



# Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

Number Six

November 2023

Professor Ann Marie Gray (UU), Dr. Jennifer Hamilton (UU),  
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## SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report draws mainly on statistics which are in the public domain. Datasets from various government departments and public bodies in Northern Ireland have been used and comparisons made with figures produced by similar organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Using this variety of sources means that no standard model applies across the different departments and jurisdictions. In some cases there have been changes in how or what data has been collected which affects our ability to provide historical perspective. For some indicators we are reliant on survey-based data. The report also draws on qualitative data, research reports and peer reviewed literature.

Thanks are due to Heidi Riley and Nora Poloni Gallagher who provided research assistance on the project and to Emily Roberts for support with reference checking.

The contents of the report are the responsibility of the authors, generously assisted by the Advisory Group led by Professor Adrian Guelke, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Community Relations Council, the commissioning body.

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# FOREWORD

This is the sixth in the series of Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Reports, the first of which was published in February 2012. In each case the Community Relations Council has coordinated the project and published the report, with financial support from The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. We are grateful to The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) for the long-term commitment to this project, without which these reports would not be possible.

The independence of each report has been an important component of the process. As well as being independently funded, the report is independently authored; it collates data which is produced independently of the report; and it is overseen by an independent advisory panel which draws on a range of academic disciplines. The Panel was also independently chaired by the highly respected and experienced academic, Professor Emeritus Adrian Guelke (Queen's University Belfast).

The Community Relations Council would like to thank the report's authors, Professor Ann Marie Gray (Ulster University) and her team: Dr. Paula Devine (Queen's University Belfast), Dr. Jennifer Hamilton (Ulster University), Gareth Hetherington (Ulster University), Dr. Grainne Kelly (Ulster University), Dr. Brendan Lynn (Ulster University), Dr. Richard Martin (London School of Economics) and Dr. John Topping (Queen's University Belfast) who carried the enormous burden for compiling, analysing and ordering the research. We are also grateful to Professor Guelke and those who served on the Advisory Panel for reading through many drafts and for contributing insights, critical reflection, and encouragement. The members of the Advisory Panel for this report were Professor Paddy Hillyard (Professor Emeritus, Queens University Belfast), Tony McCusker, (former Chair of CRC who did much to develop the original idea and create an understanding of the value of the Peace Monitoring Report), Kirsty McManus (Institute of Directors), Frank Gaffikin (Professor Emeritus, Queens University Belfast), Dr. Emily Stanton (Community Relations In Schools) and Tim Jones (JRCT), all of whom discussed the many challenging topics in a thoughtful and good-humoured way.

Each report gathers and examines data on a wide range of topics relevant to our peace journey. The data is set out in an indicator framework which has four dimensions, this has been maintained throughout the series of reports. As the reports now span over a decade, the authors have ensured that the data is gathered in a largely consistent way, albeit that there are inevitably new and emerging events to be included, in this case for example, the pandemic. The consistency of the reports structure allows us to measure the distance travelled over time towards a peaceful and inclusive society or away from it (as movement towards peace here, as is the case everywhere, is not inevitable).

As can be seen in this report, there are a myriad of actions and inactions across a wide range of themes that can affect stability and peace in large and small ways. This report reveals the complex picture of events, providing the opportunity to consider them in the context of deeper stresses in our society. This is a challenging task. Peace processes are not linear, this makes them difficult to monitor. They are multi-dimensional, acted on by event taking place now but also by deep memory and hurts passed from generation to generation. As a result, we inevitably end up with a kaleidoscopic, sometimes contradictory picture. The process of building and sustaining peace is dynamic; everyone is involved in large and small ways in shaping the future, whether they realise it or not. The Community Relations Council hopes this report will be a valuable tool for shaping plans and setting the course for the contribution we all make to sustaining peace. Focus and commitment remain vital, because as we have seen throughout the world, peace processes are not guaranteed.

Following the publication of this report there will be a series of dissemination events at which the findings will be discussed. 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, this is a timely moment for a detailed account of the peace process – its weaknesses as well as its strengths. It continues to be our hope that the dispassionate analysis presented in this report will help those making the journey now or learning from it in the future.

**Dr. Jacqueline Irwin**  
Chief Executive Officer

**Community Relations Council**

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# TEN KEY POINTS

## 1 **Instability of devolved government in Northern Ireland with lengthy periods of collapse**

In the period covered by this report (October 2018 - May 2023) the Northern Ireland Assembly functioned for 29 out of 54 months. In the absence of functioning institutions or Direct Rule from Westminster there has been a political vacuum with the Secretary of State intervening on a limited number of issues through legislation at Westminster. Civil servants have been in the unenviable position of having to make decisions beyond the scope of what should be decided by officials operating without the direction and control of a minister. There has also been a lack of accountability, with no Assembly committees scrutinising the work of departments.

## 2 **Functionality and effectiveness of the devolved institutions and cumulative social/public policy failure**

Political instability and the lack of political leadership has resulted in failure to progress major social policy decisions, including health service and education reform and economic policy and address the cost of living crisis. While there was evidence of a stronger focus on social policy and some important legislative developments - including the introduction of climate change legislation – overall the Executive has not tackled many of the major and longstanding policy problems. Therefore, the political institutions, when reinstated, will have much to do. Dealing with broader structural issues will require stronger inter-linkage between economic, social and environmental policies.

## 3 **There has been a deterioration of inter-governmental relations on several levels.**

Firstly, this deterioration was evident in relations between the Westminster government and the Northern Ireland Executive; secondly, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and, thirdly between the UK government and the Republic of Ireland.

A number of factors contributed to this, including Brexit and arrangements for exiting the EU and the failure to resolve legacy issues.

## 4 **Failure to resolve legacy issues**

In the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, legacy issues have not been resolved. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill attracted substantial international criticism, brought into question the rule of law, and united Northern Ireland politicians and groups representing victims of the Troubles in opposition. There continued to be issues relating to investigations into collusive behaviour.

## **5 The COVID-19 pandemic**

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were far reaching, requiring intervention by the Westminster and Northern Ireland governments and other agencies. In addition to the health impact, the impact on the economy and areas such as education have been profound. The pandemic had a disproportionate impact on those experiencing poverty and disadvantage. It also exposed vulnerabilities in the Northern Ireland health and social care system and exacerbated longstanding problems, including waiting times. While initially the political parties were in agreement about the approach to be taken to the pandemic, differences in opinion soon emerged.

## **6 Brexit**

In the main, Northern Ireland politics has been dominated by Brexit and the NI Protocol. This has impacted on public attitudes, widening support for the idea that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely. Significantly, opposition to the NI Protocol resulted in the DUP withdrawing from the Northern Ireland Executive. While key changes were introduced through the Windsor Framework, at May 2023 this has not resulted in the restoration of the devolved institutions.

## **7 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**

The anniversary of the Agreement in April 2023 prompted commemoration and celebration of what is often regarded as an end to violent conflict in Northern Ireland. Many international media outlets reported that the Agreement had guaranteed continued peace and prosperity - rather than being a part of a wider and ongoing peace process. The anniversary was also a period of reflection, not just on what had been achieved but also on what remained to be done. While the anniversary was a focus for celebration, it was also a time when the political institutions were fragile and where the prospect of functioning government seemed distant.

## **8 Economic indicators present a mixed picture**

In the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the economy has progressed in several positive ways. The most notable changes were within the labour market, where employment grew strongly, and unemployment fell. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant economic impact, but the scale of the impact in Northern Ireland was broadly similar to the UK as a whole and the Government's fiscal response initially ensured a swift return to growth as health restrictions were lifted. Despite the many areas of economic improvement, the performance of the local economy is weaker than many other UK regions. Many of the longstanding challenges remained, including a reliance on higher levels of public spending, higher levels of economic inactivity (in particular long-term sickness), lower productivity and, as a result, lower earnings. Policy measures to raise skills, encourage innovation and investment, and improve competitiveness must be a priority for the remainder of the 2020s.

## **9 Spatial segregation and expressions of identity continue to cause tensions in some areas**

While politically there was less focus on issues such as parades, bonfires and flags, in some areas these issues continued to be very much alive and impact on communities. There were also examples of compromise and agreement - for example with regard to parades, while bonfires became more contentious in recent years.

Ideas about inclusion and social cohesion moved beyond Protestant and Catholic, particularly with regard to the inclusion of minority ethnic groups and LGBTQI+ people.

## **10 A contradictory picture with regard to crime, policing and security**

Evidence showed something of a contradictory picture with regard to crime, policing and security. On the one hand, Northern Ireland was a relatively safe society in relation to standard measures, perceptions and definitions of crime. On the other hand, of course much crime went unreported. Race remained the most common form of hate motivation in Northern Ireland, and the number of race crimes and incidents reported to the PSNI increased significantly, along with levels of domestic abuse crime and sexual offences. Significant legislative developments in the areas of domestic abuse and sexual violence were welcomed. A major source of controversy was proposed legislation on Northern Ireland legacy issues.

## 1. Introduction

This is the Sixth Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (NIPMR), and covers the period from October 2018 to May 2023. It is worth stating the purpose of the Peace Monitoring Report:

*It will provide independent monitoring of Northern Ireland's journey out of violence, and of the efforts to create a society in which all can live free from fear, and in relationships of trust and safety with their fellow citizens. An indicator framework will be created to allow the measurement of change towards the goals of equality, social cohesion, sharing, and the ability to deal with political difference through open dialogue and accommodation.*

As with previous reports, this publication presents a wide range of information on a variety of topics related to Northern Ireland (NI). In the case of some of these, such as political developments, the activities of paramilitary groups, policing, and community relations, the link to peace is obvious. However, a sustainable peace requires tackling socio-economic inequalities, as well as building a strong and productive economy and trust in political and other institutions. These issues are therefore also included in the report. The four dimension indicator framework, developed when the Peace Monitoring report series commenced in 2012 (Nolan, 2012), has been maintained. These are: *political progress* - how (or if) the political institutions set up under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement are working; *the sense of safety* - covering safety in different contexts including the home; *equality* - including structural economic and social and progress on social policy; and *cohesion and sharing* - examining sharing and separation in education, housing and public space. By way of context, this introduction section includes analysis of NI demography and an assessment of the economic situation. Several threads run through this report, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influence of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, especially in light of its 25th anniversary.

### **The COVID-19 pandemic**

The period covered by this report has been a turbulent one, both globally and locally. The COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through societies and economies globally while the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought the worst conflict to Europe since the Second World War and triggered a humanitarian crisis. It also further impacted economies already weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic. As seen throughout this report, Brexit and withdrawal from the European Union (EU) has continued to have a major impact on politics in the United Kingdom (UK) and NI.

The NI Assembly resumed in January 2020 following three years of collapse, but the return of the institutions was short lived, folding again in 2022. Even during the time that the Assembly and Executive were in operation, relationships between the parties, and particularly between Sinn Féin and the DUP, were often fractious and fractured. Even seemingly non-political/non-sectarian issues such as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic became political. During the lengthy periods from 2017, when NI has not had a government, the UK Government has not moved to introduce direct rule, as it did between 2002 and 2007. The considerable impact this political and decision-making vacuum has had on social and public policy and the delivery of public services is outlined throughout the report. In addition to no new primary legislation being passed, progress on major policy areas has been impacted.

The pandemic touched on every aspect of life in NI. The first COVID-19 case in NI was confirmed on 28 February 2020 with the first COVID-19 death on 18 March 2020. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has reported 5,060 COVID-19 related deaths<sup>1</sup> in NI based on deaths registered up to 22 February 2023 (NISRA, 2023a). The full impact of the pandemic will be unfolding for some years, but it did expose existing fragilities in systems of all kinds and the impacts were unevenly felt by some social groups already experiencing inequalities.

As in other countries, policy responses to the pandemic had to be swift and often based on little or imperfect information. In addition to public health measures and the financial supports rolled out by the Treasury (discussed later), the NI Executive did develop a number of policies aimed at supporting economic recovery. A 2021 COVID-19 recovery plan had four broad objectives: economic development; green growth and sustainable development; the health of the population; and tackling inequalities (The Executive Office, 2021). The pandemic has been estimated by the NI Audit Office to have cost £4.94bn in NI - £4.92bn of this was met by the UK Government with the remainder from departmental budget reallocations and supplementary NI Executive funding. The NI Audit Office (2023) has reported on some of the initiatives funded by the NI Executive and notes that, due to the speed at which these were being designed and implemented, some accounting officers in departments had concerns over the value for money and the risk of fraud and error and requested ministerial approval. While government departments and the NI Audit Office have identified and recouped some inappropriate payments, work on this is ongoing.

In the initial stages of the pandemic the political parties appeared to be taking a united approach; however, tensions soon appeared. The collapse of the Executive again during the pandemic resulted in a lack of ministerial direction. The impact of this has yet to be fully assessed and will be a consideration of the UK COVID Inquiry which was established in June 2022 (see <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/>).

### **Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**

The anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in April 2023 prompted commemoration and celebration of what is often regarded as an end to violent conflict in NI. Many international media outlets noted that the Agreement had guaranteed continued peace and prosperity rather than being a part of a wider and ongoing peace process. The anniversary was also a period of reflection not just on what had been achieved but on what remained to be done. Undoubtedly the vision set out in the Agreement went beyond an end to violent conflict with aspiration to a more positive and inclusive peace through a commitment to equality and human rights (Meehan, 2006; Murtagh, 2021; O'Connell, Ní Aoláin and Malagón, 2023), as discussed throughout this report.

Power sharing has been renegotiated since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement through the St. Andrew's Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 2006), the Hillsborough agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 2010), the Stormont House Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 2014) and the New Decade, New Approach Agreement (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020) with an increasing focus on achieving consensus between the DUP and Sinn Féin. As this report shows, while debates over power sharing continue, in particular with regard to NI's consociational arrangements, there is still broad public support for the Agreement.

<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 related deaths reflects where COVID19 or 'suspected' or 'probable' COVID-19 was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate, including in combination with other health conditions.

### Focus of future peace monitoring reports

More than a decade after the first NIPMR (Nolan, 2012) was published, many of the indicators used remain relevant and important. However, ensuring that indicators are located within the lived experience of everyday life suggests some change in focus to include, for example, more analysis of environmental issues, identified as a priority issue by many young people.

In June 2022 the first climate change legislation in NI - Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) - received royal assent. Prior to the legislation being enacted, NI had been the only part of the UK with no climate change legislation. The Act creates a target for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 creating legal obligations to reduce emissions. It requires the development and publication of five-year Climate Action Plans with the first to be published by the end of 2023. However, the absence of institutions has delayed the implementation of the legislation. There are also concerns about the impact of Brexit on environmental policy if the UK government regresses on or does not keep pace with EU policy and regulations (Gravey and Jordan, 2023). Environmental policy is devolved and governments in Wales and Scotland favour keeping pace with EU developments. There is no similar commitment in NI given the politically-contested nature of environmental policy and tension between agri-growth (which has been a priority for economic development) and environmentalism. Given the environmental challenges facing NI there should be more focus on these issues in future peace monitoring reports.

In 2022 the Young Life and Times Survey asked 16 year olds whether the Agreement was still important and relevant for their generation. While 43 per cent said that it was, 29 per cent felt it was mainly for the older generation and 15 per cent said they didn't know (ARK, 2022). Findings discussed in this report also reflect more pessimistic views held by some young people about community relations in NI. Young people growing up in NI today are part of a post Belfast/Good Friday Agreement generation and hold a different set of political priorities to those that have dominated in NI in recent years. The NI Youth Forum (2023) found their most pressing concerns to be climate change, mental health, education and human rights, with a very small number citing Brexit and the Troubles. The findings do raise questions about how politics and community relations work in NI engages young people.

As of May 2023, NI does appear to be at another juncture. Some of the issues relating to the NI Protocol seem to have been dealt with, although NI remains without a government. Such a political vacuum has consequences, including economic and social consequences which are important factors in aiding the cohesion of any society.

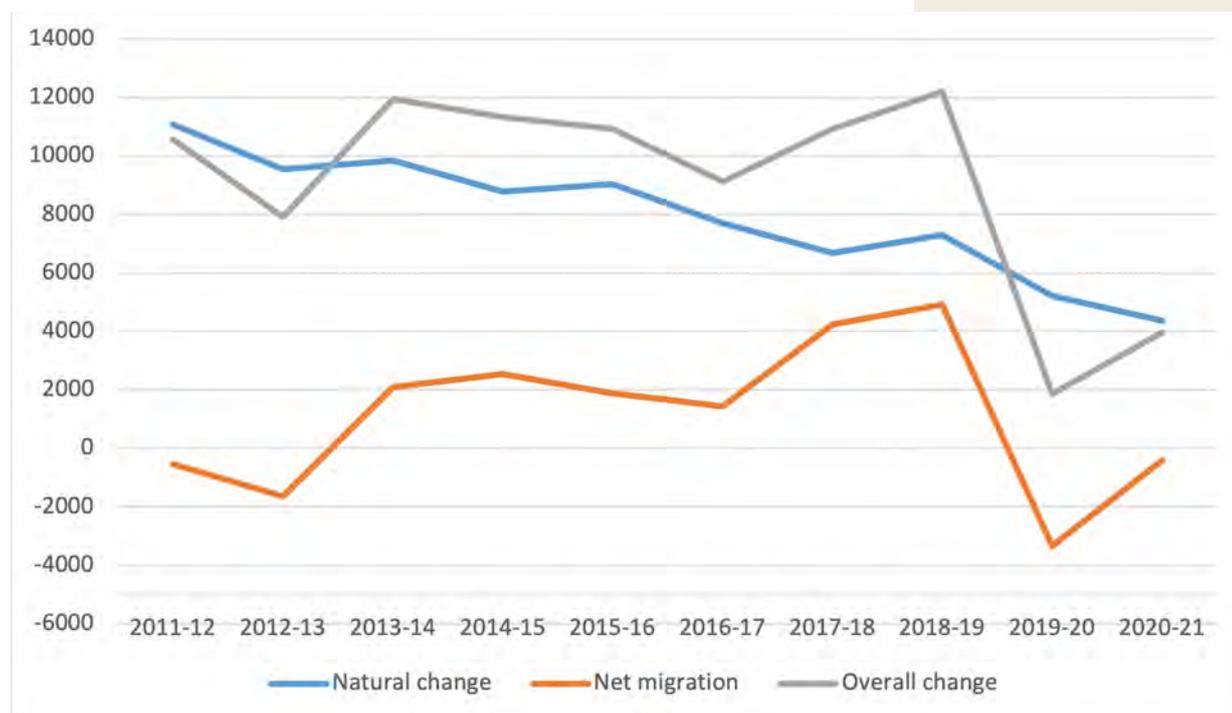
## 2. Society

Previous Peace Monitoring Reports have highlighted the demographic changes that have taken place in NI, especially in relation to religious balance and immigration. Results from the most recent Census of Population, held on 21 March 2021, provide a useful update.

On Census Day, the NI population comprised 1,903,175 usual residents, and the Census figures have been used to rebase the mid-year population estimates (NISRA, 2023b). These indicate that the population has increased by five per cent between mid-2011 and mid-2021. The main driver of

population growth (88%) was natural change: a net increase of 79,600 people, made up of 235,300 births minus 155,700 deaths (see Figure 1). Migration accounted for 12 per cent of the population change over the decade, with an estimated 237,000 people coming to live in NI, while 225,900 left.

**Figure 1: Components of population change, 2011-2 to 2020-21**



Source: NISRA (2023b)

A comparison of key demographic statistics across the United Kingdom (UK) shows a continuation of trends highlighted in the previous NIPMR. Table 1 shows that Northern Ireland:

- experienced the second highest population growth between 2011 and 2021 (5%);
- has the youngest population in the UK (median age, 39.8 in 2021);
- has the highest fertility rate;
- in the UK (although this has fallen from 1.97 in 2014 to 1.71 in 2020);
- has the second lowest death rate among the four jurisdictions (measured by age standardised mortality rate, which takes the age distribution into account).

**Table 1: Population of Northern Ireland: comparisons with other UK jurisdictions**

	UK	England	Wales	Scotland	NI
<b>Population (millions, rounded)</b>					
2021	67.0	56.6	3.1	5.5	1.9
2011	63.3	53.1	3.1	5.3	1.8
% change 2011-2021	5.9	6.5	1.4	3.4	5
<b>Median age (years)</b>					
	40.7	40.5	43.1	42.2	39.8
<b>Total fertility rates (children per women)</b>					
2020	1.56	1.59	1.47	1.29	1.71
2025 (projected)	1.53	1.56	1.44	1.26	1.68
2045 (projected)	1.59	1.62	1.47	1.3	1.74
<b>Deaths (age standardised mortality rate)</b>					
2021	1,029.2	1,008.3	1,087	1,180.6	1,044.1

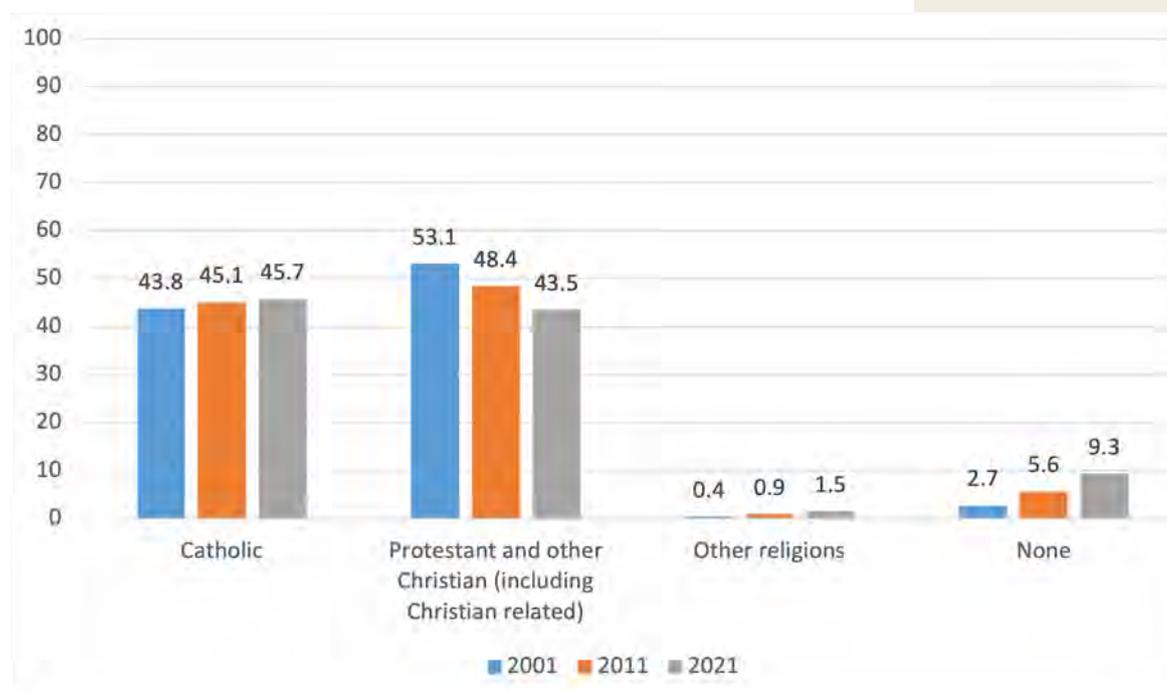
Source: Office for National Statistics (2022a; 2023)

The third NIMPR Peace Monitoring Report (Nolan, 2014) highlighted that the 2011 Census data indicated that, for the first time, Protestants were not in the majority in the population (48.4%). In addition, there was a reduction in the gap between the proportion of Catholics (45.1%) and the proportion of Protestants, to 3.3 percentage points. Thus, the results of the 2021 Census religion questions were long awaited, and led to much speculation and debate before and after their release.

The 2021 Census recorded religion using two questions. Firstly, current religion was measured by responses to the question *What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?* Secondly, anyone stating that they had no current religion was then asked about their religion of upbringing, using the question *What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?* (NISRA, 2022a).

Based on the question on current religion, 42.3 per cent were Catholic, 37.4 per cent were Protestant<sup>2</sup>, 1.3 per cent stated another religion, 17.4 per cent had no religion, and 1.6 per cent did not state a religion. Thus, for the first time, the proportion of Catholics was larger than the proportion of Protestants (by 4.9 percentage points). However, it is the composite measure of religion created using the two religion questions which was often cited in the media. Based on this measure, the gap between the proportion of Protestants and Catholics is smaller, at 2.2 percentage points (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, regardless of the measure, Catholics outnumbered Protestants for the first time since the foundation of Northern Ireland. Figure 2 also indicates an increase in the proportion of the population with other religions, and those with no religion, indicating the increasing diversity of the NI population.

