

PRESS RELEASE

Third Report of the Independent Reporting Commission

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

In the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015, from which the IRC's mandate flows, the two Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive recommitted themselves to bringing paramilitarism to an end once and for all. The IRC's mandate is to report on progress towards reaching that goal and to make recommendations on what more can be done. The IRC is not an assessment body like the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) and does not provide detailed security or threat or status assessments of the various paramilitary groupings as the IMC did.

Commenting on the findings and recommendations in the Report, the Commissioners expressed regret that while there had been progress, paramilitarism remains a clear and present danger in Northern Ireland in 2020:

“We regard the continuation of paramilitary activity as unacceptable. It is the express will of the people of Northern Ireland articulated in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that violence has no place in the politics of Northern Ireland and that political viewpoints should be pursued through exclusively democratic and peaceful means. In our view, the continuation of paramilitarism 22 years after that Agreement is against the wishes of the people, is without justification and should end.”

However, the Commissioners said there were some grounds for hope. They believe that the restoration of the Executive and functioning legislative Assembly provides a major opportunity to “re-set” the mission to end paramilitarism. The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme is once again back under Executive direction and leadership. The Commissioners welcomed the new phase of the Programme approved by the Executive during the Summer and the three year extension involved. This will require additional funding from Westminster and the Executive, and the Commissioners call on both to ensure that this is forthcoming.

In the Report, the Commissioners reiterate their view that ending paramilitarism requires a Twin-Track Approach, combining policing and criminal justice responses alongside measures to address the systemic socio-economic challenges facing communities where paramilitaries operate such as educational under-attainment, long-term unemployment, poverty and drugs. This will require a Whole of Government focus and the Commissioners are encouraged that that is reflected in the new phase of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme approved by the Executive.

The Commissioners believe that there are still too many communities in Northern Ireland and many individuals and families in local communities who remain under the coercive control of paramilitary groups. That is simply unacceptable and the Commissioners welcome the progress to enhance legislative powers in tackling this problem. It also notes key successes in helping to reduce the vulnerability of young people to paramilitary influence through the creative and effective work with at-risk young people. Innovative multi-agency work assisting young people under threat is also welcomed.

While Covid-19 has been a major challenge for society in Northern Ireland, the Commissioners believe that the measures being introduced to address its impact provide an opportunity also in terms of efforts to end paramilitarism. The Report makes the case that the targeted investment that is being provided by both the UK Government and the Executive, through planned initiatives such as the Shared Prosperity Fund, should include areas with a significant history of paramilitary activity. They make that case on the basis that the communities in question have been beset by deep socio-economic challenges that require the kind of bespoke, sustained and holistic interventions envisaged in these initiatives.

The Commissioners reiterate their call on the Executive to consider setting up a dedicated Northern Ireland agency for the civil recovery of the proceeds of crime to further bolster the fight against organised crime.

In the context of building a more inclusive society, the Report includes a recommendation on dealing with the paramilitary past, which the Commissioners term "Memorialisation". They highlight the need for an increased focus on how that past is remembered and reflected in current day events such as funerals, marking anniversaries, erecting murals, flags, memorials and plinths.

The Commissioners reiterate their call from their 2019 Report for consideration to be given to a transition process for paramilitary groups.

Ends

For further media enquiries and to arrange Zoom interviews with the panel please contact Maria McCann at McCann Public Relations maria@mccannpr.com or call 02890 666322 or 07802934246

Notes for Editors:

Report is available at 1pm pm Tuesday 17th November at:

<https://www.ircommission.org/publications>

The four Commissioners: John McBurney and Monica McWilliams, who were nominated by the Northern Ireland Executive (the Executive); Tim O'Connor, nominated by the Irish Government, and Mitchell Reiss, nominated by the UK Government, are tasked with reporting annually to the UK and Irish Governments and to Executive.

Track One of the Twin Track approach relates to policing and criminal justice responses including measures to speed up justice, enhance organised crime powers, and strengthen the policing response through neighbourhood policing and the Paramilitary Crime Task Force.

Track Two relates to the tackling of the underlying systemic socio-economic issues prevailing in communities in which the paramilitaries operate, including educational under-attainment, adverse childhood experiences, unemployment, poverty, mental health issues and drugs.