

PRESS RELEASE

FIFTH REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REPORTING COMMISSION

The Independent Reporting Commission (the IRC) has today published its Fifth Report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity.

The Commission was established in 2017 to report annually on progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland by an international treaty between the UK and Irish Governments, and the Fresh Start Agreement.

Commenting on the findings and recommendations in the Fifth Report, the Commissioners said:

“It remains our view that the risks posed to society by the continuing existence of paramilitary groups and structures mean that paramilitarism remains a clear and present danger in and for Northern Ireland.

“In the last year reaction to political developments, particularly relating to the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, led to new instability at political level, which in turn fed speculation about the potential for a resurgence of paramilitary activity. A number of paramilitary-related incidents served to heighten that speculation.

“While there remains much to be concerned about we have seen some reduction in paramilitary activity and progress in several of the initiatives being developed by the Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime and we welcome the increasing emphasis on a Whole of Government approach to tackling paramilitarism and the commitment to the well-established public health approach. It is vital that funding for the Programme and the goals behind it must be sustained well into the future.”

Emphasising the necessity for a formal Group Transition process with the aim of disbandment of the paramilitary groups the Commissioners said:

“It remains our belief that in addition to the Twin Track approach of policing/justice responses and measures addressing socio-economic issues in the communities where the paramilitaries operate – which is delivering valuable results – a comprehensive and credible process of engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves around Group Transition, with the aim of disbandment, is now required.

“We urge the two Governments, the NI parties and civic society to give urgent consideration to such a process, building on models from elsewhere, including the concept of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

We also believe there would be merit in preparing the ground for a formal process. This could be done, for instance, by the Governments appointing (with the support of the Executive) an Independent Person who would be authorised to speak to the various interested parties, including the paramilitary groups themselves.”

Commenting on evidence of progress being made the Commissioners added:

“While we share the impatience of many to see more progress more quickly, putting in place effective steps to deal with the complex issues involved takes time. The Fresh Start process has established a whole new infrastructure which has been put in place to tackle

paramilitarism, involving a wide range of measures and initiatives which are now beginning to gain real traction.

“Cross-border law enforcement co-operation continues to be a vital part of this work, including through the Joint Agency Task Force (set up to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime).”

On Phase Two of the Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime the Commissioners said:

“We welcome the establishment of a new Sponsor Group, under the leadership of the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which draws together senior officials from those departments and agencies involved in tackling paramilitarism. We see this as having the potential to foster further change and to drive in a holistic way the wider transformative work that the IRC and the Fresh Start Agreement itself identified as necessary to deal comprehensively with paramilitarism. We urge that the Group continues to deepen its focus on collaborative working across all dimensions of the effort.

“We also welcome the Programme’s commitment to a public health approach (treating violence like a disease). We have previously called for a “Whole of Government” approach to tackling paramilitarism and believe that further embedding of this public health approach will help with ensuring that everyone plays their part in tackling paramilitarism (whether funded by the Programme or not). We recommend further roll out of collaborative approaches and initiatives in areas where they are most needed.”

The Commissioners also recommended introducing organised crime legislation stating:

“Having seen how effective the use of organised crime legislation has been in disrupting organised crime in other jurisdictions we consider this legislation to be a crucial additional tool in the fight against paramilitary and organised crime. We urge an Executive to prioritise legislation for this in the next mandate of the Northern Ireland Assembly.”

Concluding, they said:

“We reiterate that there is now an opportunity as the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement approaches to re-double efforts at all levels to achieve the vision of that Agreement of a Northern Ireland free of paramilitarism and based entirely on the principles of peace and democracy.”