Figure 2: Percentage of the population by religion/religion of upbringing

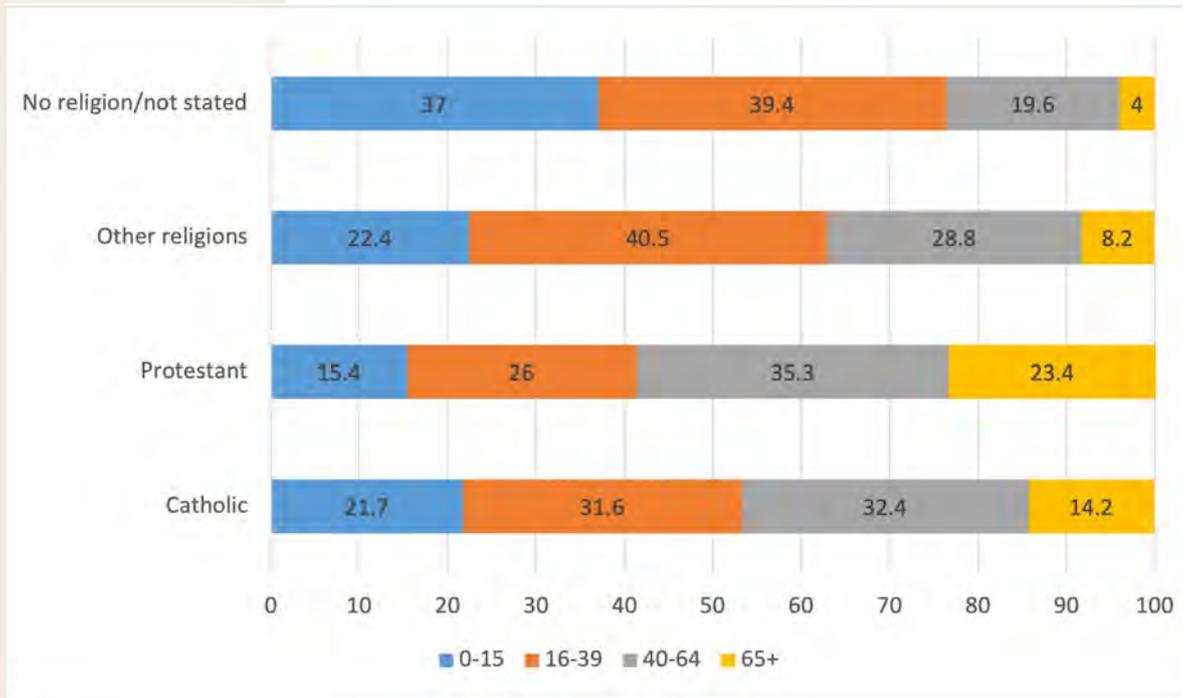


Source: NISRA (2022a)

As highlighted in the previous NIPMRs, the distribution of religions across NI is not uniform. For example, the proportion of Catholics was highest in Derry City and Strabane (72.4%) and Newry, Mourne and Down (72.11%). The highest proportion of Protestants were in Ards and North Down (67.9%) and Mid and East Antrim (67.2%). Only 3.5 per cent of people living in Derry City and Strabane had no religion, compared with 17.1 per cent in Ards and North Down.

The variation of age structure within religions was highlighted in the fifth NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) and this is also evident from the 2021 Census data. In particular, as shown in Figure 3, people with no religion or religion not stated had a younger age structure than other groups, especially Protestants. For example, 76.4 per cent of those with no religion/religion not stated were aged under 40, compared with 62.9 per cent of those from other religions, 53.3 per cent of Catholics and 41.4 per cent of Protestants. In contrast, nearly one quarter of Protestants (23.4%) were aged 65 years or more, compared with only four per cent of those with no religion/religion not stated.

Figure 3: Age and religion in Northern Ireland (%), 2021



Source: Census 2021

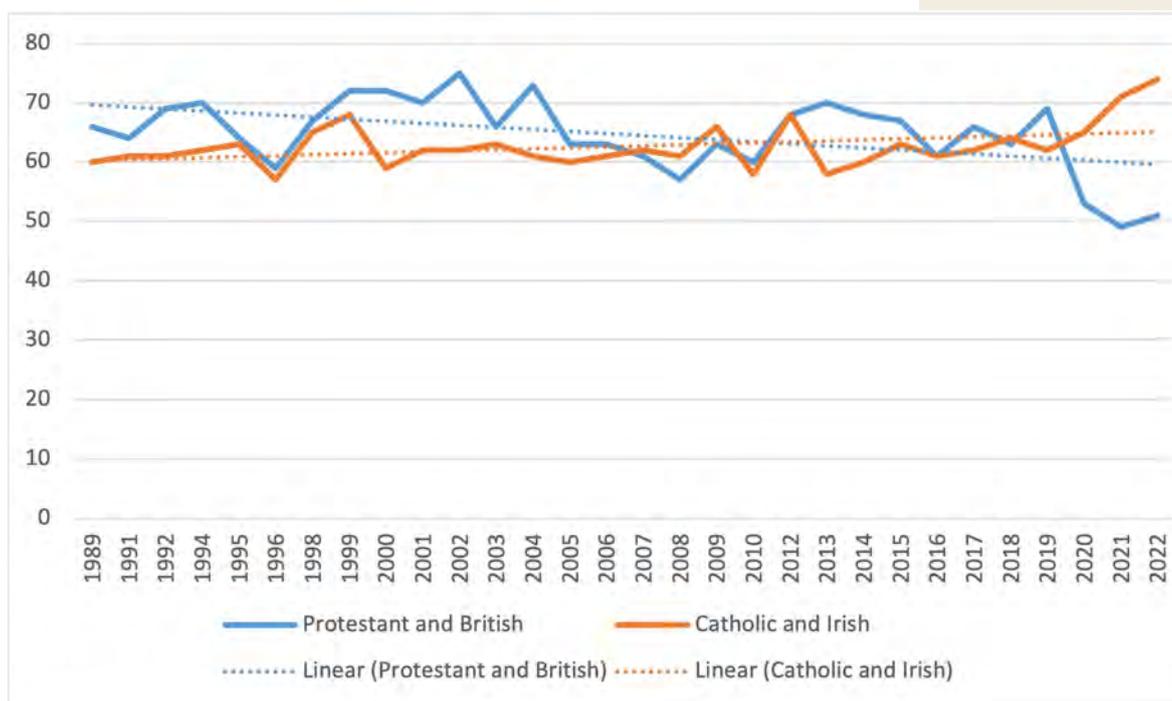
These Census figures relating to religion, as well as to age patterns, triggered public debate about future voting patterns, support for Irish unification, and the demand for a border poll. While these discussions were often based on the presumed continuation of the Protestant/British, Protestant/unionist, Catholic/Irish or Catholic/nationalist (Muldoon *et al.*, 2008), data from the NI Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey which ran from 1989 to 1996, and the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey data suggest some change in these traditional patterns in recent years<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 4 shows that the proportion of Protestant respondents identifying as British has decreased from 66 per cent in 1989 to 51 per cent in 2022. However, during the same time period, the proportion of Catholic respondents identifying as Irish has increased from 60 per cent in 1989 to 74 per cent. Furthermore, Figure 5 shows that, overall, the proportion of Protestant respondents identifying as unionists in 2022 (66%) is similar to that in 1989 (69%). However, the proportion of Catholic respondents identifying as nationalist has risen from 40 per cent to 64 per cent in the same period.

A focus on unionist and nationalist identities ignores the substantial bloc of respondents identifying as neither unionist nor nationalist (*neithers*): 38 per cent in 2022, compared with 31 per cent identifying as unionist and 26 per cent identifying as nationalist (Hayward and Rosher, 2023).

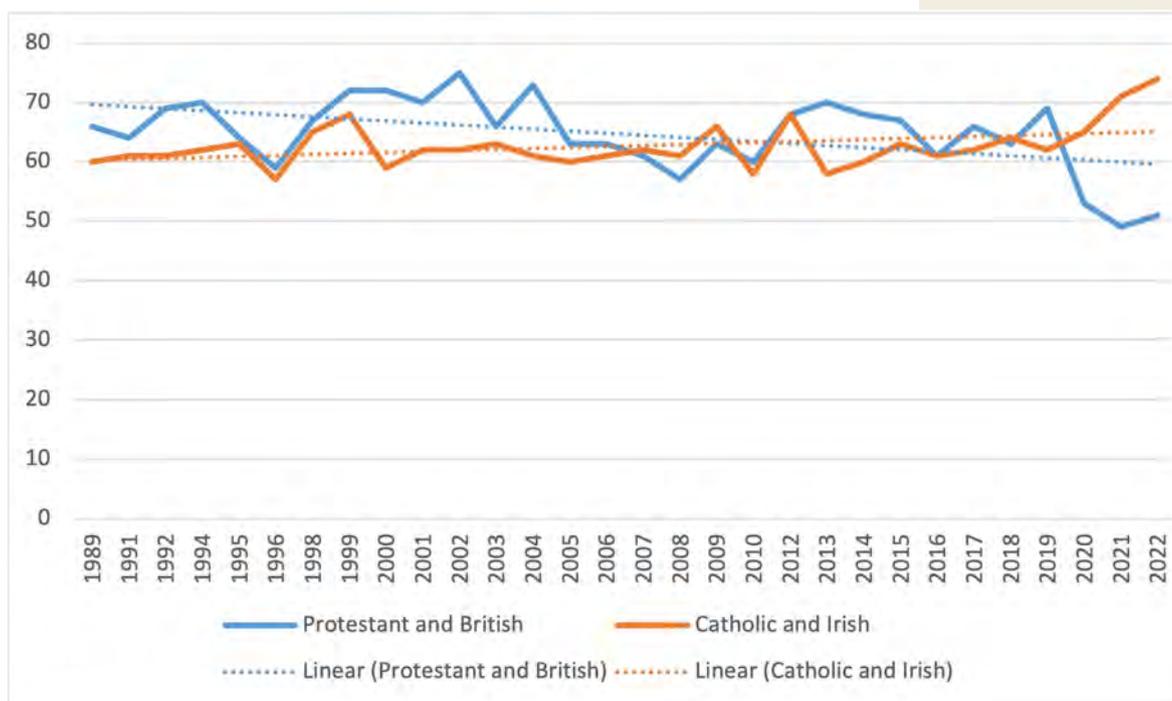
<sup>3</sup> Both NISA and NILT were traditionally completed via a face-to-face interview, followed by a self-completion questionnaire. Due to COVID-19, NILT switched to online completion from 2020 onwards)

Figure 4: National identity and religion in NI (%), 1989-2022



Source: NILT 1998-2022; NISA, 1989-1996

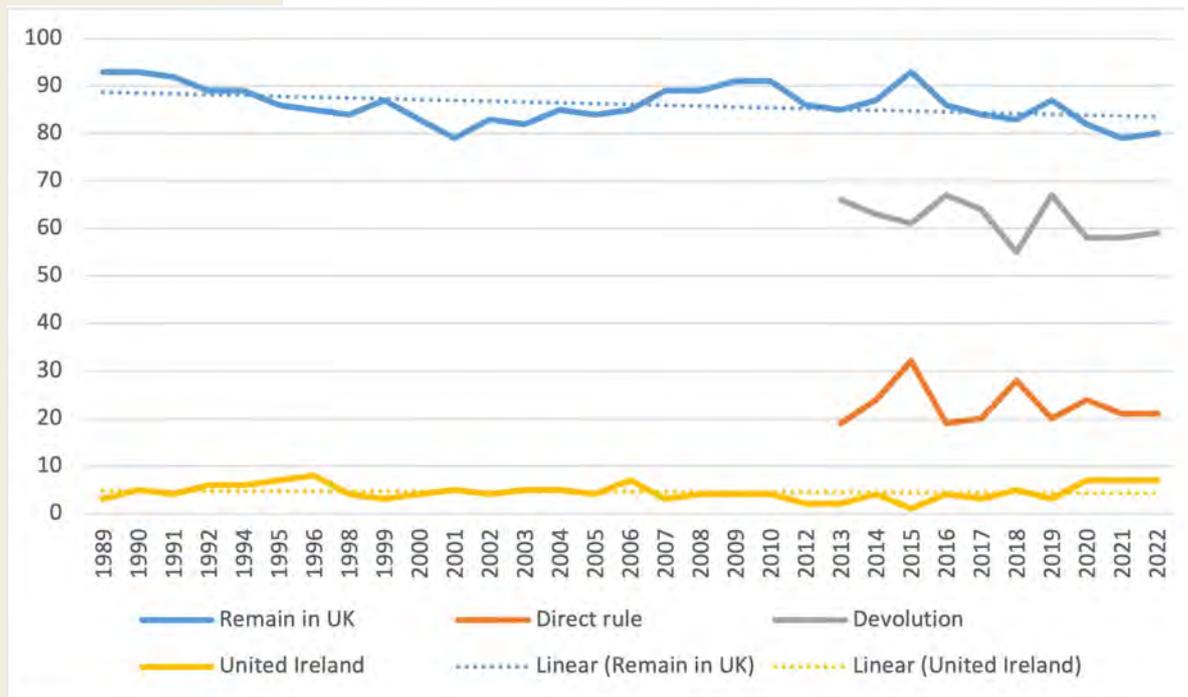
Figure 5: Percentage of Protestants describing themselves as unionist, and Catholics describing themselves as nationalist, 1989 -2022 (discontinuous)



Source: NILT 1998-2022; NISA, 1989-1996

As highlighted earlier, the Census data on religion brought the issue of Irish unification to the fore. However, the 2022 NILT survey indicates that only 31 per cent of respondents think that the long term policy for NI should be to reunify with the rest of Ireland (Hayward and Rosher, 2023). Figure 6 shows that there has consistently been very little support among Protestants for a united Ireland, whilst eight out of ten think that NI should remain in the UK.

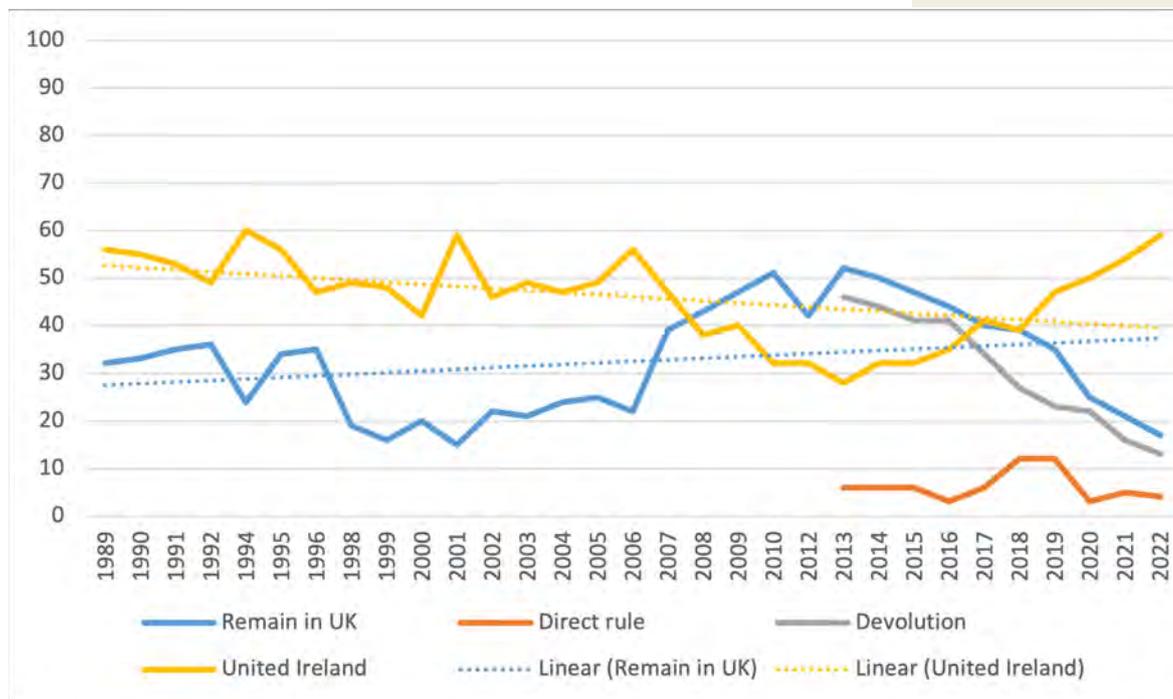
**Figure 6: Constitutional preferences of Protestants (%), 1989-2022 (discontinuous)**



Source: NILT 1998-2022; NISA, 1989-1996

The previous NIPRM (Gray *et al.*, 2018) reported that since 2013, an increasing proportion of Catholic respondents supported a united Ireland, and this trend has continued: in 2022, 59 per cent of Catholic respondents supported unification, similar to the 1989 figure of 56 per cent.

Figure 7: Constitutional preferences of Catholics (%), 1989-2022 (discontinuous)



Source: NILT 1998-2022; NISA, 1989-1996

These figures show fluctuations and complexity in identities and in constitutional preferences, suggesting that Census data on religion may not paint the full picture when calling for/against a border poll (Cooley, 2022).

The previous NIPMRs have highlighted the increasing diversity of the NI population, as well as the fluctuation in migration flows. As highlighted earlier, net migration of 11,200 people accounted for 12 per cent of population change between 2011 and 2021 (NISRA, 2023b). However, these figures hide a series of peaks and troughs, reflecting the impact of national and global events such as the expansion of the European Union (EU) and the recession in 2008. For example, between mid-2014 and mid-2015, net migration was 2,548 (that is, more people entered NI than left), whilst between mid-2019 and mid-2020, net migration -3,348 (that is, more people left NI than entered). The diversity and experiences within these migrant groups are discussed throughout this report: Dimension Two highlights hate crime and racism in NI, whilst Dimension Four discusses cohesion and sharing with regard to minority ethnic communities.

### 3. Economy and Society

This overview of NI's economy and society provides the context within which the four dimensions of this report are set: political progress; the sense of safety; equality; and cohesion and sharing.

The economy: resilient performance but differentials remain  
The previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) highlighted significant improvements in economic life and wellbeing. Unemployment was at a record low, employment at an all-time high, and the economy was rebalancing to be more private-sector orientated. Despite this positive picture, several areas of underperformance remained relative to other regions of the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland. These included lower income levels per capita, lower employment rates, higher levels of economic inactivity, and weaker productivity. This created an environment whereby NI continued to be reliant on a significant annual fiscal transfer from Westminster.

Since then, the local, national and international economic landscape has been dominated by several factors. The first of these was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic policies adopted in response to the pandemic were (understandably) focused on short-term survival, such as financial support to businesses and wage subsidies to employees. Governments across the world implemented fiscal interventions unprecedented in scale and, given the pace of economic and labour market recovery through 2021 and into 2022, the schemes delivered by Westminster and the NI Executive undoubtedly prevented a much greater and more prolonged period of economic contraction.

Secondly, just as the global economy was emerging from the pandemic and already struggling with increasing energy prices, geo-political tensions between Russia and Ukraine escalated into all-out war. Whilst this is a human tragedy first and foremost with the primary cost measured in human lives, it also brings significant economic consequences. A major conflict between one of the world's largest energy producers (Russia) and one of the world's largest food exporters (Ukraine) created significantly higher prices for many goods on international markets. This has pushed inflation up to multi-decade highs and central banks have in turn increased interest rates. As a consequence, global economic growth has slowed.

Thirdly, ongoing issues relating to Brexit and the NI Protocol had contributed to political instability and challenges for some businesses (as discussed in Dimension One). In February 2023, the UK and EU agreed the Windsor Framework, which attempts to address issues and concerns with the Protocol. Initial trade data would suggest that since 2016, North/South trade has increased, and East/West trade has decreased. However, this needs to be set against the much greater disruption caused by the pandemic. Given that the Windsor Framework has only just been agreed, it will likely be some years before reasonable conclusions can be drawn on both the costs and benefits. Nevertheless, although the Protocol was not implemented in full, if the new agreement reduces trade frictions for NI businesses and improves relations between the UK, Ireland and the EU more generally, it may provide the basis for longer-term prosperity, despite Brexit.

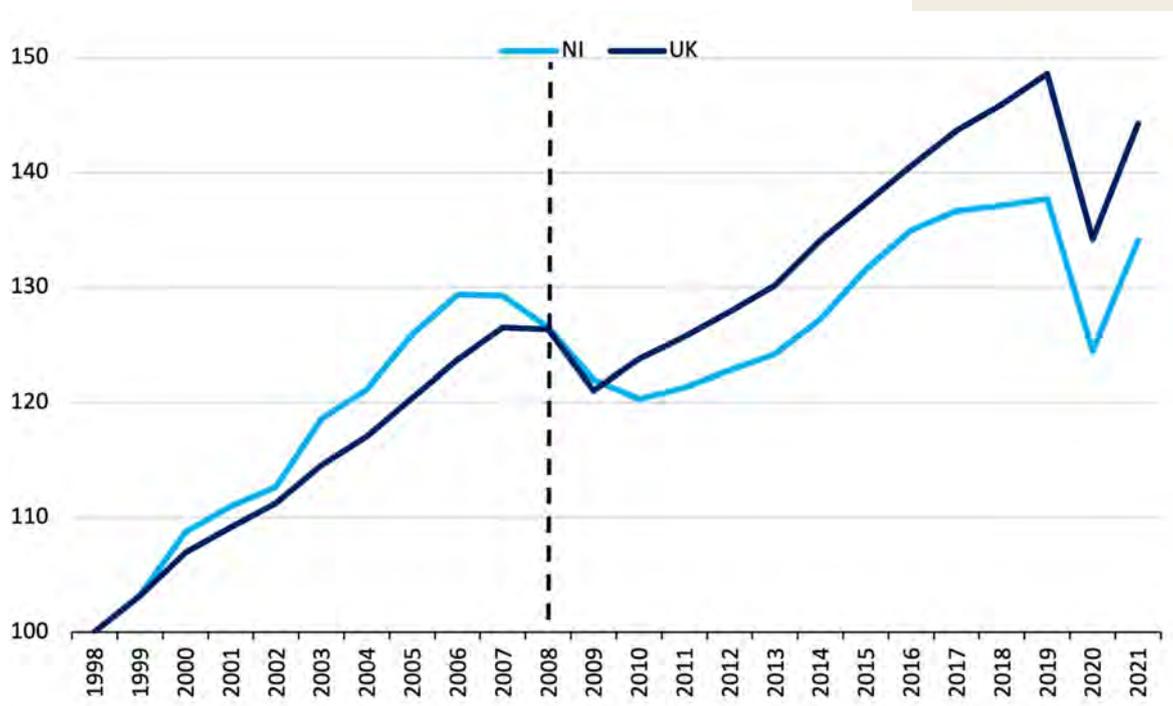
### Economic performance

Gross Value Added (GVA) is a measure of economic output similar to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but excludes taxes and subsidies such as VAT. Figure 8, based on GVA, clearly indicates that NI's economic performance relative to the UK since 1998 can be split into two specific periods. The first is the ten-year period up to the global financial crisis in 2008, which was characterised by average NI economic growth outpacing average UK economic growth. This has been attributed to several factors, many underpinned by peace, including strong growth in sectors such as construction and finance alongside increased government spending and a booming economy in the Republic of Ireland. This in turn fed through to a very strong real estate market which subsequently supported increased consumer spending.

The second period runs from 2009 to now. Following the financial crisis, NI had a deeper and more protracted recession than the UK, only returning to growth in 2011. Since then, average economic growth in NI has been slower than the UK average. During the post-2008 period, both NI and the UK have also experienced lower levels of growth compared with the pre-2008 period, a phenomenon experienced by several developed economies across the world.

More recently, the NI and UK economies were both impacted to a broadly similar extent by COVID-19. The latest data suggests that the local economy contracted by a marginally larger amount in 2020 but grew slightly faster in 2021 (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: GVA Index (Real), UK and NI, 1998–2021**



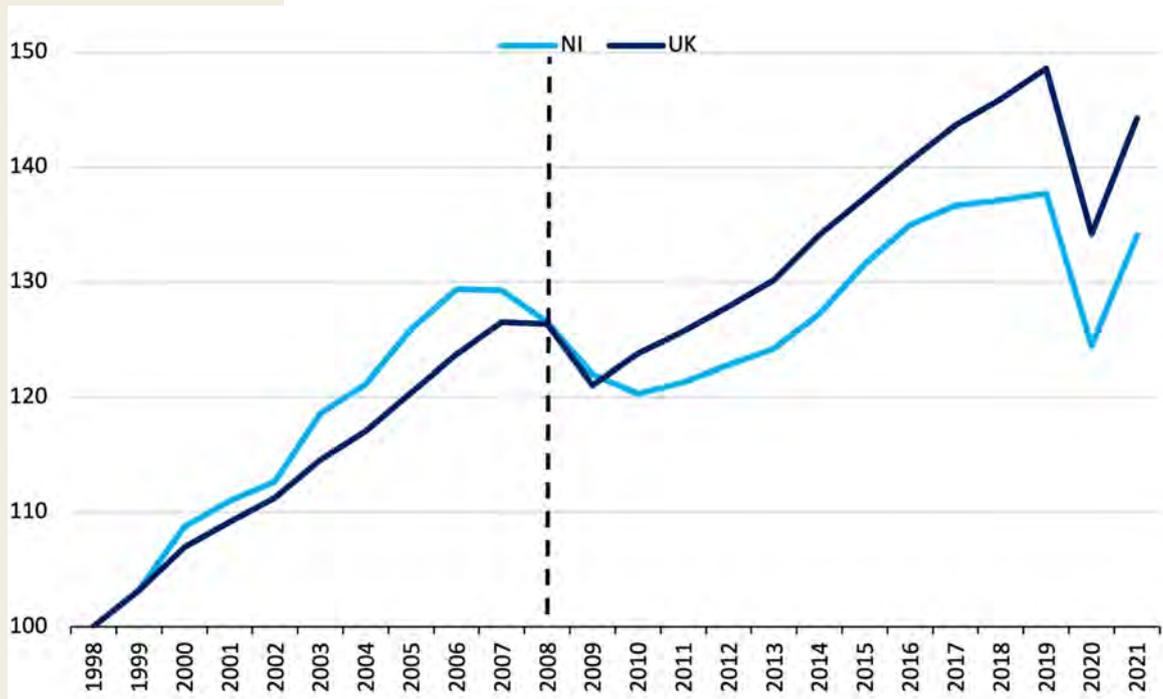
Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC)

Note: 1998=100

GVA per capita measures the level of economic output per head of population and is commonly used to compare standards of living across regions and national economies. Analysed over time, NI has persistently shown a significantly lower level of GVA per capita than England and Scotland but has

outperformed Wales (Figure 9). In the years immediately following the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, relative performance improved with GVA per capita increasing from 78 per cent of the UK average to a peak of 82 per cent in 2006. Since then, there has been a downward trend, and in 2021 was 79 per cent of the UK average – similar to the level in 1998. England has consistently outperformed all three devolved regions.

