms Brown: There is a challenge here, in that some of the data is hidden in plain sight. That goes back to the point about terminology. If we ask organisations — justice-focused organisations that collect data — for data on paramilitarism, they genuinely may not think that they have any relevant data, but by asking them that question in a slightly different form, such as, "What information do you have on intimidation?", or on vulnerability, addiction issues or mental health, we start to get a much richer picture. Once we get that information, if we get it, the challenge is to know what to do with it and to know how to interrogate it effectively. That goes back to an issue that is much bigger than the programme, which is how we use big data and how the public sector uses data to inform policy and make sure that that policy is genuinely rooted in a deep understanding of the problem. I am not

blaming anyone, but I am not sure that, collectively, we yet have the capability to deal with that, but that is where we need to get to.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): That is one of the things that I find most fascinating about your project: the evidence base, the interpretation of data, and how it impacts across the board. That is the kind of work that is magnificent. It is great to see that you guys are world leaders on some of this work, including on trauma-informed practice. It is a shame that it is the position that our country is in, but, nevertheless, I commend all of you for taking forward that work and for being world leaders in those fields.

I have a couple more questions. Page 11 of your paper is on step 2. It states:

> *"Many risks and factors are common to many different places and jurisdictions ... The Programme has been trying to identify which combinations are most relevant in Northern Ireland. This should allow resource to be targeted to the correct areas and not merely 'hot spot' areas identified by data alone."*

Will you outline how that works in practice?

Ms Hazelden: It speaks to the first question that you asked about data sharing, so it is a little bit of a combination. The diagram that accompanies the paragraphs on step 2 helps explain it a little bit. Globally, the World Health Organization developed this little framework to show that often when there are harms, particularly violence-related harms, they are interconnected in lots of different ways. Adele spoke earlier about the young people in our project. The majority of them had experienced or witnessed violence at home. There is therefore a connection: violence at home; violence in the community; violence in peer groups; and interpersonal violence, so between individuals. Those are sometimes referred to as nested harms, and people often experience more than one of them at a time. Having an understanding of that complexity is important when we are trying to figure out where needs our investment and where that investment would have the most impact.

The risk factors and protective factors for all kinds of harm are relatively consistent. The environment that young people are in determines the kind of situation that they may become vulnerable to, be that criminality, paramilitarism, as we call it here, or, as it may be called somewhere else, a gang. It is about understanding the whole context, I suppose. There is sometimes an assumption made that people know what all those things are. Sometimes it is obvious, but, as Jo mentioned, a lot of the time it is not always so clear and those things are much more hidden.

You will see in your pack the shared outcomes framework. It looks more at the impact of that activity on individuals and communities and on individuals' safety. The aim is to try to change those things for individuals and communities. All those shared outcomes, and our attempts to get all the information on them to help inform our investment decisions, are almost what led to the strategy map with all its connected lines, because, every time that we tried to get a little bit more information, we realised that there was a whole other point that perhaps did not address paramilitarism explicitly but did address it implicitly, given all the various harms.

Ms Brown: The point about hotspot areas, in particular, is that they can be a symptom of something. We can see that something looks prominent and of particular concern, and the issue or the area is then flooded with resource to address it. Again, that goes back to the public health model of crisis intervention. We are dealing with the outworkings of something. What we will not necessarily have done, unless we look at the data in the round and understand its drivers, is understand why it has happened. That root cause could be something very different. We therefore want to avoid that situation. We looked at the things that are most prominent — the hotspots — and want to ensure that we understand what is behind them. It can be quite a long and meandering route back to the root causes. If we do not do that, we will continue to be in a cycle of crisis response, and that is not great for outcomes. Outcomes from crisis response tend to be less positive. We will continue to incur the human and financial costs if we do not start to intervene earlier and understand what the root causes are, which can be very different from how an issue manifests itself.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I have gone through your programmes. I am familiar with some and have visited some. You indicated that you will be short of funding for projects this year. I think that you gave a figure, but I cannot remember it off the top of my head. In the course of the information that you have provided to us, you indicated the level of investment requested and the level of investment

recommended. Most projects have been given the same amount of budget, but a few have not. How did you determine which would not and the extent to which they would not?

Ms Brown: It is important to say that, probably the previous time that we talked, we were not clear about what we would be offered in UK Government match funding. That is now clearer. For 2024-25, on the basis of budget discussions with the Executive last year, we have broadly the same amount overall that we have had in previous years. From looking at the projects themselves, we have considered a combination of factors: evidence of outcomes; the extent to which funding is matched against assessed need; and the overall availability of finance.