Figure 9: UK regions GVA per capita Index, 1998-2021



Source: ONS

Note: UK=100

There are two primary reasons to explain this poor relative performance. Firstly, NI has a lower employment rate than the UK average. This means that there are proportionally fewer people in employment contributing to economic output (GVA). Secondly, NI has a lower level of productivity than the UK average, meaning that those in employment produce a lower level of economic output.

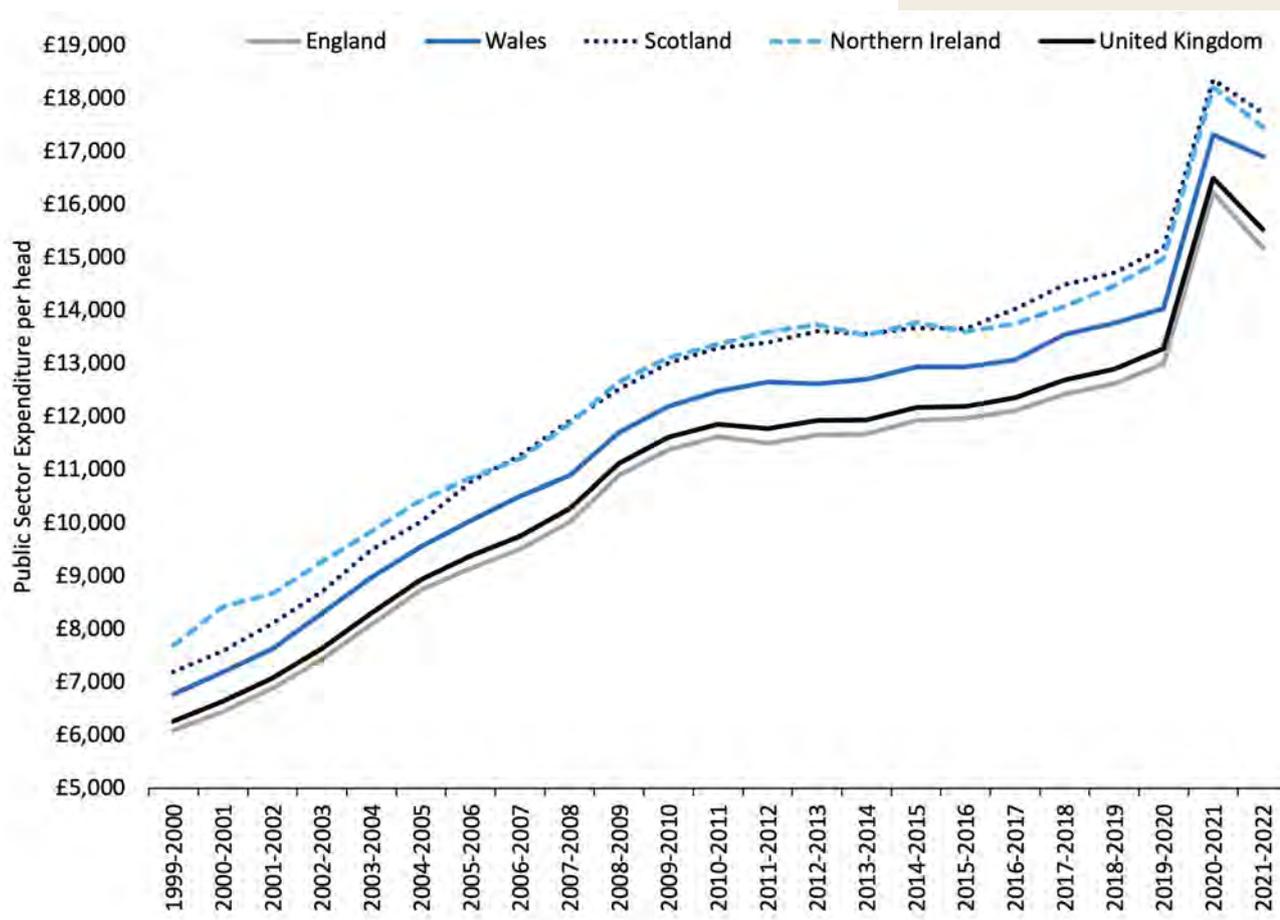
This relatively lower level of productivity in NI is explained by the sectoral structure of the economy. In particular, the local economy has a larger proportion of low productivity sectors relative to the UK and smaller proportion of high productivity sectors (such as Professional Services and ICT). As a result, economic policy in recent years has focused on growing high productivity sectors, but this requires significant investment in skills (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre [UUEPC], 2021), research and development, and incentivising innovation. For a fuller explanation and discussion on productivity in NI, see Johnston and Stewart (2019).

These problems have been widely recognised and as a result, boosting levels of skills, employment and productivity are key elements of current strategies both nationally and locally. These include the UK Government's Levelling Up programme (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022) and the Department for the Economy's 10X Strategy (Department for the Economy, 2021).

## Public expenditure

Although NI has a low level of GVA per capita, Figure 10 shows that it has regularly experienced the highest level of public expenditure per capita across all UK jurisdictions. In 2021/22, NI public expenditure per capita was £17,452 compared with £17,723 in Scotland, £16,902 in Wales and £15,177 in England.

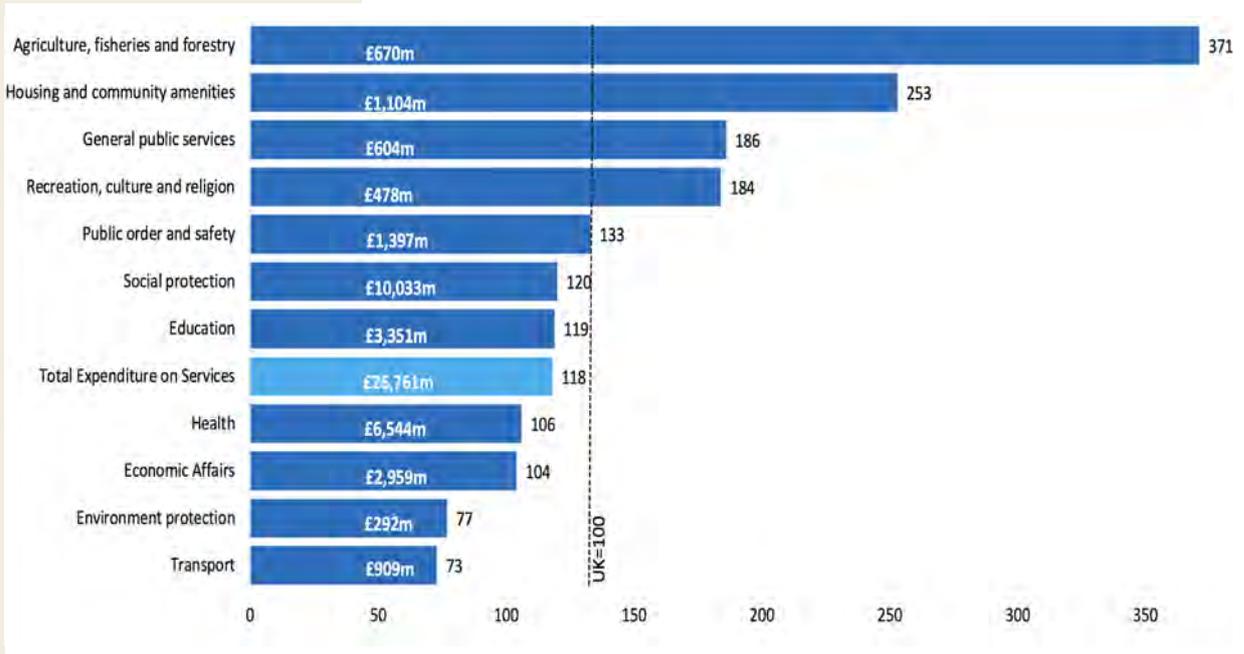
**Figure 10: Public expenditure per head, UK regions, 1999-2000 – 2021-2022**



Source: ONS

Detailed analysis of the allocation of spending across public services shows that NI spends more on average than the UK, although this hides much greater differences across individual service areas (Figure 11). For example, compared with the UK average, NI spends over three times as much (proportionally) on agriculture, fisheries and forestry, over twice as much on housing and community amenities, and nearly twice as much on recreation, culture and religion, and on general public services. Conversely, NI spends only 77 per cent on environment protection, and 73 per cent on transport.

Figure 11: Total Identifiable Expenditure (TIE) on services by function, NI, £ and per head indexed, 2021-22



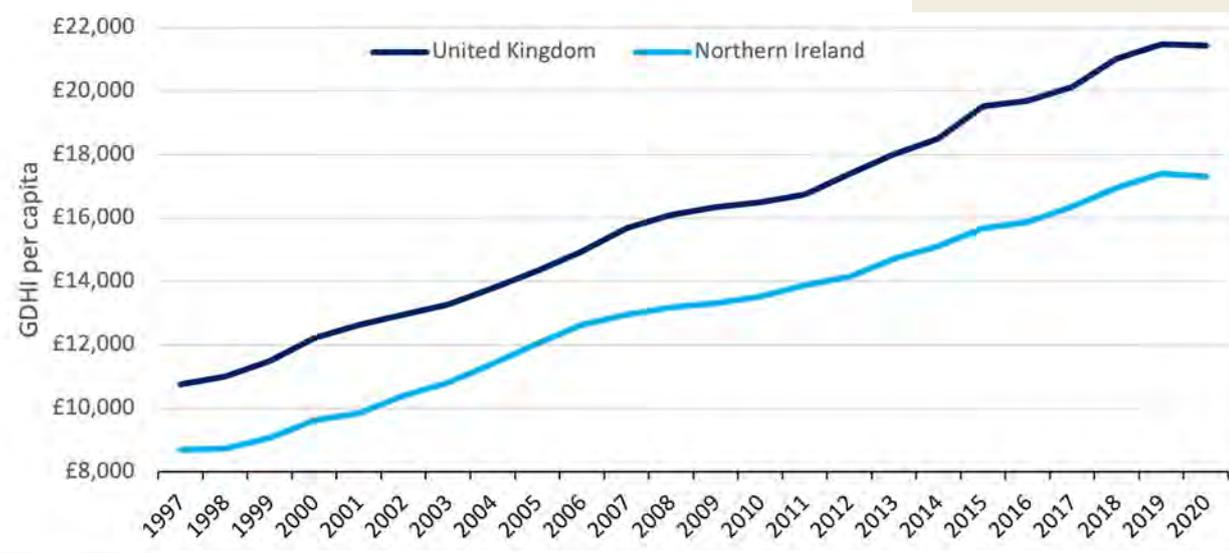
Source: ONS and HM Treasury

Note: UK=100

**Income and cost of living**

Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) is the amount of money people have for spending or saving after expenditure such as taxes and national insurance contributions, property ownership and pension contributions. GDHI per capita in NI has consistently lagged below the UK average (see Figure 12). The latest data available, for 2020, shows the NI average at £17,301, compared with the UK average of £21,440. Although both have increased over the years, the differential between the NI and the UK average has varied. In 1998, UK GDHI per capita was 24 per cent higher than in NI, falling to 18 per cent in 2006, but increasing to 24 per cent by 2020.

**Figure 12: Gross Domestic Household Income per capita, NI and UK, 1998-2020**



Source: ONS

Note: GDHI per capita at basic prices

It is important to look at income alongside the cost of living. The cost of living is lower in NI relative to the UK average, but not sufficiently so to compensate for the income differential. Regional cost of living data in the UK is limited, but the ONS produced a UK relative regional consumer price level of goods and services in 2016 (ONS, 2018). This research found that the price level in NI was the lowest of all UK regions, on average 2.3 per cent lower than the UK average. In contrast London was the most expensive region, at seven per cent above the UK average.

The cost of housing is also lower in NI, with an average house price of £159k, compared with £181k in Scotland, £205k in Wales and £296k in England (ONS, 2022b) making property ownership more accessible for some people. However, the GDHI analysis above represents income after housing costs associated with property ownership, highlighting the scale of the overall gap.

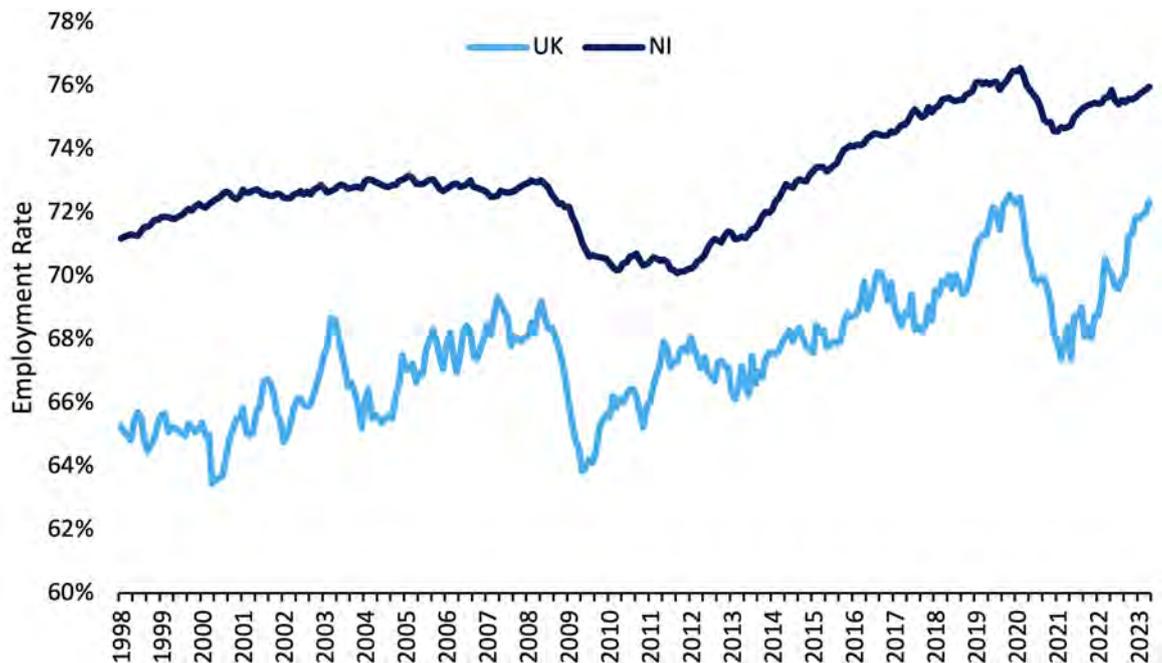
In addition, the cost of living has become a much more significant issue in the last two years with large increases in the cost of energy, food and a wide range of other commodities. Although these increases are global in nature, regions with lower average income (such as NI) will be more impacted and experience greater levels of food and fuel poverty.

A full analysis of socio-economic inequalities is hindered by a lack of data on wealth and assets. However, as shown in this section and in Dimension Three of the report, across a range of policy areas socio-economic inequalities in NI have persisted and in some cases worsened. The absence of functioning institutions has impeded policy development and led to budgetary constraints. Furthermore, there are questions about the extent to which addressing these inequalities has been a policy priority.

### Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity

Employment levels in NI have grown strongly since 1998, both in the period up to the global financial crisis in 2008, and then again in the recovery period from 2012. The employment rate reached its all-time high just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic of 72.6 per cent in November 2019, and as of April 2023 has returned to 72.4 per cent compared with 76 per cent in the UK. However, as shown in Figure 13, NI employment levels have consistently underperformed the UK average.

Figure 13: Employment rate UK and NI (16-64 year olds), 1998–2023



Source: ONS and UUEPC

One of the primary drivers of employment growth in both NI and the UK since 1998 has been the growth in female employment. The NI male employment rate has increased only very marginally from 73.3 per cent in Quarter 4 (Q4) 1998 to 74.1 per cent in Q3 2022; in contrast, the NI female employment rate has increased from 57.2 per cent to 67.4 per cent. The most recent biennial report on Women in NI published by NISRA shows that the proportion of women working full time increased in the ten years up to 2021 by 2.1 percentage points to 64.3 per cent. Nevertheless, it is still well below the male rate of 89.3 per cent (NISRA, 2022b).

Given the increase in the employment rate, it is unsurprising that the unemployment rate has fallen. Unemployment levels, as measured using the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition<sup>4</sup> have followed the economic cycle, falling through the early 2000's, rising after the global financial crisis and then falling again from 2012 to onset of the pandemic in 2020 (Figure 14).

<sup>4</sup> The number of unemployed people in the UK is measured by the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and includes people who meet the international definition of unemployment specified by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This ILO definition defines unemployed people as being without a job, have been actively seeking work in the past four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks; or are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start in the next two weeks.

Figure 14: Unemployment rate (ILO, UK &amp; NI, 1998–2023)



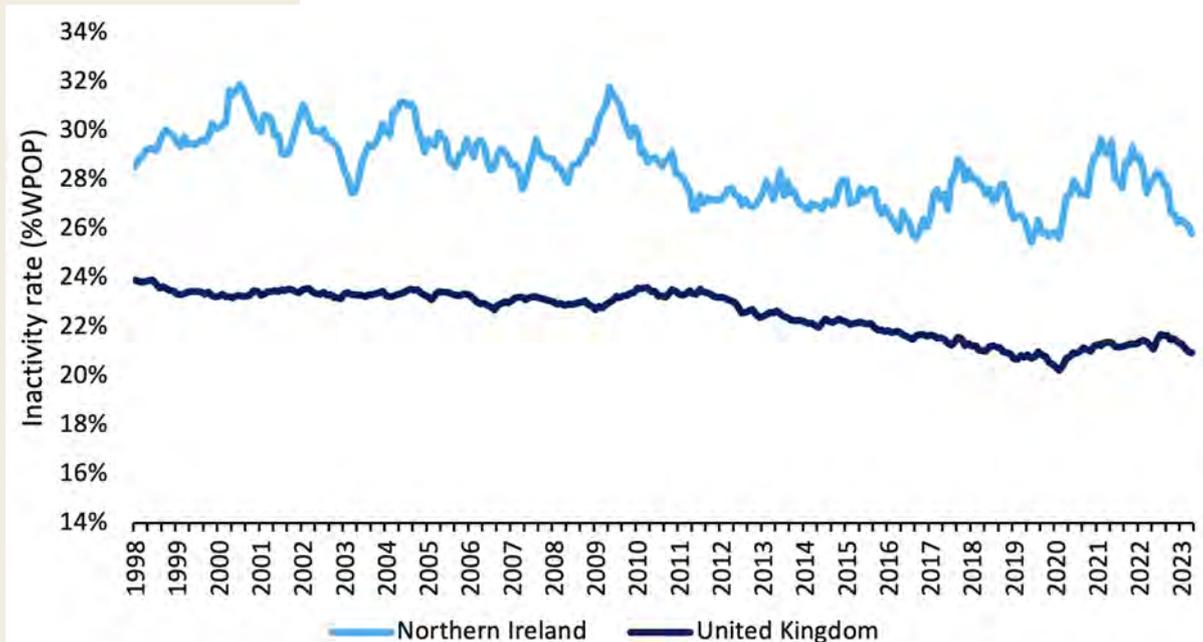
Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey and UUEPC

NI Labour Market Statistics (NISRA, 2023c) show that at the end of the three months up to March 2023 the NI unemployment rate was 2.5 per cent, comparing favourably to a UK average unemployment rate of 3.9 per cent and making it the joint lowest of the 12 UK regions. The unemployment rate in Republic of Ireland at May 2023 was 3.8 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2023). In NI, age differences persist with the unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds (6.1%) being almost four times the rate for those aged 35-49 year olds. The rate of long term unemployment (that is, the percentage of unemployed people who have been unemployed for one year or more) in NI has, for many years, been persistently high. In August 2022, the long term unemployment rate was 42.2 per cent while the figure for the UK was 27.2 per cent (ONS, 2022c).

While unemployment is one of the few economic measures where NI performs relatively strongly against the UK, the lower employment rate *and* lower unemployment rate in NI is explained by the significantly higher economic inactivity rate. Economically inactive people, for the purpose of statistics, are people not in employment who have not been seeking work within the last four weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks (NISRA, 2023c).

Relatively high economic inactivity remains one of NI's most persistent and challenging economic issues. Since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, NI economic inactivity has averaged six to seven percentage points higher than the UK average (Figure 15). Inactivity rates in both NI and the UK have trended downwards only gradually over the period, with more volatility experienced in NI. The NI economic inactivity rate in March 2023 was 26.1 per cent, compared with a UK rate of 21.0 per cent (NISRA, 2023). The rate among women was 30.4 per cent while for men it was 21.8 per cent.

Figure 15: Economic inactivity rates (16-64 year olds), UK and NI, 1998-2023

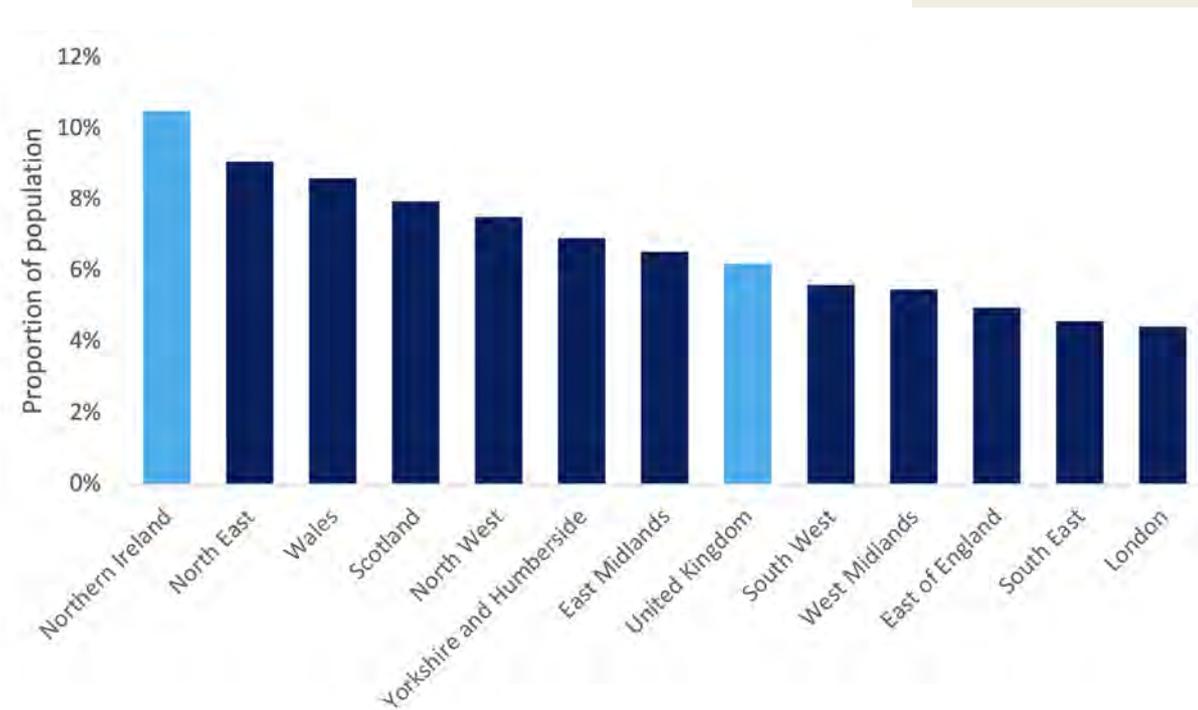


Source: ONS and UUEPC

#### Economic inactivity typically falls into one of four broad groups:

- Students – this group represents approximately 6.3 per cent of the working age population in NI in Q1 2023, the highest across all 12 UK regions (against a UK average of 5.2 per cent). This is generally considered to be a positive reason to be economically inactive as it improves the skills base of the labour market in the longer term.
- Looking after the family/ home – this is a predominantly female cohort and represents approximately 4.4 per cent of the working age population at Q1 2023 against a UK average of 3.9 per cent. This group has decreased significantly in NI over the last two decades, falling from 9.7 per cent in 1998.
- Retired – this is the group that have retired before the age of 65 and they represent 2.4 per cent of the NI working age population. This percentage increased throughout the 2000's in both the UK and NI, but in the following decade it started to reduce again. Much has been made of the increase in retirements in the UK after the onset of the pandemic, but that trend did not occur in NI and the proportion of the local labour market retired is now lower than prior to the pandemic.
- Long-term sick – NI has the highest proportion of long-term sick across all 12 UK regions (Figure 16) and is the primary reason for NI's higher rate of economic inactivity. Although the high level of long-term sickness has been attributed to the legacy of The Troubles, it is a concern that the 2022 sickness rate of 10.4 per cent is higher than the Q4 1998 figure of 9.6 per cent. Although the fallout from COVID is a factor in this increase, the differential with the UK average has increased (from 2.9% to 4.4%) over that time period.

**Figure 16: Economic inactivity due to long-term sick as proportion of 16-64 year olds, UK regions, Q1 2023**



Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey and UUEPC

The previous NIPMR (Gray et al., 2018) discussed how the long-term impact of the conflict in NI and major inequalities in population health accounts for the higher number of long-term sick and disabled people in NI. However, a recent report (UUEPC, 2022) concludes that even allowing for the fact that there is a higher incidence of more limiting conditions in NI, and a lower qualification profile of disabled people relative to the UK average, there is still evidence of a disability penalty. Only one third of disabled people in NI are in paid work compared with over one half in the UK as a whole. Moreover, NI has the lowest disability rate and the largest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled persons in the UK.

The proportion of the working age population who are inactive because they are looking after the family/home, studying or are retired is also higher in NI than the UK as a whole. In particular, looking after family or the home is a much more common reason for female economic inactivity than for male. Economic inactivity rates for women aged 25-34 with dependent children are higher than for those without dependent children. As noted earlier, over the past decade, women have consistently had a higher economic inactivity rate than men regardless of the age of the youngest dependent child. However, the group with the highest economic inactivity rate is women with a youngest child that is of pre-school age (Gray et al., 2020).

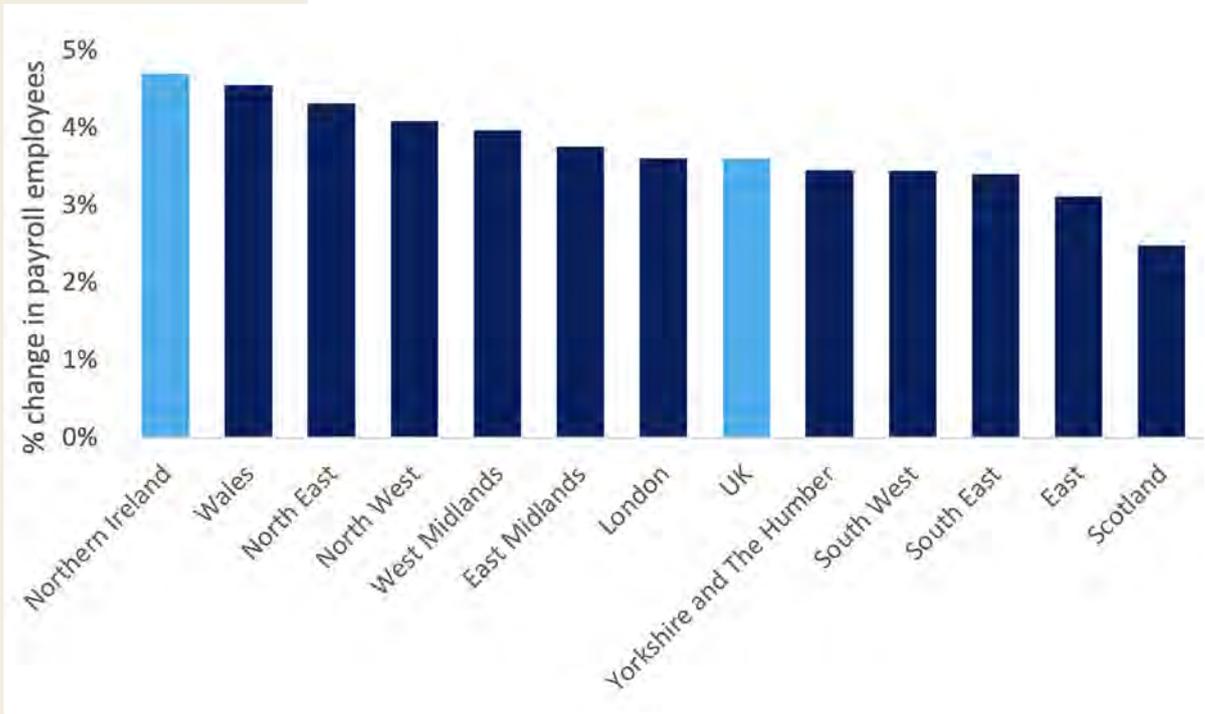
The use of the term economic inactivity seems increasingly inappropriate because of the number of people, mainly women, disproportionately outside the labour market due to home and caring commitments. Arguably, there is a large proportion of women that could access the labour market if adequate childcare provisions and social support were in place. It has also been argued that the contributions of those managing home and family commitments should not be considered to have no economic value, with unpaid care work estimated of being equivalent to 56 per cent of GDP for the UK (ONS, 2016).

### COVID 19 Recovery

The global fiscal response to the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in scale and protected businesses and employees from the worst impacts of the public health restrictions. The pace of economic recovery, particularly in the labour market, would suggest that the measures introduced were largely successful.

This strong labour market performance has also been experienced in NI. Payrolled employees initially fell from 752,000 in March 2020 to 736,000 in November 2020, but since then has increased significantly to 788,000 in May 2023. This increase in employees in NI from pre-pandemic levels is the largest increase across all 12 UK regions (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: % change in payrolled employees, UK regions, March 2020 - May 2023**



Source: HMRC

In stark contrast to the strong payrolled employee growth, the number of people who are self-employed remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels. The contraction in NI is the largest across all 12 UK regions.

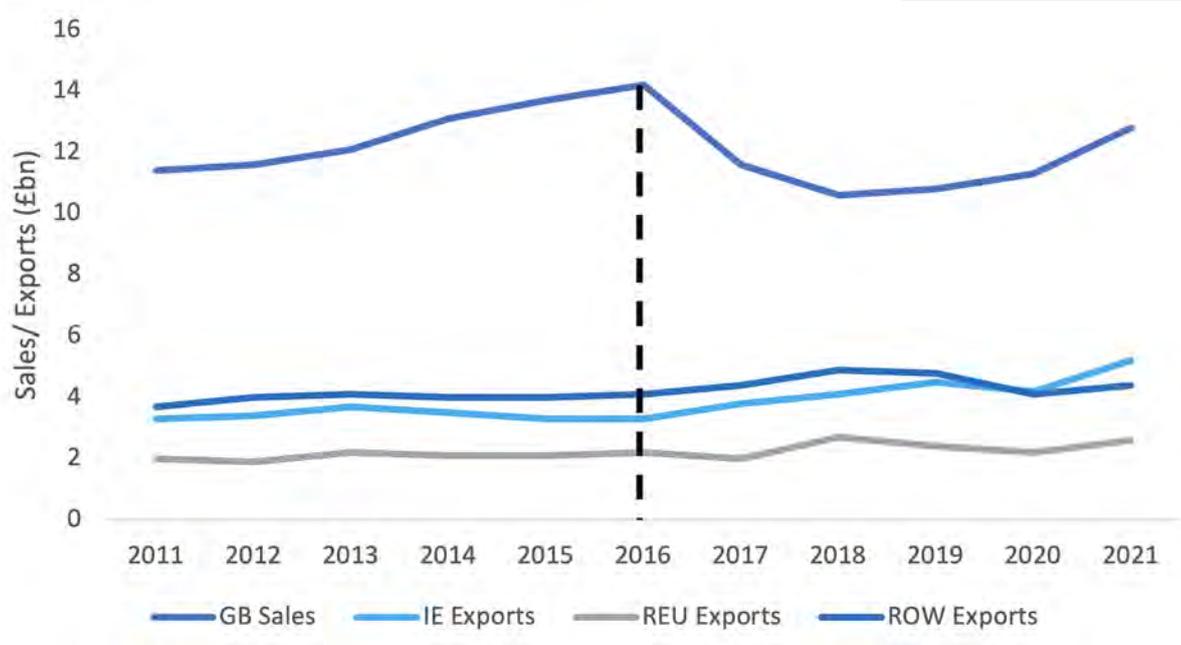
Overall, the local labour market has recovered well, but the longer-term implications of the pandemic in terms of higher levels of public debt, the disruption to international supply chains, and the interruptions to the education of young people have yet to be fully understood. In addition, higher energy and commodity prices on global markets following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, alongside tightening monetary policy to control inflation, has created significant uncertainty in the economic outlook.

Previous NIPMRs have included analysis of tourism and highlighted the peace dividend. Obviously this sector has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A comprehensive set of statistics on the period since the easing of COVID-19 restrictions is not available.

### The NI Protocol and changing trade patterns

Between the Brexit referendum in 2016 and 2019, NI sales to Great Britain (GB) decreased from £14.2bn to £10.8bn, before rising to £12.8bn in 2021. Over the same period sales to the Republic of Ireland increased from £3.3bn to £5.2bn (Figure 18). In 2021, NI external sales to GB and the Republic of Ireland was valued at £18bn (72% of NI's total external sales), compared with 18 per cent to the rest of world (ROW) and 10% to the rest of the EU (REU).

Figure 18: Sales and export statistics by destination, 2011-2021



Source: NISRA

Initial analysis (Flynn *et al.* 2021) suggests that cross-border trade increased in 2021, comprising both imports and exports. In contrast, both imports and exports between the Republic of Ireland and GB fell, with imports to the Republic of Ireland falling much more significantly. This divergence could be at least partly explained by the phased implementation of customs checks by the UK while the EU implemented full checks immediately.

More recently as noted earlier, the UK and EU have reached agreement on the Windsor Framework but uncertainty remains if this will lead to a restoration of the local institutions.

## 4. Conclusions

In the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the economy has progressed in several positive ways. The most notable changes are within the labour market, where employment has grown strongly, and unemployment has fallen. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant economic impact, but the scale of the impact in NI was broadly similar to the UK as a whole and the Government's fiscal response ensured a swift return to growth as health restrictions were lifted.

Looking forward, the global economic outlook remains uncertain due to the longer-term implications of the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and higher interest rates to counter inflation. Given the interconnected nature of the global economy these factors will continue to have a significant impact on the local economy.

Despite the many areas of economic improvements, the performance of the local economy relative to other UK regions shows limited, if any, progress. Many of the long-standing challenges remain, including a reliance on higher levels of public spending, higher levels of economic inactivity (in particular long-term sickness), lower productivity and as a result lower earnings. Policy measures to raise skills, encourage innovation and investment, and improve competitiveness must be a priority for the remainder of the 2020's.

In addition to standard measures of economic performance, economists are increasingly looking to other measures such as general wellbeing. Much of the research into NI's mental health problems suggest a strong link to the legacy of The Troubles, which shows that despite the significant progress made, the long shadow of the conflict remains. This is discussed further in Dimension Three.

# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

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# DIMENSION ONE

## Political Progress

### Overview

The previous Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (NIPMR) covered the period up to October 2018 (Gray et al., 2018). Since then the political situation has been further complicated by the process of withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and continuing political tensions between the major political parties. The timeframe covered in this report does include periods of compromise and progress, particularly with the positive conclusion of talks to reinstate Stormont in early 2020 and some agreement on reforms to contentious issues such as the Petition of Concern and, at least for a time, language and culture legislation. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sense is of the precarity of political consensus.

### 1. Inter-Party Talks and the re-establishment of Stormont

As discussed in the previous NIPMR (*ibid.*), the collapse of the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive in January 2017 came as the result of long-standing political tensions including issues such as Sinn Féin's Language Act legislation and reform of the Petition of Concern. However, the final blow came as a response to the controversy around the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) involvement in the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Green Energy Scheme, which led to the resignation of the deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness. Also covered in the 2018 report were the unsuccessful efforts by then Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, to negotiate a new deal. Negotiations in 2017 had proved unfruitful and although talks in early 2018 gave the appearance that a deal could be brokered, they collapsed at the last moment. A deal was made even more difficult after the DUP entered into a Confidence-and-Supply Agreement with Theresa May's Conservative government after the June 2017 general election. This was perceived by nationalist parties as a failure of the British government to support the conditions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and remained an obstacle to the conclusion of talks on the reestablishment of the Executive during 2018. Karen Bradley took over as Secretary of State for NI in early 2018 and, as discussed in the previous report, her efforts to broker a deal that year were also unsuccessful.

This current report covers the periods of negotiations that attempted to break the political stalemate at Stormont, the reinstating of the NI Assembly in January 2020, the subsequent collapse of the Executive in February 2022, the marking of the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in April 2023 and the local elections in May 2023. Table 1 provides a timeline of the key events in this period.

## Table 1: Key Political Events

### November 2018 to March 2019:

Theresa May published a Brexit deal setting out agreement reached between the United Kingdom (UK) Government and the EU Commission after a highly protracted and difficult process. It included details of a backstop which would avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland by ensuring that NI remained within the EU Customs Union and some areas of the EU Single Market. This deal was rejected in the House of Commons three times.

**18 April 2019:** Journalist Lyra McKee was murdered by dissident republicans linked to the New IRA. The public outcry at the tragic event unleashed public anger towards the failure of the political parties to restore devolved government.

**2 May 2019:** Local council elections saw the greatest number of seats go to the DUP (122), followed by Sinn Féin (105), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) (75), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (59) and the Alliance Party (53).

**23 May 2019:** Elections to the European Parliament saw the three NI constituency seats filled by Diane Dodds (DUP), Naomi Long (Alliance Party) and Martina Anderson (Sinn Féin). The win for Naomi Long removed UUP representation in the European Parliament.

**24 May 2019:** Theresa May announced her intention to resign after failing to secure a Brexit deal.

**23 July 2019:** Boris Johnson became UK Prime Minister after emerging as a clear winner in a leadership election contest.

**24 July 2019:** Karen Bradley was replaced as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by Julian Smith. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act, 2019 received Royal Assent. This allowed for the decriminalisation of abortion and the legalisation of same sex marriage. It also afforded the Secretary of State for NI the right to further extend the date for the reformation of the NI Executive.

**October 2019:** The EU-UK Withdrawal agreement was renegotiated and the NI Protocol introduced. This arrangement avoided a hard border on the island of Ireland but effectively created a sea border between the UK and NI, in the management of the import and export of certain goods.

**12 December 2019:** A general election saw the Conservative party under Boris Johnson win a landslide victory. The support of the DUP in passing bills in Parliament was no longer vital to the Conservative party.

**11 January 2020:** The NI Executive was restored as a functioning body after the New Decade, New Approach Deal (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020) was agreed by all political parties.

**31 January 2020:** The UK leaves the EU and entered a transition period.

**13 February 2020:** Julian Smith was replaced as Secretary of State for NI by Brandon Lewis.

**27 February 2020:** The first COVID-19 case in NI was reported. After initial disagreements between the First Minister (Arlene Foster) and deputy First Minister (Michelle O'Neill), over the speed of introduction and the extent of measures required to manage the spread of the virus, schools, universities and many businesses were closed and a strict lockdown implemented across the UK on the 23 March 2020.

**18 March 2020:** The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis announced the introduction of legislation which, he said, aimed to provide greater certainty for service personnel and veterans who had served in armed conflicts overseas. He stated that it set out plans to address the legacy of the past in NI in a way that focused on reconciliation, delivered for victims, and ended the cycle of reinvestigations into the Troubles in NI that had failed victims and veterans alike. He added that it ensured the equal treatment of

Northern Ireland veterans and those who served overseas.

**30 June 2020:** Attendance of senior Sinn Féin figures at the funeral of senior republican, Bobby Storey, during a time of tight COVID-19 restrictions caused controversy.

**30 December 2020:** The UK and the EU signed the Trade and Co-operation Agreement covering future relations with regard to trade, citizen security and agreement on governance.

**31 December 2020:** The transition period for EU Withdrawal ended.

**30 March to 5 April 2021:** Disturbances broke out in several areas of NI. Much of the unrest was linked to protests over the NI Protocol, and it was reported that these were orchestrated by loyalist paramilitary groups.

**28 April 2021:** Arlene Foster announced she was stepping down as First Minister and leader of the DUP. This came after she and two other DUP ministers abstained on an Assembly vote to ban gay conversion practices. This triggered a DUP leadership election which Edwin Poots, MLA for South Belfast, won on the 14 May 2021.

**28 May 2021:** Edwin Poots took up position as leader of the DUP.

**8 June 2021:** Edwin Poots announced Paul Givan as Northern Ireland's First Minister designate and Sinn Féin nominated Michelle O'Neill again as deputy First Minister.

**17 June 2021:** Edwin Poots resigned as leader of the DUP after only 21 days. It came as he faced a revolt after agreeing a deal with Sinn Féin to restore the Assembly and ensure Paul Givan became Northern Ireland's First Minister. Most DUP members in the NI Assembly wished to delay the process.

**30 June 2021:** Jeffrey Donaldson's position as leader of the DUP was ratified. Paul Givan remained as First Minister.

**14 July 2021:** The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis MP, set out the UK Government's plans for legislation to address the legacy of the Troubles, in a statement to MPs

**21 July 2021:** The UK Government produced a Command Paper (HM Government, 2021), laying out a new approach to difficulties relating to the Protocol and avoiding the triggering of Article 16 of the NI Protocol, which allowed for either side to intervene if they believed that the Protocol had caused serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties or the diversion of trade.

**9 September 2021:** In a speech on the first day of European Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič's visit to Northern Ireland, Jeffrey Donaldson threatened to withdraw the DUP from the power-sharing arrangement if changes to the Protocol were not made quickly.

**21 October 2021:** Political leaders, including the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, the DUP's Jeffrey Donaldson and Paul Givan, and the SDLP's Colum Eastwood attended an inter-denominational Centenary Service in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh to mark the creation of NI in 1921.

**3 February 2022:** The Stormont Executive collapsed again when the DUP withdrew Paul Givan from the First Minister position.

**24 March 2023:** The Windsor Framework (HM Government, 2023) amending the NI Protocol was formally adopted.

**11 April 2023:** 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

**5 May 2022:** Elections to the NI Assembly saw Sinn Féin returned as the biggest party.

**17 May 2022:** Brandon Lewis introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (NITLRB) in the House of Commons. Measures in the Bill were consistently opposed by all NI political parties, as well as by groups representing victims of the Troubles.

**18 May 2023:** Local elections were held across Northern Ireland.

## 2. Political Stalemate

The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 was introduced by the Secretary of State to allow an extension of the time for making Ministerial appointments following the NI Assembly election on 2 March 2017. It also made provision for the exercise of governmental functions in the absence of NI Ministers including setting out departmental budget allocations in legislation (Secretary of State for NI, 2018).

This legislation, however, did cause some discontent within Sinn Féin. Deputy leader, Michelle O'Neill defined it as a shift away from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement towards direct rule. This discontent also exacerbated what was perceived amongst many nationalists as Theresa May's continued overreliance on the DUP in supporting her position on Brexit negotiations.

The DUP's powerful position in Westminster was one of the major stumbling blocks in Karen Bradley's failed attempts to restart negotiations at the end of 2018. Her ability to initiate talks was further hampered by questions relating to her own legitimacy after admitting that before taking up the position of Secretary of State, she lacked a comprehensive knowledge of the NI context and was slightly scared of the place (The Guardian, 6 September 2018). She did find some agreement amongst parties in her announcement of a cut to MLA salaries in response to a lack of a sitting Executive. Pay was reduced in November 2018 from £49,500 to £35,888, with a further reduction of £6,187 to follow three months later if the Assembly did not resume its work. Karen Bradley told Parliament that:

*While Assembly members continue to perform valuable constituency functions, it is clear that during any such interim period they will not be performing the full range of their legislative functions (Bradley, 2018).*

At the end of 2018, the Secretary of State informed parties that she intended to resume talks in January 2019, but these were subsequently delayed until after the local elections in May. A turning point came in the aftermath of the death of journalist and LGBTQI+ activist, Lyra McKee, who was murdered by dissident republicans aligned to the New IRA who were targeting the police during rioting in the Creggan area of Derry/Londonderry. The killing caused broad public outcry and much of the anger was turned towards political leaders and their failure to come to any deal. The public mood seemed to indicate that a return to violence of this kind would not be tolerated and that political leaders needed to make greater efforts to restore government. Just days after Lyra McKee's death, a vigil was attended by leaders of the main political parties and a joint statement from the leadership of Sinn Féin, the DUP, the UUP, the SDLP, the Alliance party and the Green Party, defined the murder of Ms McKee as an attack on the peace and democratic processes (Irish News, 19 April 2019). In response to the murder and a renewed commitment to reinstate the Executive, leaders of the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance Party wrote to the UK Government requesting the initiation of new talks. The push to get the Executive up and running again was reiterated at the funeral of Lyra McKee, which was attended by Theresa May (Prime Minister), Karen Bradley (Secretary of State for NI), Leo Varadkar (Taoiseach - Irish Prime Minister), Michael D. Higgins (President of Ireland) and political leaders from all political parties in NI. Ms McKee's sister urged people to create a new society in Lyra's memory, which was met with a standing ovation. Leading the service, Father Martin Magill, told the room full of political leaders that he prayed:

*that Lyra's murder may be the catalyst needed for parties to start talking, to reform that which was corrosive in previous assembles and to begin anew* (The Guardian, 24 April 2019).

Talks restarted on 7 May 2019 but were complicated by the resignation of Prime Minister, Theresa May, in June which also brought uncertainty to the position of Karen Bradley as Secretary of State for NI. By early June 2019 it was clear that a deal to get Stormont up and running again was unlikely to be in place by the Westminster summer recess. As a contingency plan, Karen Bradley brought legislation to the House of Commons that would extend the period of the Northern Ireland (2018) Act to 21 October 2019, with the option of a further extension to 13 January 2020.

This legislation included reform of strict abortion laws in NI and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. These provisions were to come into force by midnight on 21 October 2019 if no Executive was established by that date. The changes were framed as a way of bringing NI more into line with the rest of the UK on matters of marriage equality and the legal right to abortion. In the case of the latter, the UK Government also argued that abortion reform was necessary to address what the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) had identified as a systematic breach of women's rights in NI (CEDAW, 2018). The changes were welcomed by Naomi Long of the Alliance Party and Colum Eastwood of the SDLP, but brought angry reaction from unionist parties. The DUP leader in Westminster, Nigel Dodds, claimed that it drove a coach and horses through the principle of devolution (Irish Times, 10 July 2019). Jim Allister, of the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) urged the DUP to use the leverage of its Confidence-and-Supply Agreement with the Conservative government to thwart the MPs' decisions (The Guardian, 9 July 2019).

## 2.1 Restarting the talks, 2019

The summer of 2019 in NI was relatively quiet in NI despite fears that a political vacuum would lead to a more difficult marching season. Boris Johnson became Prime Minister on 23 July 2019 and replaced Secretary of State, Karen Bradley with Julian Smith. With continuing deadlock after the summer period, the new Secretary of State announced in November 2019 that a fresh round of talks would begin on the 16 December, after the general election. He noted that this was a last attempt to get Stormont up and running before having to call an election by the deadline of 13 January 2020. Speaking at the NI Conservative Party's election manifesto launch on 21 November 2019, the Secretary of State acknowledged that while there were still a number of issues to deal with, these were not insurmountable. He was also clear about his intention to avoid any possibility of imposing direct rule from Westminster stating that taking powers back to London would not be the best way to proceed (Belfast Telegraph, 27 November 2019).

The results of the general election in December 2019 brought a change in the balance of power between the two biggest parties in NI. The DUP lost two seats, from ten to eight, while Sinn Féin maintained seven seats. Importantly, Boris Johnson's landslide victory meant that the DUP was no longer required in a confidence-and-supply capacity in Westminster. This made talks more palatable to Sinn Féin and space was made for more productive talks with less disparity in the balance of power between the parties (The Journal, 16 December 2019).

Talks restarted on 16 December and included individual meetings between the Secretary of State and the five main party leaders as well as round table discussions with all parties present. On 9 January the text of a draft agreement was published. It was described by the Irish Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), Simon Coveney, as being filled with compromises but fair, balanced and inclusive (Irish Times, 9 January 2020). The deal was finalised the following day and the new text on a way forward was adopted by all parties. After almost three years without sitting, the NI Assembly was reinstated on 11 January 2020. The deal negotiated, titled New Decade: New Approach (NDNA), brought with it some significant changes and the creation of some new bodies. Westminster renewed financial commitments to allow for priorities such as pay increases for nurses and the Irish government committed to more funding for infrastructure projects.

Particularly significant reforms within NDNA were: the creation of the Party Leaders' Forum and Executive sub-committee on Brexit; reform of the Petition of Concern (PoC) mechanism; changes to the procedure for appointing the First and deputy First Minister; and, changes in commitments towards Irish language issues. These are discussed in greater detail below. NDNA also set out the priorities of the restored Executive regarding governance and social policy commitments. These are discussed in Dimension Three of this report.