We are also mindful of the fact that we are coming towards the end of the funding period and that we have no clarity on what will happen beyond March 2025. We have therefore needed to take a responsible approach in order to ensure that we do not create a tail and pressures when we do not have any sense of how projects might be funded. We have tried, wherever possible, to balance all those different factors and to make sure, to the best of our ability — this has been discussed on the basis of evidence and information and been considered by our sponsor group and benefits realisation groups — that we get the most effective return on our investment and try to keep a balanced portfolio across all the different projects.

It is never a perfect science. It has been done in consultation. We have to make sure that we are balancing stability and continuity with innovation. That is really quite difficult to do, and it is very difficult to do in the context of not knowing what will happen next with funding. Broadly speaking, we have been trying to take a balanced approach so that we have innovation and continuity but do not create a tail that would create pressures for Departments further down the line.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): You are looking at a reduction in funding for the PCTF, and the PSNI is therefore looking at ways in which the PCTF's work could be incorporated, if it had to be, into its work on organised crime and so on. I know that conversations are ongoing with partners. The work of the PCTF is a specific area of work also involving the NCA and HMRC to tackle behaviours. If that funding were to stop, reduce or whatever, do you know yet whether those partners would continue to work to the same extent in Northern Ireland as they do currently under the agreement?

Ms Brown: We are working through that at the moment. We have not yet got any definitive answers. It is a significant concern to us all that we would lose any capability in that area, and, indeed, in other parts of the programme, when we can demonstrate considerable success. It is worth noting that the PCTF has had a really positive impact, with the three agencies working together in communities. We hear that pretty consistently when we engage with people. We are certainly keen to make the case for continued activity in that area, but that will really depend on wider funding decisions for the programme.

We are really keen to make sure that we have conversations about what is possible, regardless of the funding outcome. There are lots of ways in which to take forward activities. We had a conversation with our partners yesterday about capturing learning, policy and processes that can be adopted without financial support. I am not saying that that is the answer, and we want to avoid at all costs a funding cliff edge in March 2025. That would be devastating for the people who need support, for the organisations that have placed their trust in the programme and for the longer-term impacts on efforts to deal with the problem. We are where we are, however, and we need to wait to see what funding will be awarded to the programme in due course.

Mr Dickson: I will follow up on that comment very briefly. Do you believe that those whose influence you are working to reduce would be emboldened if they were to realise that the programme was coming to an end?

Ms Brown: Anyone who is engaged in exploitation is probably much more agile than us as a collective in engaging in that exploitation and making the most of opportunities. We have seen that consistently, whether as a result of, of late, COVID or the cost-of-living crisis. If supports are removed and vulnerability increases as a result, I am pretty confident that it would lead to a change. We have had some really impressive successes. The number of paramilitary-style assaults and instances of intimidation is down. Protective factors have increased for thousands of people, although I am not sure for exactly how many.

Ms Hazelden: It is in the tens of thousands now.

Ms Brown: Those are all people, communities and families in need of that support. Whether it comes from the programme or somewhere else is a matter for Ministers, but, fundamentally, the work and the need to which I pointed at the start of the presentation has not gone away.

Ms Doherty: I was reading some of the paramilitary crime task force's more recent reporting before coming to the Committee, and I was really taken by the effectiveness of having those three agencies work together on the issue. We know about seizures of drugs and weapons and all of that, but some points struck me: the value of freezing orders obtained was £41,000; the value of recovery orders granted was £40,000; the value of tax assessments issued was £13,000; and the loss of HMRC revenue prevented was nearly £23 million. That is all in the past three months. The task force is really having an impact, and, as we have said repeatedly, the progress, the capability and the working together cannot be lost. Whether the work is done through the programme or a similar structure is a matter for others to decide, but the learning and the capability need to remain.

Ms Brown: I will make a final comment on that. We have been trying hard to cost paramilitarism, which, it turns out, is not easy to do. Our provisional figures are somewhere between half a billion pounds and three quarters of a billion pounds a year. Apart from the moral and ethical reasons, which should be at the forefront of our thinking when addressing the issue and providing support to people who need it, there is a huge economic cost. If we do not continue the work, we will see those costs increase. We are clear on that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thank you very much. The length of time that we have kept you here indicates our interest in the subject matter. We commend the work that you do, and we encourage you in it. Where we can support your call for resources, I am fairly sure that we will be happy to do so. Thank you, and keep up the good work.

Ms Brown: Thank you very much.