### **Party Leaders' Forum**

NDNA committed to the establishment of a Party Leaders' Forum designed as a mechanism to improve collaboration and partnerships and to better stabilise political institutions. It was intended to meet at least once a month and was to be reviewed after six months of existence. However, it faced persistent challenges. In July 2021 Alliance Party leader, Naomi Long, and Doug Beattie, leader of the UUP, withdrew from the Forum following controversy regarding a statement from Sinn Féin's leader Mary Lou McDonald about a proposed discussion of legacy issues at the upcoming meeting on 19 July (Belfast Telegraph, 16 July 2021).

The lead up to the Forum meeting set for the 4 February 2022 was also riddled with controversy. The meeting was scheduled to take place the day after the resignation of First Minister, Paul Givan of the DUP, and the subsequent collapse of the Executive. Sinn Féin sought to exclude the DUP from the meeting but other parties, including the SDLP and the Alliance Party, opposed this approach. As explained by Naomi Long:

*Whatever happened yesterday, the reality is that the DUP are still going to be part of the Assembly going forward, they are still going to be, after the elections, potentially involved in an Executive, so I don't think it is helpful to have meetings without them present (Newsletter, 4 February 2022).*

There was an eventual U-turn on Sinn Féin's decision and Jeffrey Donaldson, leader of the DUP, was invited to the meeting. However, the party chose to boycott the meeting anyway (*ibid.*).

### **Petition of Concern**

The PoC has been a source of ongoing controversy. It was a mechanism whereby 30 MLAs could petition the Assembly requiring a matter to be passed on a cross-community rather than a simple majority basis. Under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, it was one of the safeguards in Strand One

as a mechanism to ensure key decisions [in the Assembly] are taken on a cross-community basis. It became controversial as it was seen to be used beyond this remit.

In reforming it within NDNA, the parties agreed to:

- a new 14-day period of consideration between a valid petition being lodged and any vote on the matter concerned;
- ensure the mechanism cannot be used to prevent a Bill proceeding past its Second Stage;
- ensure every petition includes a statement of the grounds and rationale upon which it is being tabled and that it be signed in person;
- prevent the Speaker of the NI Assembly and the three Deputy Speakers from signing a petition;
- ensure a petition can only be triggered by members from two or more parties (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020).

These measures were hailed as an important way of avoiding the interests of one community being prioritised (Haughey, 2020). The new measures also introduced a level of transparency to the process as MLAs were now required to sign PoC documentation in person at the Assembly's Bill Office and to provide justification for the submission of a petition of concern.

#### *Changes to how the First and deputy First Minister are appointed*

Previously, should a position in the Executive Office be unfilled for seven days then the Secretary of State was required to call an election. The new arrangement required that this period be extended to six weeks, with the option of an extra 18-week extension if necessary. Importantly, Ministers would remain in post as caretakers during this period. It also allowed for the continued sitting of the Assembly with MLAs and committees maintaining their parliamentary duties. These changes were introduced to mitigate the possibility of an automatic collapse of the Assembly, should either the First or deputy First Minister resign. This was put to the test after the resignation of First Minister Paul Givan when the Assembly continued to function despite the Executive having collapsed in February 2022.

#### **Language and cultural expression**

The NDNA deal contained a commitment to recognise both Irish and Ulster-Scots as official languages in NI. The deal committed to the creation of an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and the recruitment of two Commissioners, one for the Irish language and one for Ulster-Scots. The Commissioners would be tasked with enhancing the language, arts and literature of each respectively. It also stipulated that any person can conduct their business in Irish or Ulster-Scots before the Assembly or one of its committees. Prior to the collapse of the Assembly in February 2022, no agreement was reached on the passing of legislation to establish culture and language proposals contained in the NDNA. Giving evidence to the NI Affairs Select Committee in February 2022, NI Minister, Conor Burns, suggested that Westminster would act to legislate if the Assembly did not (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2022). On 28 March 2022, the Secretary of State said that a cultural package containing new legislation around the Irish language would not be introduced before the May 2022 elections to the NI Assembly (BBC NI, 28 March 2022). On 6 December 2022, the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 received Royal Assent. Key provisions included a

Commissioner for the Irish Language, a Commissioner for Ulster-Scots and the Ulster British Tradition, and the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. As of May 2023 these provisions have not been enacted.

As discussed in Dimensions Two and Three, NDNA also sought to deal with core issues aimed at supporting sustainable peace and improvements in regional governance in a number of areas. These included the transformation of health services and education, commitments to multi-year budgets, measures to address housing shortage, tackling paramilitarism and ending sectarianism, and a suite of social inclusion strategies (including an anti-poverty strategy, a disability strategy, a gender equality strategy and a sexual orientation strategy).

### 3. Brexit and Northern Ireland

The outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 changed the political landscape in terms of the UK and NI's place within the EU, and led to increased tensions between Westminster and the devolved nations of the UK. The outcome of the referendum had particular consequences for NI which were given little attention by British politicians or the media in advance of the referendum. However, finding a solution to the issue of the Irish border became pivotal to the withdrawal process, presenting not just technical and legal challenges, but more complex political questions around the UK's constitutional settlement and NI's place within it. As outlined by Hayward and Komarova (2022, 131):

*The issue of the Irish border is not just a practical concern ... but also a highly symbolic one ... synonymous in people's minds with the success of the peace process.*

Concern over a hard Brexit and the Irish border question was a key priority for the Irish government given the impact it would have on the economies of the Republic of Ireland and NI and the possible impact on wider political and intercommunal stability. After voicing these concerns in Brussels, the Irish government's priorities were taken seriously by EU negotiators. This resulted in the EU's Article 50 negotiation guidelines<sup>1</sup> including the Irish border question as one of three key issues to be addressed in the initial negotiation phase. Connolly and Doyle (2021) comment that in the early stages of negotiations, the UK Government was somewhat surprised at the extent to which the Irish question and support for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement took primacy within EU negotiation directives.

#### 3.1 EU/UK negotiations

The negotiations that led to the finalisation of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement saw multiple manifestations of a deal which sought to manage NI's place within a UK that was outside the EU, whilst at the same time avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland and maintaining the integrity of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Changes in leadership in Westminster over the four years of negotiations saw different manifestations and priorities come and go. The UK and the EU committed to finding a solution that avoided the need for a hard border on the island of Ireland in 2017. The EU's initial proposed solution was for a NI-only backstop whereby NI, but not the rest of the UK, would be treated as part of the EU customs territory and Single Market for goods. This was rejected by pro-Brexit MPs at Westminster and strongly opposed by the DUP, as was Theresa May's UK-wide alternative

for keeping the whole of the UK in a customs union with the EU by proposing modifications that included a confirmatory referendum following approval of the deal in the House of Commons. The withdrawal arrangements negotiated by Theresa May were rejected three times by the House of Commons in early 2019. The DUP, in their position of supply-and-confidence with Theresa May's government, remained ardently opposed to the arrangement and were instrumental in securing votes against it.

In a final attempt to gain support for the deal, Theresa May sought to appeal to Labour MPs by proposing a modification that would allow for a second referendum. She failed to win the support she required and as a result announced her resignation in May 2019. With Boris Johnson, who had successfully led the Brexit campaign, now Prime Minister, there was an increasing expectation of a hard Brexit. For many unionists who felt this would secure NI's position in the UK, and extreme Brexiteers, this would have been a positive outcome. However, Johnson was constrained by a majority in the House of Commons opposing the UK leaving without a deal. A new agreement was negotiated in October 2019 that left NI as the only part of the UK to remain in the Single Market (HM Government, 2019).

The new agreement remained largely unchanged from the earlier version, covering issues such as citizen's rights, transition arrangements and the financial settlement. It saw the whole of the UK leave the EU Customs Union but in legal terms, NI would remain part of the UK customs territory and be included in UK free trade agreements. In practice, NI would apply EU customs rules and there would effectively be a customs and regulatory border between Britain and NI in the Irish Sea. A democratic consent mechanism was included which would allow the NI Assembly to review the continued application of EU regulations in NI with regard to trading arrangements under the Protocol. If the Assembly rejected existing arrangements, it would be up to the EU and the UK to make any adjustments to these.

On 23 January 2020, the legislation that would implement the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by the UK and the EU received Royal Assent and became an Act of Parliament: The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. On 29 January the EU Parliament approved the deal. The UK left the EU at 11pm on 31 January 2020 and entered a transition period due to run until 31 December 2020. This transition period was to allow for the negotiation of future relationships between the EU and the UK. From this point, there were no UK Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), no UK commissioner, and UK ministers no longer attended meetings of the European Council. During the transition period, the EU continued to treat the UK as a member of the Single Market and Customs Union.

## 3.2 Post EU Withdrawal Agreement challenges and tensions

On 24 December 2020, just days before the transition period ended, the UK and EU agreed a deal on a future trading and security relationship - EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA)<sup>2</sup> - and on 1 January 2021 this agreement and the Protocol took effect. During the transition period, little had changed in practice for most people and businesses. While the TCA prevented the introduction of tariffs and quotas on goods trade, businesses trading goods with the EU faced increased barriers including customs and health checks. Many were not prepared for these changes, an outcome it has been argued, of the UK Government failing to be upfront about the trade-

<sup>2</sup> For full text of the agreement see [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22021A0430\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22021A0430(01))

offs that were involved in the agreement (Marshall, Thimont and Jones, 2021). There is a view that many of the practical problems since withdrawal could have been avoided, although these solutions would have been politically contentious (Hayward and Komarova, 2022).

Within NI, the Protocol became a source of deepening political tensions. The DUP made their opposition to it very clear and the issue plagued, to the point of collapse, the smooth functioning of the Executive. Within the first month of the UK officially leaving the EU, the DUP Agriculture and Rural Affairs Minister, Edwin Poots, withdrew inspection staff from the ports of Larne and Belfast, citing safety concerns (Irish Times, 1 February 2021). The local council also withdrew staff members after it was told by its DUP mayor that the port's trade unions had raised concerns about suspicious activity. However, the trade unions denied raising these alleged concerns and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) also reported that they had no intelligence information on a threat posed to inspection staff. Loyalist paramilitary organisations denied they were responsible for any alleged threats. It has been argued that these claims made by DUP politicians were instrumentalised to persuade the UK Government and the EU that the new Protocol was unworkable and would lead to violence (Connolly and Doyle, 2021).

The Protocol was the subject of a judicial review brought by the TUV leader, Jim Allister, and others including Arlene Foster (DUP) and David Trimble (UUP), which sought to challenge the Protocol based on the 1800 Acts of Union between Great Britain and Ireland and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Following unsuccessful challenges in the High Court in June 2021 (Judiciary NI, 2021a) and the Court of Appeal in March 2022, in February 2023 Supreme Court judges unanimously dismissed all grounds of appeal, including claims that the Protocol is unlawful because of its purported incompatibility with the Acts of Union 1800 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Supreme Court UK, 2023). While the Court accepted that the Protocol conflicted with Article VI of the Acts of Union, which states that Britain and Ireland will be on the same footing in terms of trade, the ruling noted that the most fundamental rule of UK constitutional law is that Parliament, or more precisely the Crown in Parliament, is sovereign and that legislation enacted by Parliament is supreme. The court also rejected claims that the implementation of the Protocol led to a change in the constitutional status of NI without a poll, contrary to the Northern Ireland Act.

Disharmony on the Protocol was also fuelled by the UK Government's push for reform almost from the point that it was agreed. The Protocol included a safeguard clause known as Article 16, that allowed either party to take unilateral action if *strictly necessary*, and if applying the Protocol *leads to serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist, or to diversion of trade*. Threats to trigger Article 16 came from both the UK Government and the EU. As early as 3 February 2021, Boris Johnson stated he was prepared to trigger Article 16 if reforms were not made. On the 29 January 2021, a political and diplomatic crisis arose when a row over the import of COVID-19 vaccines to the UK through NI led to Article 16 being triggered by the EU, and then retracted by the EU only a few hours later. The move was defined as an embarrassment to the EU which subsequently apologised and admitted a mistake. Speaking to the European Affairs Committee of the Oireachtas (parliament of the Republic of Ireland), the EU vice president Maroš Šefčovič said that the move was driven by a lack of transparency on where EU-made COVID-19 vaccines were going, and

contextualised the move as linked to the enormous pressure the EU was under to ensure their fair share of vaccines (Irish Examiner, 16 February 2021). Arlene Foster branded the move as an incredible act of hostility and Steve Aiken of the UUP expressed frustration that the UK Government did not respond in the same way, stating that:

*The Secretary of State Brandon Lewis should be embarrassed and ashamed by the behaviour of the Government and the Northern Ireland Office [in failing to respond] following the unilateral decision of the EU to activate Article 16 to put controls on exports of vaccines from its territory (ibid.).*

In July 2021 the UK Government produced a Command Paper (HM Government, 2021) laying out a new approach to difficulties relating to the Protocol. It set out three sets of concerns: removing the burdens on trade in goods within the UK; ensuring normal access to goods for NI businesses and consumers; and normalising the governance basis of the Protocol. In response to the Command Paper, the European Commission announced, on the 28 July 2021, that it was pausing pre-existing legal infringement procedures against the UK in relation to the Protocol in order to enable proper consideration of the proposals (Garner, 2021).

Within NI, DUP opposition to the Protocol became increasing louder after Arlene Foster stepped down as leader of the party. Jeffrey Donaldson took over the leadership in July 2021 and adopted a hard-line position in his opposition to the Protocol. On 9 September 2021, he threatened to collapse Stormont should changes not be made to the Protocol. The speech was made on the first day of Maroš Šefčovič's two-day visit to NI. This opposition to the Protocol was reiterated by unionists in a joint declaration signed by DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson, UUP leader Doug Beattie, TUV leader Jim Allister and Progressive Unionist Party leader, Billy Hutchinson.

On 2 February 2022, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots, ordered his officials to halt checks at ports as part of the DUP's campaign against the Protocol (Irish Times, 2 February 2022). The move was strongly condemned by the Irish Government, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party, who questioned the legal basis for the Minister's action. The move was labelled as very unhelpful by Mairead McGuinness, European Commissioner on Financial Stability, Financial Services and the Capital Markets Union. Simon Coveney, the Taoiseach, stated that it was a breach of international law. Political tensions were heightened the following day with the resignation of First Minister, Paul Givan. Under the terms of the power sharing agreement this effectively meant that the deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill, also had to step down from her job.

## 4. The Windsor Framework

Two years on from the implementation of the Protocol, following negotiations between the EU and the UK, Rishi Sunak (the UK Prime Minister) and Ursula von der Leyen (President of the European Commission) announced that a new agreement had been reached to change the way the Protocol would operate. The key changes introduced through this Windsor Framework (HM Government, 2023) required that goods staying in NI for final sale will be exempt from most checks and requirements (and will operate through a green lane); goods moving onwards to the Republic of

Ireland and the rest of the EU will face the usual third-country checks ( a red lane); to avail of easier customs processes and avoid customs declarations, businesses would have to register for the trusted trader scheme and provide a description of goods moving to NI; and, certification requirements would remain in place for some goods - such as agri-foods, with physical checks taking place at inspection facilities at NI ports and airports. Medicines were to be subject to dual regulation by both UK and EU authorities.

A key criticism of the Protocol was that because the UK was no longer part of the EU, there was no formal mechanism for NI representatives that would enable them to take part in the EU policy-making process. Therefore, it was argued that the Protocol created a democratic deficit (see for example the Report from the Sub-Committee on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2021). The Windsor Framework addressed this through a mechanism called the Stormont brake which gives MLAs a say in whether new EU rules or amendments apply in NI, and the UK Government the power to veto such laws from applying.

## 5 Attitudes on Constitutional Preferences

Brexit brought public debates about NI's position within the UK and discussion about Irish unification to the fore. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement provides the legal framework through which Irish unification can take place. It sets out that unification can only take place through a referendum in both NI (with a simple majority result) and the Republic of Ireland. It is at the discretion of the Secretary of State for NI to call a referendum if at any time it appears likely to him [or her] that a majority of those voting would express a wish for a united Ireland. This has not yet been the case, but the Brexit outcome has seen some significant changes in opinions on this issues, both within political and public opinion.

### 5.1 Party positions

#### Unionists

Unionist parties remain strongly opposed to the possibility of Irish unification. The reluctance of many unionists to engage in any debate was driven by a sense that discussions of constitutional futures outside the Union only served to legitimise pro-referendum and pro-Irish unity arguments. The Grand Secretary of the Orange Order, Reverend Mervyn Gibson, noted in 2019 that, while he would accept the democratic result of a vote for unification, he simply did not believe a referendum on the subject was likely in the short term (Belfast Telegraph, 10 July 2019).

#### Nationalists

Sinn Féin has made persistent calls for a border poll on unification and advocated for the Irish and British governments to begin what they regard as the necessary planning for unification. The party's leap in the polls in the 2020 Irish General Election to the Dáil (lower house of the Oireachtas) amplified their claims that the uncertainty resulting from the 2016 Brexit vote has reshaped people's thinking on their constitutional future and that unity is now increasingly likely (Haverty, 2020). In a submission made to the Working Group on Unification Referendums (WGUR) on the Island of Ireland (2021, 41), Sinn Féin expressed the need for fora and other mechanisms to facilitate a discussion of the process towards Irish unity to be set in motion.

The SDLP has been more cautious on pushing for a referendum on Irish unity. In July 2020 the party announced the setting up of a New Ireland Commission. This body would have multiple levels of dialogue (locally, regionally and nationally) and was to establish and understand the full diversity of views on Ireland's constitutional future. In March 2023 the New Ireland Commission published a set of six core principles which the party claims will guide its work towards building an inclusive new Ireland, including: reconciliation as a guiding force; embracing our diversity; no one left behind; citizen-led; future focused/outward looking and hope with honesty (New Ireland Commission, 2023).

### The Alliance Party

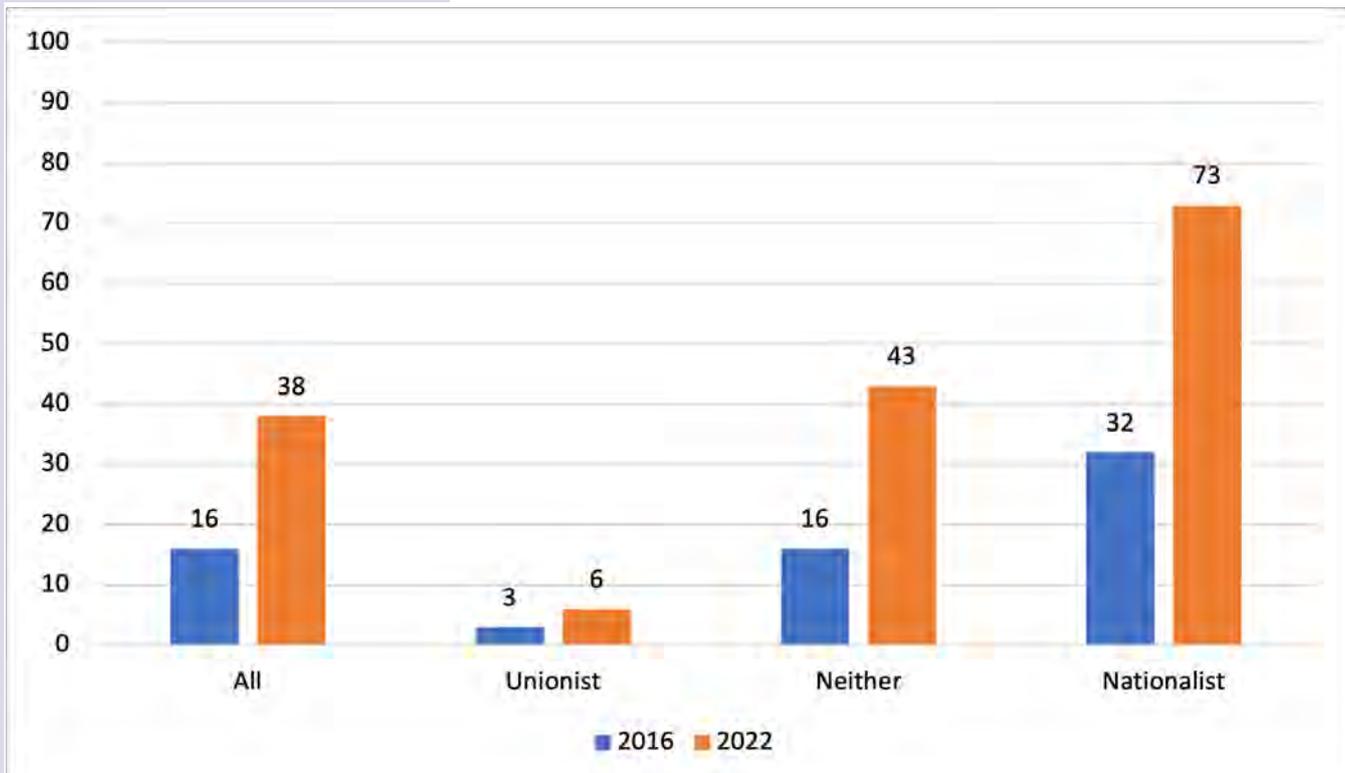
The Alliance Party has been less vocal on the constitutional question, stressing that the party's priority is on securing NI's future as a functioning devolved unit based on a shared future and citing the principle of consent (outlined in the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement) as the basis for its neutrality on the constitutional question (Murphy, 2023). In a speech at the party's annual conference in 2020, Stephen Farry MP reiterated the party's view that there is no current case for a border poll but said that the party recognised the fluidity of the situation and the multiple active debates underway.

## 5.2 Public attitudes

Between the restoration of the Assembly in January 2020 and its collapse in February 2022, two issues dominated political discourse – Brexit and the Protocol, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. In addition, by early 2022 rising inflation and cost of living increases had come to the fore. Public attitude surveys and opinion polls provide insights into how the public think about these issues, including their assessment of how political leaders are managing them. However, results can vary depending on the methodology used to collect such data (see Robinson, 2018). In order to provide comparison with the previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), this section will focus on findings from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey. This is an annual cross-sectional survey, and fieldwork takes place between September and December each year.

Findings from NILT indicate widening support for the idea that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely, rising from 26 per cent in 2016 to 63 per cent in 2022 (Hayward and Rosher, 2023). The majority of nationalist respondents (87%) were of this view in 2022, compared with 64 per cent of respondents who see themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist (*neithers*), and 45 per cent of unionist respondents. There has also been a steady rise in the proportion of respondents stating that Brexit means that they personally are now more in favour of a united Ireland, with 38 per cent of NILT respondents in 2022 expressing this opinion, compared with only 16 per cent in 2016. In 2022, three quarters (73%) of nationalists, and 43 per cent of *neithers* took this view (see Figure 1). For both these groups, there has been an increase since 2016 in the proportion thinking this (41 percentage points and 27 percentage points respectively). However, the picture is different in relation to unionist respondents. While few said that Brexit made them more in favour of a united Ireland (6% in 2022), there has been a notable rise of 16 percentage points in the proportion saying that they are now less in favour of a united Ireland as a result of Brexit (from 12% in 2016 to 28% in 2021).

Figure 1: % of respondents more in favour of a united Ireland due to Brexit, by identity

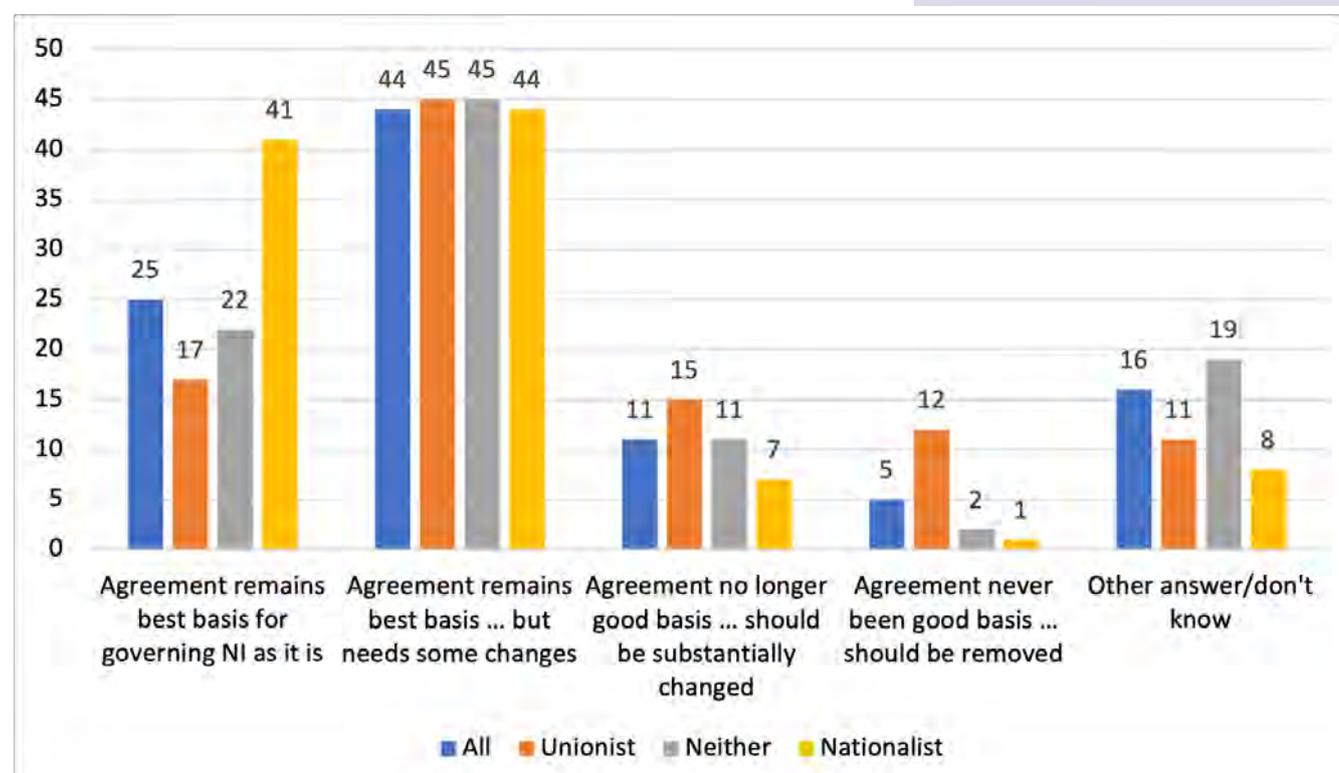


Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023)

The NILT survey has provided a useful barometer of public attitudes relating to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In 2003, 58 per cent of respondents were generally supportive of the Agreement, despite the Executive not having functioned since 14 October 2002. One quarter (23%) felt it was basically right but needed to be implemented in full. A further 35 per cent felt that some specifics need to be renegotiated. However, one quarter felt the Agreement is basically wrong: 15 per cent thought it should be renegotiated, and 10 per cent felt that it should be abandoned.

The 2022 data show an increase in positive views, with 69 per cent of respondents expressing the view that the Agreement remains the best basis for government in NI (which includes 44% of respondents feeling that it needs some changes). Nevertheless, 11 per cent supported substantial changes, and five per cent feel that it should be removed (see Figure 2). Notably, 30 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds said that they did not know what their opinion was on the Agreement. Figure 2 shows high levels of nationalist support for the Agreement (either as it is or with some changes), whilst unionists are the group most likely to think that it needs substantial change or should be removed (*ibid.*).

Figure 2: Opinions on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, by identity (%)



Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023)

NILT data also highlight changes in constitutional preferences over the past 25 years. In 1998, a slight majority (57%) of respondents thought that the long-term policy for NI should be to remain part of the UK, and 22 per cent supported reunification with the rest of Ireland. By 2022, support for NI remaining within the UK was lower (48%, comprising 13 per cent supporting direct rule, and 35 per cent supporting devolved government), while support for Irish unity had risen to 31 per cent.

### 5.3 Civic debate

Brexit has intensified the debate about the constitutional future of NI and possible Irish unity. It has also given rise to the emergence of a number of new civic society organisations, including Ireland's Future and @Think32. Organisations such as @WeMakeNI and @UnitingUK have set out a pro Union vision. Calls for the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly to consider the question of Irish unity have increased, although there is some concern that the circumstances are not currently conducive to this form of deliberation (Renwick and Kelly, 2021). The WGUR on the Island of Ireland, based at University College London's Constitution Unit, has examined how any future referendum should be designed and conducted, but did not explore the kind of constitutional design that might be offered to voters. One of the central conclusions of the group centred on the importance of securing agreement on the design of a referendum process *before* any vote is called (WGUR, 2021).

## 5.4 Institutions: North/South; East/West

Under Strand Two of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the North/South Ministerial Council was established to facilitate better cross border co-operation on areas such as trade, health, agriculture, transport, the environment, and EU programmes. Some meetings of the Council take place in plenary, while the majority only involve bilateral meetings between sectoral representatives from each government. As the Council is comprised of the Irish government led by the Taoiseach and the NI Executive under the First and deputy First Minister, the Council was unable to function during the periods that the NI Executive was collapsed.

The NDNA agreement set the conditions for the re-establishment and functioning of institutions for North/South co-operation as established through the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. It committed to greater co-operation, connectivity and opportunity on the island, working in partnership with the NI Executive and the UK Government. Meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and sectoral meetings got underway in early 2020 but due to continuing tensions around the NI Protocol, attendance by DUP ministers became increasingly uncertain. During Edwin Poots' short term as First Minister he threatened to boycott the June 2021 meeting, leading the SDLP and Sinn Féin to seek legal advice on the matter. In a meeting in Dublin with Irish Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, the First Minister explained that there was a lot of anger within the unionist community towards the Protocol and stated that North/South relations had never been as bad. He did, however, confirm that he would be attending the June meeting of the North/South Ministerial Conference meeting (BBC NI, 3 June 2021).

While the DUP attendance at the meeting in June 2021 maintained co-operation as agreed in the 2020 deal, this collapsed later that year. In September 2021 Jeffrey Donaldson, who had taken over as DUP leader, announced that his party would no longer participate in North/South bilateral meetings in protest against the NI Protocol. As a result of the DUP boycott, over a quarter of the meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council scheduled for the last quarter of 2021 did not take place. Aside from one meeting on health to address vital issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, other meetings on cross border co-operation focused on issues such as agriculture, environment and languages did not go ahead. Meetings were again disrupted following the collapse of the institutions in February 2022.

The DUP boycott led to legal action being taken by a Belfast businessman, Sean Napier, in October 2021. The High Court found that the decision to withdraw from the North-South Ministerial Council was unlawful and a breach of the legal duties and responsibilities contained within Part V of 2 the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Judiciary NI, 2021b).

### The judge further noted that:

*It is perhaps worth emphasising that each minister of the Northern Ireland Executive bears personal responsibility to comply with the pledge of office and the ministerial code (ibid.).*

Mr Napier's lawyers returned to court in December 2021 in an attempt to get the North/South Ministerial Council up and running again. While the court stopped short of compelling the DUP ministers to end the boycott, the

judge noted that that the boycotting of meetings was in abject breach of their [minister's] solemn pledge and that the failure to set a date for the next meeting was profoundly concerning and depressing (Judiciary NI, 2021c).

#### *North/South Interparliamentary Association*

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement made provision for the establishment of a North/South Interparliamentary Association. This met for the first time in 2012 but had not sat since 2 December 2016. Within NDNA, the Irish Government commits to establishing a working group of representatives from the North/South Interparliamentary Association to make recommendations focussed on developing North/South parliamentary relationships. This was to be set up within six months of the deal. It has not yet taken place.

East/West co-operation was to be supported through the British-Irish Council (BIC) and British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA). The BIC was to promote harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships. A purely consultative body, it was to meet twice a year and at sectoral level in between biannual meetings. The potential of the Council relies on leadership from the parties in NI and from the UK and Irish Governments; however, there is some distance between the two states on the importance of the institution, with the Taoiseach attending the plenary session more regularly than the UK Prime Minister (Kelly and Tannam, 2022). The BIPA has continued to meet. Recent publications include a report on Provision for Indigenous Minority Languages in the BIPA Jurisdictions (BIPA, 2023) and a report on COVID-19 vaccine rollout in BIPA jurisdictions (BIPA, 2022).

## 6. Political Issues and Logjams in the NI Assembly

In addition to EU Withdrawal and Protocol issues, the NI Executive has struggled to maintain cohesion around a number of other issues, including the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, commemoration of centenaries, and dealing with the past. This section begins by providing an update on an issue which ultimately led to the three-year collapse of the Executive in 2017 – the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme.

### 6.1 The Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry

Just before the publication of the fifth NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), Sir Patrick Coughlin chaired an independent public inquiry into the RHI scheme. The report of the inquiry was published in March 2020 (Independent Public Inquiry into the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme, 2020). Running to 656 pages and 319 findings it found that the behaviour of some ministers, special advisers and civil servants was wholly inappropriate and that there had been a lack of effective scrutiny in the implementation of the scheme. Citing weaknesses in governance, staffing and leadership it made 44 recommendations. The NDNA agreement included commitments and actions relating to the RHI Inquiry: a dedicated sub-committee was to be established to consider the findings of the review and propose further reforms; ministers were to be responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of their special advisers, and there was to be an explicit requirement on the civil service to maintain accurate records.

In the wake of the RHI Inquiry report the Department of Finance established an external independent panel to consider the need to invoke a disciplinary

process in relation to civil servants. It recommended disciplinary action against eleven civil servants. Subsequently an internal NI Civil Service panel and a UK Government Office panel concluded that there should be charges of gross misconduct against six civil servants and charges of misconduct against four. A revised code of conduct concerning the appointment of special advisers pre-empted the RHI Inquiry report and clarified that special advisers served the NI Executive as a whole and not just their own minister, and strengthened record keeping requirements for special advisers. Under the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021, special advisers became subject to the disciplinary policies and procedures of the NI Civil Service.

In March 2022, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) reported on progress on the Inquiry's 44 recommendations (NIAO, 2022). While all the findings and recommendations of the Inquiry had been accepted by the NI Executive, the NIAO reported that only 18 recommendations had been implemented in full, 14 were likely to be implemented, and planned actions for 10 were not likely to address recommendations. This progress was described by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Ciaran Donnelly, as disappointing.

## 6.2 The COVID-19 pandemic

As a major public health emergency, much of the legislative response relating to the COVID 19 pandemic was passed through Westminster. The UK Government introduced new legislation - the Coronavirus Act 2020 (HM Government, 2020) - which was supported by the four governments across the UK. In addition, the Coronavirus Action Plan (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020) was also endorsed by the four governments. Within NI, following early disagreement between the two main parties about whether schools should close, the DUP and Sinn Féin seemed to be in agreement about the NI government response to the pandemic.

Treasury schemes to address the economic impact of the pandemic were rolled out across the UK. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme provided 80 per cent of employee salaries up to £2,500 per month; VAT and income tax deferrals were introduced; and people in receipt of Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits received an uplift of £20 per week (Mackley, 2021). Additional funding was also received by the devolved administrations via Barnett consequentials<sup>3</sup>. The reliance of governments in the devolved jurisdictions on financial support from Westminster limited the extent to which there could be divergence from Westminster policies concerning measures such as the closure of workplaces.

Whereas the first wave of the pandemic saw a high level of inter-governmental collaboration and coordination between the devolved areas of the UK and the Westminster government, policy divergences soon appeared. The devolved governments generally adopted a more cautious approach to the easing of restrictions and used their (limited) powers to deviate from UK government policy on the timing and stringency of responses.

Within NI, disagreement between the parties in the Executive crept in regarding whether NI should follow policy in Westminster or align itself to the approach of the Irish government around issues such as the easing of restrictions. In general, the DUP was unhappy with divergence between Stormont and Westminster, and nationalists generally favoured more

<sup>3</sup> The Barnett consequential is the change to a devolved administration's assigned budget as a consequence of changes in spending in England (Pidgeon, 2012)

convergence with Irish government policies. In addition to this, relationships were also strained between the DUP and Sinn Féin and other parties in the Executive about the control being exercised by the two main parties and the leaking of decisions to media before Executive meetings. There was further controversy caused by the attendance of senior Sinn Féin officials at the funeral of senior republican figure, Bobby Storey, on 30 June 2020 (see Dimension Four).

There was some inter-jurisdictional co-operation on the response to the pandemic between NI and the Republic of Ireland. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Departments of Health in both jurisdictions in April 2020 which committed the NI Executive and the Irish government to coordinate and cooperate in order to protect the lives and welfare of everyone on the island (Irish Government and the NI Executive, 2020). Nolan *et al.*'s (2021) study of co-operation during the period concluded that, notwithstanding the historical and constitutional obstacles to an all-island response to COVID-19, there was evidence of significant public health policy alignment.

### 6.3 Centenaries

The Decade of Centenaries marked the period from 1912-1922 which included the signing of the Ulster Covenant, the First World War and the Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising, the Irish Civil War and the partition of Ireland. Different events have different implications for communities. On the island of Ireland, NI's centenary posed difficult and sensitive challenges given the contested nature of history and heritage. Yet in March 2021, the speaker of the NI Assembly Alex Maskey, praised the level of agreement that had been seen across the five main political parties in agreeing upon a programme of events to mark the centenary, calling it extremely positive (Irish Times, 16 March 2021).

However, there was also some controversy and disagreement. A pan-unionist proposal was made for the erection of a centenary stone to be placed at Stormont. The stone was to have an inscription: *Erected to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland 1921-2021*. The proposal was brought before the Assembly Commission, but Sinn Féin vetoed the move. All unionist parties supported it, and the SDLP and Alliance also agreed to endorse the stone proposal (Irish Times, 18 March 2021). However, the project could not proceed because of the veto.

In December 2021, a group of loyalists unveiled their own unofficial NI centenary stone at Stormont (Belfast Telegraph, 21 December 2021). This stone included a plaque with the St Patrick's Cross with the Red Hand of Ulster on it, along with a James Craig quote: *Let no man ever think for a moment that I will not stand to the very death if it is necessary in the interests of Ulster and of the Ulster people*. The inscription ended *For God and Ulster*. People were invited to attend the unofficial ceremony through posts on social media claiming the event was facilitated by Restore UK. This stone was removed shortly after, with the Department of Finance, which manages the Stormont estate, justifying the move by stating that permission was not sought for it (*ibid.*).

The controversies which did arise need to be placed in the context of many positive events. Much of the activity to mark the anniversaries took place at community level with planning ongoing for several years in the lead up to the anniversaries. For example, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Community Relations Council approached the contested nature of heritage in NI through the funding of community-based projects. The work of the two organisations included the development of a methodology for engaging with difficult heritage and the preparation of resources and toolkits (MacBride, 2017).

## 7. Elections and Political Party Support

### 7.1 Local government election

Within the period covered by this report local government elections to the 11 councils took place on 2 May 2019 and 18 May 2023. In 2019, of the four traditional large parties, only Sinn Féin held onto its pre-election seat tally (see Table 2). The DUP, UUP and SDLP all suffered losses. The Alliance Party saw its representation increase by 65 per cent with a gain of 21 seats. Some of the smaller parties and independents also made significant gains, while the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) representation more than halved. In the 2023 election Sinn Féin became the largest party in local government winning 144 seats, from 105 in 2019. The DUP retained the same number of seats but the party's share of the vote declined by 0.8%. The Alliance party continued its success of the 2019 election gaining 14 seats.

**Table 2: Distribution of seats, 2019 and 2023 local government election**

Party	Number of seats, 2019		Number of Seats 2023	% of first preference votes 2019	% of first preference votes 2023	Number of seats, 2014	Seats change, 2014-23
<b>Democratic Unionist Party</b>	122		122	24.1	23.3	130	-8
<b>Sinn Fein</b>	105		144	23.2	30.9	105	+39
<b>Ulster Unionist Party</b>	75		54	14.1	10.9	88	-34
<b>Social Democratic Labour Party</b>	59		39	12.0	8.7	66	-27
<b>Alliance Party</b>	53		67	11.5	13.3	32	+35
<b>Traditional Unionist Voice</b>	6		9	2.2	3.9	13	-4
<b>Green Party</b>	8		5	2.1	1.7	4	+1
<b>People Before Profit</b>	5		2	1.4	1.9	1	+1
<b>Aontu</b>	1		0	1.1	0.9	0	
<b>Progressive Unionist Party</b>	3		1	0.8	0.3	4	-3

Source: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/flg19.htm> and BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65655547>

### European Parliament Election

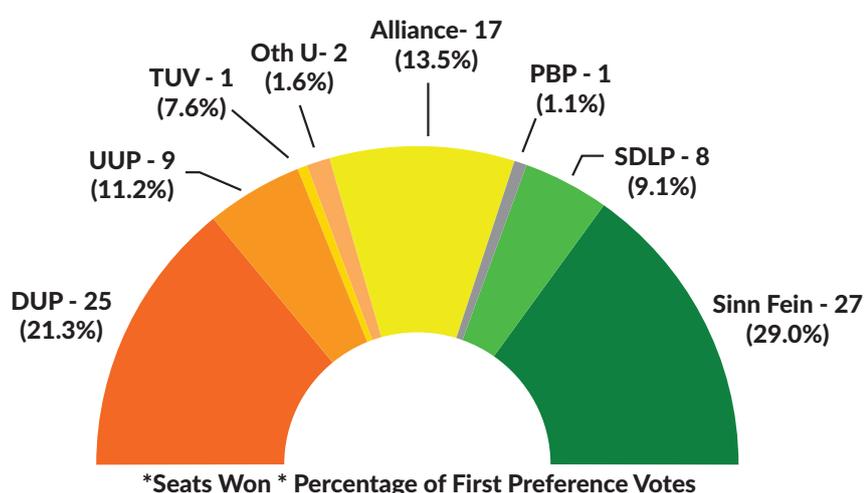
The election to the European Parliament took place on 23 May 2019. Elected MEPs had to step down from this role when the UK formally left the European Union on 31 December 2020. The 2019 election saw a gain for the Alliance Party. While the DUP and Sinn Féin returned a seat each (for Diane Dodds and Martina Anderson respectively), the previously UUP dominated seat was taken by Naomi Long (Alliance Party), who claimed her party's best ever result, gaining 18.5% of first preference votes.

### NI Assembly election

The 2022 election to the NI Assembly was held on 5 May 2022, the seventh election to take place since the devolved Assembly was established in 1998. Following the previous election, it had taken almost three years for an Executive to be formed. It lasted just over two years, collapsing on the resignation of First Minister Paul Givan on 3 February 2022, in protest over the Protocol.

Ninety members were elected to the Assembly. Thirty two women were elected which means that 36 per cent of MLAs are women, the highest figure yet. Ten seats changed hands in the election. The Alliance Party gained nine seats resulting in a total of 17 - four from the SDLP, two each from the DUP and the Green Party, and one from the UUP. The DUP lost another seat in North Down, where a former party colleague, Alex Easton, retained his seat as an independent. Sinn Féin became the largest party in the Assembly for the first time with 27 MLAs and 29 per cent of first preference votes. This was the same number of seats as in the previous election but the DUP (previously the largest party), lost 3 seats. This left the DUP with 25 seats and 21.3 per cent of the vote. People Before Profit (PBP) held its one seat (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: NI Assembly election, 2021: seats won by party and % of first preference votes)**



Source: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fa22.htm>

## 8. Women in Politics

The number of women elected as political representatives remains low in NI compared with European averages overall, despite women making up the leadership of three of the main political parties until May 2020, and two in 2022. Although the European elections in 2019 saw all three seats filled by women, across three different parties (DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party), a closer look at the local elections of the same year is more revealing. There is further discussion of women and public life in Dimension Four.

## 9. Conclusions

This dimension examines political progress since the publication of the last report in October 2018 (Gray *et al.*, 2018). It is a period which has been dominated by Brexit and the various efforts that have been made to mitigate its impact on NI, including the NI Protocol, and the Windsor Framework. This has led to increasing debate about the constitutional future of NI, including a border poll (Hayward, Komarova and Rosher, 2022). Brexit has also contributed to the failure to sustain devolved government. In the time period covered by this report (October 2018 to May 2023), the Assembly functioned for only 29 out of 53 months, with detrimental consequences for decision-making in a number of areas, including economic policy, health services and educational reforms, as well as the cost of living crisis. In the absence of functioning institutions in NI or Direct Rule from Westminster there has been a political vacuum with the Secretary of State intervening on a limited number of issues through legislation at Westminster. Civil servants have been in the unenviable position of having to make decisions beyond the scope of what should be decided by officials operating without the direction and control of a minister. There has also been lack of accountability with no Assembly committees scrutinising the work of departments.

Voting patterns show further consolidation of the DUP and Sinn Féin vote at the expense of the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. The period has also seen an increase in support for the Alliance Party which won a number of significant electoral victories. However, in addition to fractures in the relationship between parties, there have also been problems within parties, such as the internal wrangling and leadership issues evident in the DUP.

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# DIMENSION TWO

## The Sense of Safety

### Overview

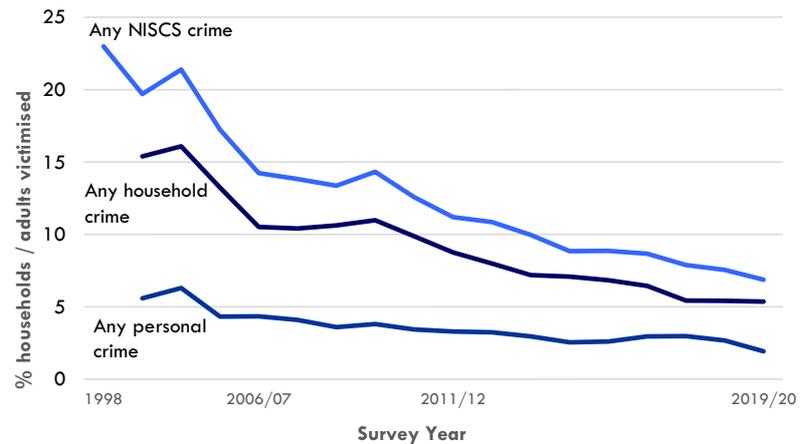
This Dimension of the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (NIPMR) provides an assessment of criminal justice, policing and security issues relating to a sense of safety. It includes levels and perceptions of crime and paramilitary activity, along with the performance and composition of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The Dimension also reflects a growing focus on domestic abuse, sexual violence and online criminality, along with the complexity and time required to deal with such crimes. The issues and controversies of policing during the COVID-19 pandemic are also highlighted. In addition, this Dimension reflects that in the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a key and outstanding challenge relates to dealing with the legacy of the past. Proposed legacy legislation by the United Kingdom (UK) government has attracted substantial international criticism while bringing into question the rule of law.

### 1. Crime and Victimization

One of the most reliable and longstanding indicators of crime trends and victimisation is the Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) (previously the Northern Ireland Crime Survey). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a shorter survey - the Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey (NISCTS) - was carried out in 2020/21 and 2021/22 using telephone interviews. Findings using NISCTS data may not be directly comparable with NISCS, although they do provide a useful sense of overall trend data.

As evident in Figure 1, long-term trends for the levels of crime and victimisation for all offences in Northern Ireland (NI) have continued on a general, downward trajectory since 1998. The prevalence rate (the percentage of the population who were victims of any type of crime) has dropped from a peak of 23.0 per cent in 1998 to 6.9 per cent in 2019/20 (Campbell, Rice and Ross, 2021). The greatest falls relate to vehicle-related theft (7.7 percentage point reduction); vandalism (4.1 percentage point reduction); and violent crime (2.9 percentage point reduction). More recent figures from the NISCTS point to low levels of crime victimisation and perceptions of crime (Ross and Beggs, 2023), although the comparability to previous surveys is limited due to the shift in methodology. Nevertheless, it is the overall, long-term trajectory which is important to note for the purposes of the NIPMR and perceptions of safety.

**Figure 1: Households/adult victims of crime once or more in NI, 1998-2019/20**



Sources: Northern Ireland Crime Survey 1998-2017/18; Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey 2018/19-2019/20

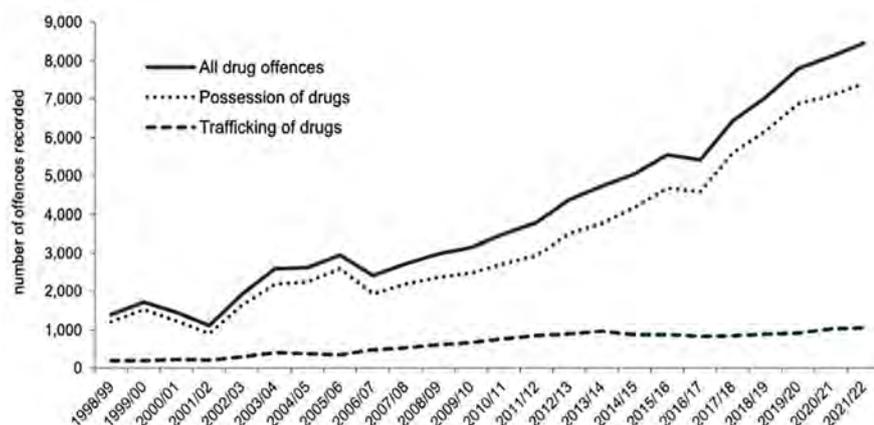
1. The any NISCS crime rate is calculated treating a household crime as a personal crime.
2. Rates for any household crime are based on all households.
3. Rates for any personal crime are based on all adults and are weighted for household size.
4. Rates for household and personal crime are not available for 1998.

Source: Campbell, Rice and Ross (2021)

The proportion of adults experiencing personal crime remains relatively low, having decreased from 5.6 per cent in 1999 to 2.7 per cent in 2018/19, and 1.9 per cent for 2019/20. The majority of these offences relate in some form to crimes involving violence. The chances of becoming a victim of crime remain lower in NI compared to England and Wales at 6.9 percent and 13.3 per cent respectively. In general, the NISCS estimates that 96,000 incidents of crime occurred during the twelve-month reporting period for the 2019/20 survey, having decreased from an estimated peak of 295,000 incidents in 2003/4 (*ibid.*, 14). However, the availability of statistics disaggregated by socio-economic group or geography are limited.

When looking at the nature of crime, it is also useful to explore data on crimes recorded by the PSNI. These show a drop from 81 crimes per 1,000 people in 2002/03 to 56 crimes per 1,000 people in 2021/22 (PSNI, 2022a). While theft accounted for 78 per cent of all victim-based crime recorded by the PSNI in 1998/99, that figure fell to 37 per cent in 2021/22. However, violence against the person and sexual offences rose from 19 per cent to 50 per cent over the same period. In 2021/22, 68 per cent of all alcohol-motivated crime was related to violence. Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, recorded drug offences, and particularly possession offences, have risen significantly during this recording period (*ibid.*)

Figure 2: Trafficking of drugs and possession of drug offences, 1998/99-2021/22



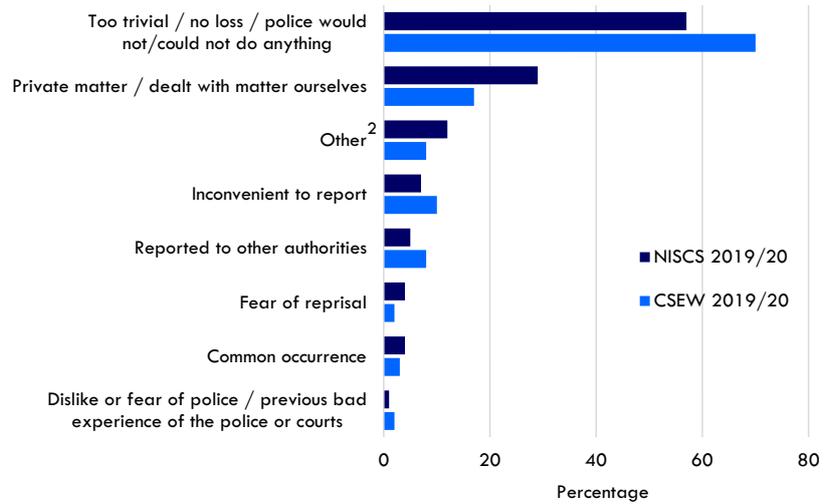
Source: PSNI (2022a)

A significant growth area for crime in NI relates to online crime, which now accounts for 5 per cent of all recorded crime in 2021/22 (up from 0.6 per cent in 2014/15). Types of online crime recorded by the PSNI include harassment, malicious communications, sexual offences, and blackmail (*ibid.*, 25) – with harassment comprising the largest volume of online offences at 75 per cent for 2021/22.

NICS data from 2019/20 indicate that approximately 45 per cent of all crimes are reported to the PSNI, up from 35 per cent in 2018/19. For comparison, the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows that 39 per cent of all crime was reported to the police (Campbell, Rice and Ross, 2021).

Figure 3 demonstrates that the main reasons given for not reporting crime to the police was the perceived triviality of the crime (57%), while dislike/fear of police/previous bad experience of the police or courts accounted for only 1 per cent (*ibid.*, 16).

**Figure 3: Reasons for not reporting crime to policing in NI, and England and Wales, 2019/20**



Sources: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey 2019/20; Crime Survey for England and Wales 2019/20

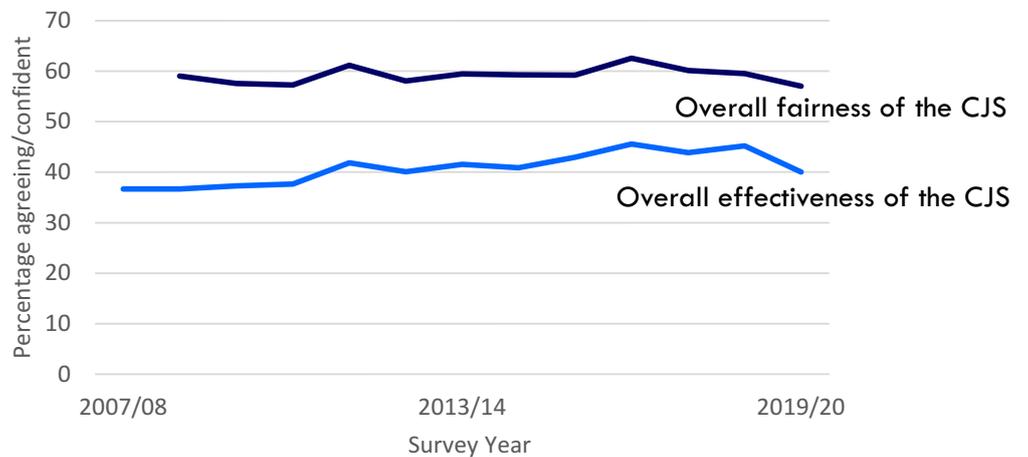
- 1. More than one reason could be given per incident.
- 2. See Table 10 for further details on 'Other' reasons.

Source: Campbell, Rice and Ross (2021)

It remains, therefore, that a relatively large volume of the *actual* amount of crime happening in NI goes unreported to the PSNI. However, the various reasons for not reporting seem counterintuitive given that 80 per cent of the public in 2019/20 reported having overall confidence in the police, having risen from 73 per cent in 2003/04 (Campbell, Ross and Rice, 2021). NICS respondents had a lower level of confidence in police in their local area (49 per cent in 2019/20). This is further discussed in the Policing in Northern Ireland section below.

It is evident from Figure 4 that confidence in the overall *fairness* of the criminal justice system is consistently higher than confidence in its *effectiveness* (57% and 50% respectively in 2019/20). To set this in context, in 2021/22, it took on average 746 days from date of reporting to a court disposal in NI, up from 526 days in 2016/17 (Department of Justice [DoJ], 2022).

**Figure 4: Confidence in the overall effectiveness and fairness of the criminal justice system, 2007/08-2019/20**



Sources: Northern Ireland Crime Surveys 2007/08- 2017/18; Northern Ireland Safe Community Surveys 2018/19-2019/20

Source: Campbell, Ross and Rice (2021)

The age profile of victims provides a more granular understanding of patterns around crime and victimisation. PSNI statistics show that 13 per cent of all known victims in 2021/22 were aged under 18; 81 per cent were aged between 18 and 64; and 6 per cent were aged 65 or over. For those under 18 years of age, 95 per cent were victims of violence against the person and sexual offences, compared with 63 per cent for victims aged 18 to 64, and 41 per cent for those aged 65 or over. The trend for violence against the person to form the largest proportion of offences against victims under 18, has been increasing across the last ten years (PSNI, 2022a). This points to the fact that children and young people are experiencing proportionally greater levels of violence and sexual assault in comparison with older age groups, which highlights issues of vulnerability and the potential need for more specific policing and criminal justice attention.

## 2. Detection and Outcomes

PSNI statistics can be affected by changes in recording practices, standards, methods and public imperatives around particular crimes, thus impacting on the outcomes related to reported crime (PSNI, 2022b). The main indicator for an outcome is defined as a sanction outcome, whereby a person is formally dealt with by the PSNI by means of a charge, summons, offence taken into consideration, formal or informal out-of-court disposal. For 2020/21, the PSNI's sanction outcome rate was 31 per cent. This means that for over two thirds of detected crime in NI, there is no further outcome. More precise detail can be found for sanction outcomes over time via the PSNI's website (PSNI, 2022a). While there has been a rise in the number of recorded crimes related to violence against the person, outcomes have steadily declined. The reverse is true in relation to recorded burglary/robbery/theft. However, it should be cautioned that in terms of policing, there is a general criminological acceptance that the very nature of crime is becoming more complex. At the same time, crime is being dealt with by increasing numbers of government and other agencies. In this regard, sanction outcomes remain a blunt barometer of PSNI efficacy – and particularly when set against financial and organisational challenges faced by the PSNI (Police Foundation, 2022).

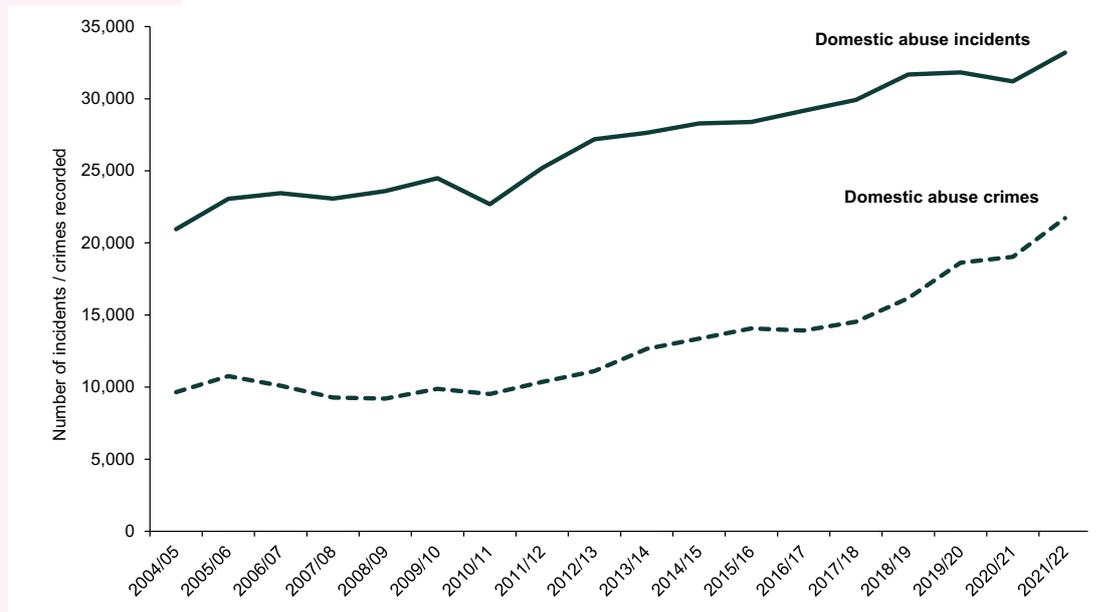
The new Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-24 was published in 2021 looking at needs, support and services (among other areas) for victims of crime (DoJ, 2021). This followed a number of key developments, including the Gillen Review (2019) relating to the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI, and the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report into the Care and Treatment of Victims and Witnesses (CJINI, 2020).

## 3. Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences

### 3.1 Domestic abuse

Since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), there has been a significant focus on the issue of domestic violence and abuse in NI, particularly in relation to the prevalence of incidents and crimes recorded. (Not all domestic abuse incidents will result in a crime being recorded, due to the level of severity – see PSNI, 2022c). Figure 5 clearly shows that since 2004/05, there has been a continuing, upward trajectory in the number of recorded domestic abuse incidents and crimes (*ibid.*).

**Figure 5: Trends in domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI, 2004/05 – 2012/22**



Source: PSNI (2022c)

Latest PSNI statistics show that there were 33,186 recorded domestic abuse *incidents* and 22,142 *crimes* recorded between July 2021 and June 2022 - the highest since records began in 2004/05 (*ibid.*). In particular, there has been an increase in the number of reported domestic abuse crimes involving violence, as well as with stalking/harassment. Given that data from the NISCS survey indicate that barely half of all crimes are reported to the PSNI, the number of domestic abuse incidents and crimes is therefore likely to be higher than officially recorded.

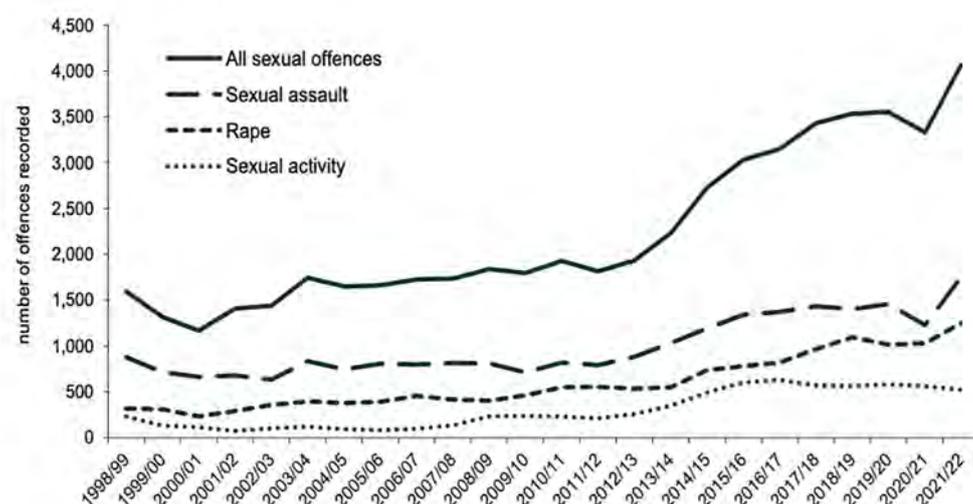
Set against these figures, in February 2021 the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 was passed, further defining coercive control as a criminal offence, to include financial, non-violent actions and psychological control. However, evidence from the 2022 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey (adults aged 18 years or over) and the 2020/21 Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey (16 year olds) indicates that there is limited public understanding of what the term coercive control means or involves as a form of domestic abuse (Lagdon *et al.*, 2021; Lagdon *et al.*, 2022).

At a UK level, domestic abuse and violence has also been thrust into the media and public spotlight since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) following the murder of Sarah Everard (The Guardian, 30 September 2022). At a local level, revelations about former Irish rugby player, David Tweed, raised questions about social and political attitudes to domestic abuse. There has also been concern about so-called armed patriarchy, given a suggested link between paramilitarism and the high levels of domestic and sexual assault in NI nearly 25 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (The Guardian, 1 December 2021). The first PSNI action plan for tackling violence against women and girls was launched in September 2022 (PSNI, 2022d).

## 3.2 Sexual offences

Beyond a rise in the number of domestic abuse crimes recorded by the PSNI, Figure 6 shows that there has been an increase in the number of officially-recorded sexual offences since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018).

**Figure 6: Police-recorded sexual offences, 1998 to 2021/22**



Source: PSNI (2022a)

The number of recorded rape offences has been increasing consistently over the past twenty years (PSNI, 2022a), with 2021/22 recording the highest levels since PSNI first published statistics in 2001. Unlawful sexual activity offences and sexual grooming/communication with a child have also shown steady increases (*ibid*, 14-15). It should be noted that grooming-type offences have been recorded since 2004/05, while the offence of sexual communication with a child was introduced in 2015/16.

Set against these increasing figures, statistics from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) indicate that 1,568 files involving sexual offences were received in 2020/21, down from 1,684 in 2019/20 (PPS, 2021). Of those cases in 2020/21, the test for prosecution for a sexual offence was met in 23.6 per cent of cases. In terms of no-prosecution decisions during 2020/21, 98.4 per cent of those were due to not passing the PPS's evidential test.

The average number of calendar days taken by the PPS during 2020/21 to issue indictable prosecution decisions for all sexual offences was 293 days. This NIPMR covers the period of the global pandemic, with the (then) Justice Minister Naomi Long indicating that delays and backlogs caused by the pandemic may not be cleared until 2028 – adding to the already slow processing of court cases in NI (BBC NI, 3 August 2022).

Conviction rates in all sexual offences cases (where there was at least one conviction for a sexual offence) was 67 per cent in 2020/21. However, the percentage of rape offence cases which met the test for prosecution was 11.4 per cent (76 prosecution/diversion decisions), with just eight people convicted of rape. (PPS, 2021)

The CJINI has highlighted significant problems with PSNI and PPS file quality, case delays and the impact this is having on victims of crime in NI (CJINI, 2023a). Of significant note since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), Sir John Gillen published his Review containing 253 recommendations into the law and procedures around serious sexual offences in NI (Gillen Review, 2019). These related to many of the issues discussed above, including access to trials, the dangers of social media, public perceptions, delays in the justice system, training for PSNI and the legal sector, and an examination of resources to deal with such offences. Since then, the new Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act 2022 has come into force, implementing (among other provisions) elements of the Gillen Review; including new offences related to up-skirting and cyber-flashing, along with tightening provisions related to 'rough sex' defence and unwanted disclosure of private sexual images.

The Executive Office (TEO) led work to develop the Equally Safe Strategy: A Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls, following the lead of England, Wales and Scotland. A programme of research has been undertaken to inform the development of this strategy. For example, the 2022 YLT survey of 16 year olds found that 91 per cent of young males and 96 per cent of young females have experienced at least one violent act or behaviour during their lifetime, such as unwanted inappropriate attention, coercive control, and physical assault (TEO, 2022; Schubotz, 2023).

## 4. Public Sense of Safety

### 4.1 Hate crimes

In 2021/22, 5,355 hate crimes or incidents were reported to the PSNI (PSNI, 2022e). Examples of the (often) violent circumstances of hate crime and incidents can readily be found in local newspaper reports: white supremacist graffiti sprayed on the shutters of an East Belfast shopfront (Belfast Live, 28 December 2022); windows smashed and graffiti sprayed on a house wall in South Belfast reading *local only* (Irish News, 8 October 2022); a racially-motivated arson attack in Ballymena forcing a family to flee their home in the middle of the night (Belfast Telegraph, 2022). These manifestations of hatred, intolerance and bigotry are experienced by those within NI's majority communities, as well as being directed at its emerging minority communities who are continuing to cultivate their own spaces, places and identities.

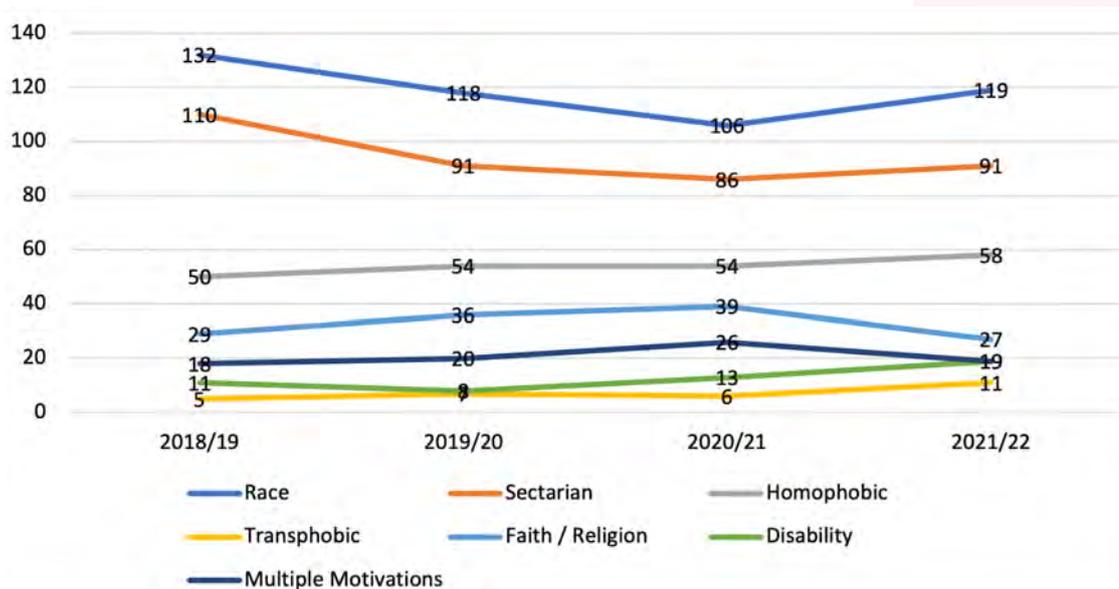
### 4.2 Overall trends

A hate crime is singled out from a typical crime because the offence is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards someone based on a determining personal characteristic (PSNI, 2022e). The PSNI monitors six strands of hate motivation in the reporting of incidents and recording of crimes: Race, Homophobia (sexual orientation), Sectarianism, Faith/religion (non-sectarian), Disability; and Transphobia.

In order for cases to proceed to the PPS, the police need to have sufficient evidence to provide a reasonable prospect of convicting the suspect. As seen in Figure 7, only a small proportion of hate-motivated incidents reported to the PSNI proceed to the PPS for a decision on whether to prosecute the suspect. In 2021/22, for example, out of the 1,334 incidents reported to the PSNI, only 119 files (9%) concerning racially-motivated hate crimes were

submitted to the PPS. Even within that small number, many will result in a decision not to prosecute, primarily because the PPS does not consider the evidential threshold – a realistic prospect of conviction – has been satisfied. In 2021/22, for example, 151 cases out of a total of 433 hate crimes (35%) were not prosecuted (PPS, 2022). With few exceptions, for each hate motivation strand in every year since 2010/11, over 75 per cent of crimes do not end with a prosecution or a warning. When it comes to racist hate crimes, since 2010/11 over 80 per cent do not end with a prosecution or a warning.

**Figure 7: Number of files relating to hate crimes submitted by the PSNI to the PPS, 2018/19 to 2021/22**

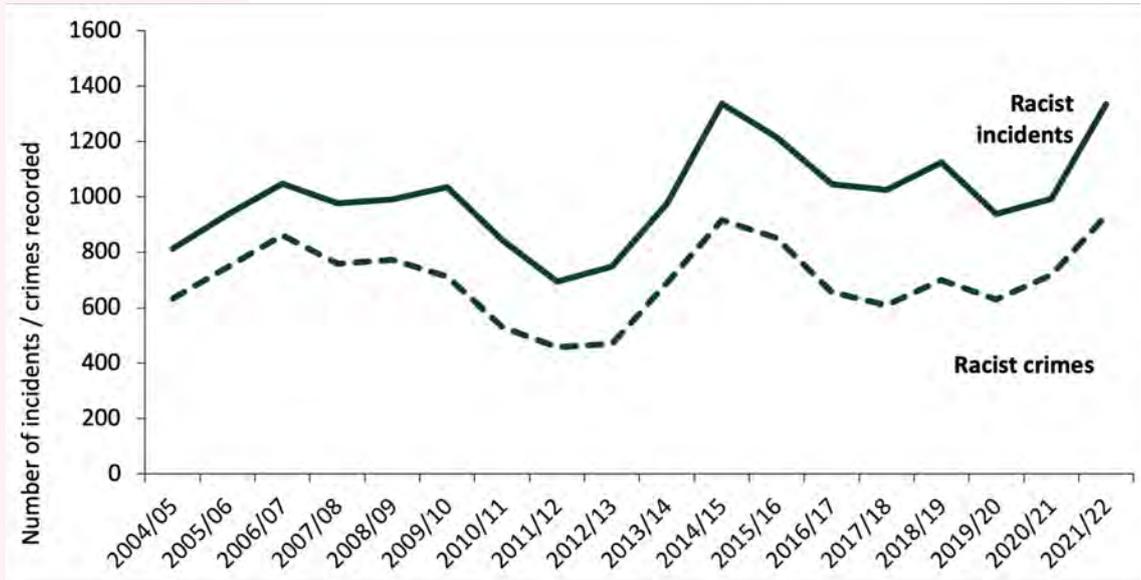


Source: PPS (2022)

### 4.3 Racist hate crimes

Race has remained as the most common form of hate motivation over time in NI. One quarter (24%) of respondents to the 2022 NILT Survey thought that there was more racial prejudice in NI than there was five years ago, and a further 36 per cent thought there was the same amount (ARK, 2023a). The number of racist hate crimes and incidents reported to the PSNI have increased by 92 per cent and 103 per cent respectively between 2011/12 and 2021/22 (PSNI, 2022e). In 2021/22, the number of racist hate incidents and crimes reached their highest levels since 2004/05, with 1,334 incidents (Figure 8). When accounting for the small proportion of the population from a black or ethnic-minority background, there is a one in 31 chance of members of these ethnic groups being a victim of a racist hate incident. By comparison, there is a one in 1777 chance of being a victim of a sectarian hate crime incident (Hate Crime Review, 2020).

**Figure 8: Trends in racist incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI, 2004/05 to 2021/22**



Source: PSNI (2022e)

Racist hate incidents are, of course, carried out by a small minority of individuals who hold racial prejudices and exhibit behaviour most of society would condemn. However, it is also apparent that racial intolerance and biases manifest themselves in the wider outlooks and attitudes across NI more generally. In the 2022 NILT Survey, 26 per cent of respondents said that they were a little or very prejudiced against ethnic minority groups. When asked about who people mixed with socially, 75 per cent did not mix socially with those from a black background and 84 per cent had not mixed with people from a Chinese background. Unsurprisingly, then, just 29 per cent of respondents felt that they knew about the culture of some minority ethnic communities (ARK, 2023a).

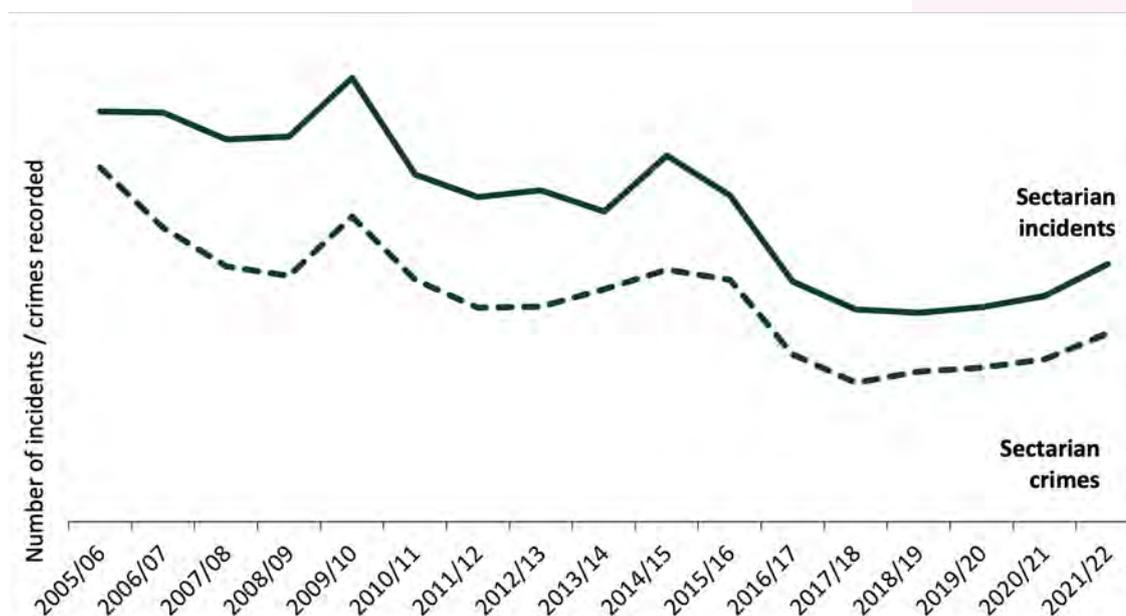
More optimistically, though, the NILT Survey revealed signs of a welcoming attitude amongst the general population. For example, 82 per cent of respondents felt that migrant workers make NI open to new ideas and cultures (*ibid.*). So too are there individual stories of success, like Jahswill Emmanuel, who came to live in NI from Nigeria in 2004. After being seriously injured in a racist attack in 2012, he set up a charity to integrate multi-ethnic communities with local people. He was awarded a British Empire Medal in the King’s New Year Honours list 2022. Reflecting on the changes taking place in NI, Emmanuel recounts:

*When I arrived, there were no African shops and we had to use an Asian shop. Now it is so diverse you have shops for everyone as there has been such a growth in diversity and multi-cultural communities here (Sunday Life, 31 December 2022).*

## 4.4 Sectarian hate crimes

Sectarian incidents remain a marked feature of hate crime in NI. These range from offences against the person including violent assaults, to criminal damage like graffiti sprayed on walls (Belfast Live, 16 December 2022). In 2021/22, there were 1,057 sectarian incidents reported to the PSNI, much lower than the peak of 1,840 incidents recorded in 2009/10 (Figure 9). It is worth noting that PSNI statistics do not record the perceived religion of the victims of sectarian hate crime. Instead, such a crime is recorded where offence is perceived, by the victim or someone else, to be motivated by sectarian hostility.

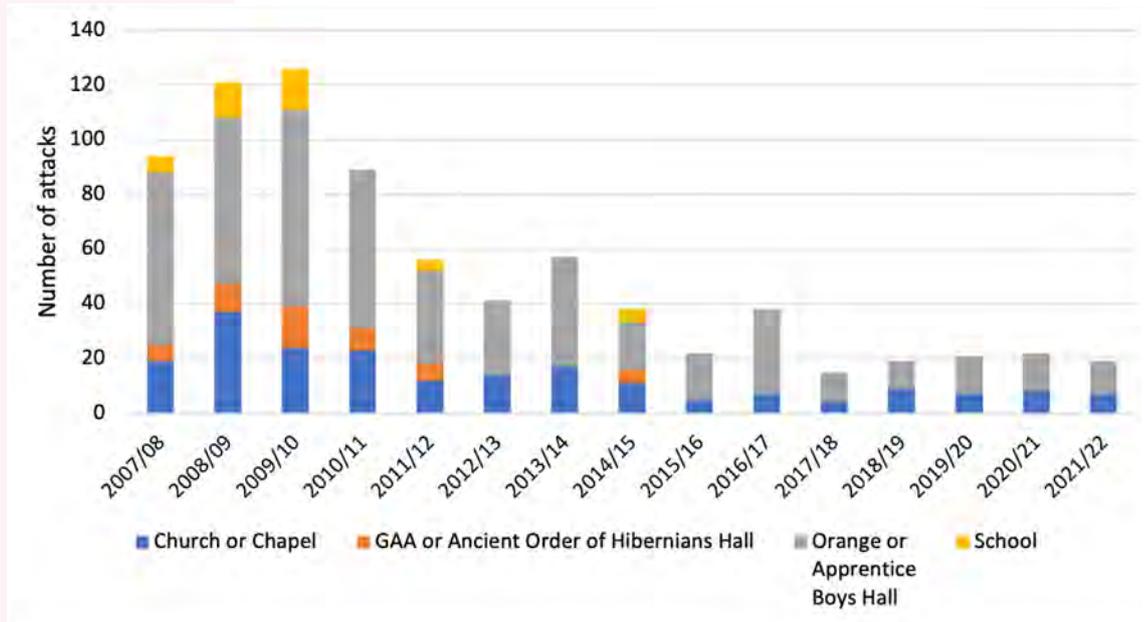
**Figure 9: Number of sectarian incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI, 2005/06 to 2021/22**



Source: PSNI (2022e)

The number of attacks on symbolic premises of a particular community can be seen as a proxy measure of sectarianism. As detailed in PSNI statistics, an attack is recorded where a crime has a sectarian motivation, when the premises is the intended target of the attack, and where the premises are one of the following: a church or chapel, a Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) or Ancient Order of Hibernians Hall, an Orange Hall or Apprentice Boys Hall, or a school. As illustrated in Figure 10, such attacks remain a sad reality, such as the spraying of graffiti in support of the IRA on an Orange hall in Keady, County Armagh in December 2022 (BBC NI, 29 November 2022). However, there have been no attacks on schools since 2015/16.

Figure 10: Number of attacks on symbolic premises, 2007/08 to 2021/22



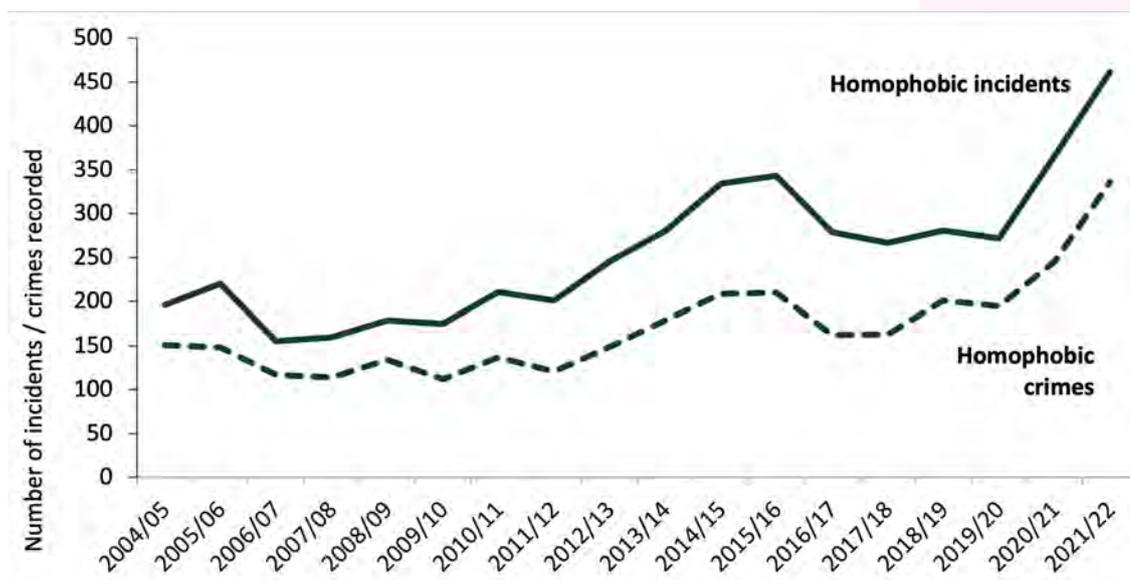
Source: PSNI (2022e)

A sizable proportion of respondents in the 2022 NILT Survey reported having felt intimidated by either loyalist (39%) or republican (28%) murals, kerb paintings, or flags at least one time in the last year (ARK, 2023b). Paramilitary flags continue to be erected in shared housing developments in an attempt to intimidate certain sections of the community living there (Irish News, 1 July 2019). At the most extreme, between 2017 and 2022, 1,411 people presented themselves as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) due to intimidation (NIHE, 2023).

### 4.5 New hate crime issues

The number of disability-motivated hate incidents reported to the PSNI has risen from 33 in 2011/12 to 123 in 2021/22 (PSNI, 2022e). So too has there been a steady increase in the number of homophobic hate incidents and crimes reported to the PSNI, with both rising to their highest levels since recording began in 2004/05. For example, there were 462 homophobic incidents reported in 2021/22 (Figure 11). The number of transphobic incidents has increased from four in 2011/12 to 65 in 2021/22 (Belfast Live, 22 May 2022). In November 2022, the Belfast City councillor, Micky Murray, was the subject of a homophobic attack in central Belfast, which was condemned by the Lord Mayor and other elected representatives. Murray is one of a number of victims of homophobic and transphobic abuse speaking out about their experiences of physical and verbal abuse and the associated trauma.

Figure 11: Number of homophobic incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI, 2004/05 to 2021/22



Source: PSNI (2022e)

## 4.6 Proposals for hate crime legislation

At present, there is no specific offence of hate crime in NI, but perpetrators of offences aggravated by hostility can receive a higher sentence following conviction. The PSNI has stated that the lack of a specific definition of hate crime imposes significant limitations on their ability to act (The Detail, 12 May 2022). In June 2019, the DoJ announced the appointment of an independent review into hate crime legislation, conducted by Judge Desmond Marrinan, which was completed in 2020 (Hate Crime Review Team, 2020). It recommended that statutory aggravations should be added to all existing offences in NI (as happens in Scotland) and become the core method of prosecuting hate crimes. In addition, the characteristics of age, sex/gender and variations in sex should join the existing protected characteristics of race, religion, disability and sexual orientation in any new aggravated offences. A new statutory aggravation for sectarian prejudice was also recommended, something supported by 83 per cent of the 780 respondents who were surveyed as part of the Review process. That survey also revealed that 58 per cent of respondents agreed that hate crimes should be punished more severely than non-hate crimes and, on the wider issue of hate crime on social media, an overwhelmingly majority (91%) thought that social media companies should be subject to a statutory regulatory regime and compelled to remove hateful material posted online.

The DoJ accepted the Marrinan Review's recommendations, leading to the NI Assembly bringing forward a Hate Crime and Public Order (NI) Bill. In January 2022, the (then) Justice Minister, Naomi Long, launched a public consultation calling for views to inform the development of this Bill, which was to be taken forward in the next Assembly mandate. As of May 2023, the suspension of the Assembly makes this Bill one of a number of legislative schemes that have stalled. While NI waits for the political impasse to end, so too it remains an outlier when initiatives to develop bespoke hate crime offences and the regulation of freedom of expression have progressed in neighbouring jurisdictions. Legislation has been successfully enacted in Scotland (Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021), a bill is in motion in the

Republic of Ireland (Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022), and the Law Commission of England and Wales reported on the issue in December 2021.

## 5. Policing in Northern Ireland

### 5.1 Setting the context

Since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), two key anniversaries have occurred – the 20th anniversary of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland (ICP, the Patten Report) in September 2019, and the 20th anniversary of the PSNI's formation in November 2021. While significant progress has been made in terms of overall societal support for, and engagement with, the PSNI, there remain many ongoing issues which command attention for the purposes of this report.

There has been significant change in the leadership of the PSNI since 2018, with Simon Byrne appointed as Chief Constable in May 2019, having taken over from Sir George Hamilton who served as Chief Constable since 2014. Set against the ever-present political context and backdrop to policing in NI, the appointment of Simon Byrne, along with the start to his tenure, has seldom been far from controversy. His first public appearance, at Queen's University Belfast, attracted attention for his comments around child welfare and paramilitarism – where he stated he would take children away from paramilitary leaders (BBC NI, 5 September 2019). This was followed by his social media appearance on Christmas Day in 2019 with militarised officers at Crossmaglen PSNI station – an act which sparked the controversial review into the policing of South Armagh itself, along with calls for him to resign (BBC NI, 7 January 2020). There was also political controversy in relation to policing of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the policing of the Bobby Storey funeral and police operations at a Black Lives Matter protest – both of which are discussed below.

There have been a number of other issues relating to policing, such as the unlawful high-profile arrest of journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCafferty over the *No Stone Unturned* documentary (Irish Times, 16 July 2020), as well as a number of high-profile cases in the media related to misogyny, domestic abuse, officer behaviour and social media usage within the organisation (Northern Ireland Policing Board [NIPB], 2022a).

### 5.2 Strength and composition of the PSNI

The PSNI has been experiencing significant financial pressures over the past number of years, impacting upon operations and recruitment (PSNI, 2022f). Under the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020), it was agreed that PSNI numbers would be increased to 7,500. However, with the lack of an agreed budget or a functioning Assembly to achieve this aim, PSNI officer recruitment has been stalling – in turn impacting upon numbers, composition, and diversity.

Early rates of progress around increasing the number of Catholic PSNI officers have not been maintained. The 2001 figure of 0.3 per cent rose to 29.38 per cent in 2010, just before the 50/50 recruitment provisions lapsed in 2011 (Northern Ireland Office [NIO], 2010). In 2022, that figure was 32.17 per cent (see Table 1).

PSNI-commissioned research (Deloitte, 2016) showed that between 2013 and 2015, 31 per cent of those applying to join the PSNI were from a Catholic background; while only 19 per cent of successful applicants were from a Catholic background.

**Table 1: PSNI workforce composition (1 September 2022)**

	Police Officers	Police staff
% Perceived Protestant	66.46	77.75
% Perceived Catholic	32.17	19.81
% Not Determined	1.36	2.44
% Female	31.43	56.91
% Male	68.57	43.09
% Ethnic Minority	0.62	0.73
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,897</b>	<b>2,620</b>

Source: PSNI, 2023a

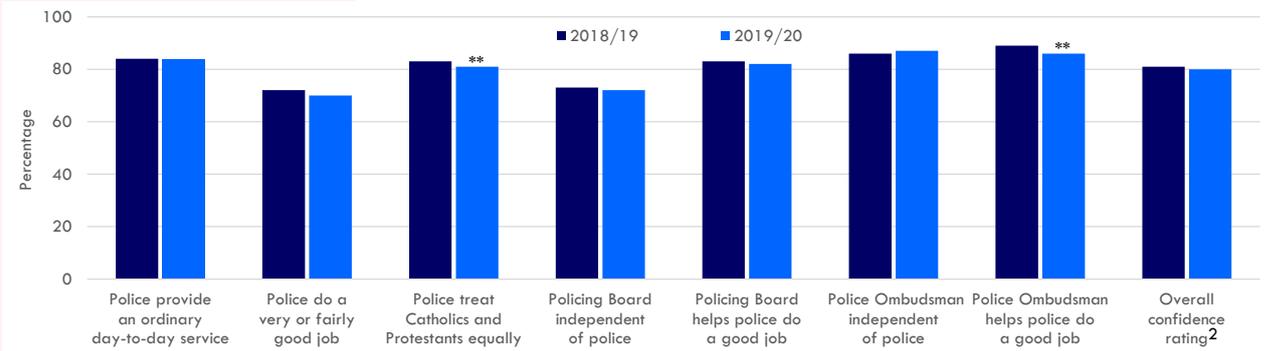
Based on PSNI statistics, Table 1 also indicates that issues of gender, race and sexual orientation remain prominent dynamics in terms of the PSNI seeking to have a balanced and representative complement of officers who reflect society. The percentage of ethnic minority officers has only increased from 0.52 per cent in 2017 to 0.62 per cent in 2022. This sits at odds with the current ethnic minority population of NI which, according to the 2021 Census, is 3.4 per cent (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2022). Or in other terms, there are seven times fewer police officers from an ethnic minority background than would be expected proportional to the population. Furthermore, the research from Deloitte (2016) indicates significant socio-geographic variation in police recruit applications across NI. In general, it is of note that the PSNI remain a long way from the ICP's aspiration of being a fully representative police service.

Overall, while issues related to composition remain, in terms of absolute numbers of police officers, the PSNI still retains a relatively high number of officers proportional to the population, with approximately 357 officers per 100,000 of population, compared with 235 in England and Wales, 305 for Scotland, and 278 for An Garda Síochána in the Republic of Ireland (Allen and Mansfield, 2022).

## 5.3 Perceptions of and confidence in the PSNI

As noted earlier, general confidence in the PSNI has remained relatively high over time, rising from 73 per cent since 2003/04 to 80 per cent in 2019/20 (Campbell, Ross and Rice, 2021). Across eight different measures, public confidence in both the PSNI and wider policing arrangements is evident (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Confidence in the police and police accountability arrangements in NI, 2019/20 (%)**



Sources: Northern Ireland Safe Community Surveys 2018/19-2019/20

Source: Campbell, Ross and Rice, (2021)

The picture at a local level, however, is significantly different. When considering local policing, 49 per cent of people in NI rate their local police as doing an excellent or good job, compared with 55 per cent in England and Wales (*ibid.*). The lowest response in terms of public confidence relates to the perception of how visible local police are in NI, with only 27 per cent of respondents agreeing that they were. Overall, perceptions of policing in NI, across a range of markers, do not differ significantly from England and Wales (*ibid.*).

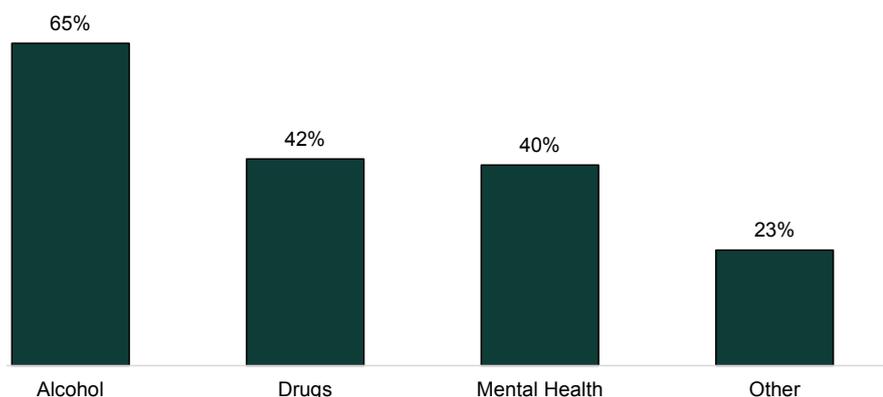
## 5.4 Complaints against the PSNI

The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (OPONI) provides annual statistics in line with its statutory obligations (OPONI, 2022a). There was a 17 per cent increase in the number of complaints received and matters referred to the OPONI between 2017/18 and 2021/22 (from 2,579 to 2,950). The majority of complaints for 2021/22 arose from a criminal investigation (889, 30%), with 415 arising from an arrest, 237 from a traffic incident, 219 from a domestic incident (such as a neighbourhood dispute), 184 from police enquiries, and 157 from police searches. Only 19 complaints were recorded for incidents associated with parades or demonstrations. The majority of complaints (51%) related to a failure in duty. Of all complaints made for 2021/22, 41 per cent were fully investigated, with evidence found to substantiate all or part of the complaints in 11 per cent of these cases (*ibid.*).

## 5.5 Police powers

The PSNI possess a wide variety of legislative and operational powers to cope with the broad spectrum of criminological scenarios faced by the organisation on a daily basis. In general, lethal and less-lethal Use of Force (UoF) represent a very small proportion of PSNI's overall UoF profile. For example, while firearms were drawn almost 2,000 times between 2018/19 and 2021/22, only in one case was a live round actually discharged. Similarly, of the 1,270 times a conductive energy device (Taser X26) was drawn over the same period, it was discharged 93 times (PSNI, 2022g). And while, for example, PSNI use of batons has been decreasing steadily for nearly ten years, use of police dogs has been increasing over that time period. For all recorded PSNI UoF, the top reason for use has been to protect self (86% of cases). Figure 13 clearly shows that a large proportion of incidents involving PSNI UoF involve alcohol, drugs and mental health.

**Figure 13: Impact factors relating to Use of Force 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022**



Source: PSNI (2022g)

In terms of all UoF, 81 per cent was recorded as being directed at males and 19 per cent females; 11 per cent of all UoF was against children (under 18s); and 77 per cent was used on 18-44 year olds. Irish Travellers were disproportionately subject to use of these powers.

Setting aside the broad overview around UoF, one of the most controversial and new tactical options to have been introduced by the PSNI has been the spit and bite guard (NIPB, 2022b). Introduced by the PSNI in March 2020 on a temporary basis in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these guards were rolled out to most frontline policing roles in January 2021 (OPONI, 2021a). This was despite a NIPB recommendation to phase out their use in November 2020, and evidence they did not protect police officers from COVID-19, and that they were being used predominantly against people with disabilities (Amnesty NI, 2021).

Since the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), stop and search remains the most common form of adversarial contact between the PSNI and the public in NI (The Guardian, 4 September, 2019). Between October 2021 and September 2022, 20,862 people were stopped and searched/questioned, which is the lowest figure within the previous decade. However, it should be noted that in this context *terrorist-related* stop and search powers account for the biggest variations in use, while *ordinary* stop and search powers have remained almost static over the past ten years. Notably, the PSNI have been, and remain, one of the highest users of stop and search powers, with the poorest outcomes out of all UK police services (PSNI, 2022h).

Eight out of 11 PSNI districts have higher stop and search usage rates than England and Wales. The average PSNI arrest rate for stop and search (6%) sits at less than half the average rate for police services in England and Wales. In NI in 2022, the arrest rate for under 18s resulting from a stop and search was 2.6 per cent, having fallen from 3.8 per cent in the 2020/2021 period (*ibid.*). This figure sits at odds with the legal requirement for reasonable suspicion to engage someone as part of a stop and search encounter under *ordinary* legislation. Or in other terms, and particularly for children stopped/searched in NI, the object of the stop is not matched by the outcome.

As identified in the previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), trends around stop and search as a form of police contact with children and young people remain controversial (Topping and Schubotz, 2018). However, continued pressure by academics, the NIPB and NGOs has resulted in new levels of PSNI transparency around stop and search practice. This is particularly related to the creation of a new, dedicated website section by the PSNI for stop and search, resulting in the publication of previously restricted research by Topping (2018; 2019a; 2019b). Rudimentary attempts by the PSNI at community monitoring around stop and search were also published for the first time in 2022, albeit limited to terrorist-related powers (PSNI, 2022h; 2022i).

Finally, during the current reporting period, people from the Catholic community were almost twice as likely to be arrested by the PSNI compared with the Protestant community. As identified by The Detail (9 December 2021), between 2016 and 2020 over 57,000 members of the Catholic community were arrested compared with 31,000 members of the Protestant community. This situation has been criticised by the NIPB, primarily because the PSNI had been in possession of these figures for a number of years but failed to act or progress the issue with the NIPB (NIPB, 2023). While evidence does not exist to explain definitively this difference in arrest rates according to religion, it does raise questions for both PSNI and the NIPB – together with wider UoF patterns – about the practical monitoring and oversight of police powers.

## 5.6 Pandemic policing

Aside from the cyclical episodes of public order-type policing faced by the PSNI, the biggest post-conflict policing challenge faced by the organisation in its history has been the policing of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 came into force on 28 March 2020. This legislation strengthened police enforcement powers to reduce the spread of COVID-19, protect the health service, and save lives. The new powers included instructing people to go home and allowed the PSNI to issue fixed-penalty notices. This led to the most significant increase in police powers since conflict-related emergency provisions legislation. While it is not possible to cover all aspects of the pandemic policing response within this report, there are a number of key issues that relate to police confidence in the enforcement of the regulations.

The NIPB noted a tension between the actions of PSNI in enforcing the public health regulations and the erosion of civil liberties (NIPB, 2020). The situation did present significant challenges, including the speed with which regulations and amendments were introduced. Indeed, there were eleven different sets of amendments introduced during the pandemic, with the lack of legal clarity posing real challenges to the ability of the PSNI to explain the law and its application. Some of these challenges are discussed below.

The major political and operational test for PSNI's enforcement was the funeral of the republican figure, Bobby Storey, in June 2020. With the leader of Sinn Féin, Mary-Lou McDonald, and deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, in attendance among other high-profile politicians, approximately 2,000 members of the public lined the streets for the funeral route at a time when regulations put strict limits on attendances at funerals and other public gatherings. With calls from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) for the Chief Constable to resign over the policing of the event and allegations that the

regulations were broken, the Director of Public Prosecutions concluded that any prosecution could not prove any breach of the regulations to the required standard (BBC NI, 30 March 2021). This further confirmed the decision by the PPS earlier in the year not to prosecute any of the 24 Sinn Féin attendees of the funeral for breach of the regulations (Belfast Telegraph, 10 June 2021).

As a symptom of the social and political confusion over enforcement of the regulations, anomalies also appeared in the PSNI's 4Es approach of engaging, explaining, encouraging and enforcing the regulations. For example, there were various scenarios of gatherings and crowds which included: clapping for health and care workers; queuing at supermarkets and the IKEA store; crowding at beaches; sea-swimming; funerals and protests (NIPB, 2020). One gathering resulted in the arrest by the PSNI of a victim marking the anniversary of the Sean Graham massacre at the memorial site on the Ormeau Road in Belfast in February 2021 (Irish News, 5 October 2022). Also controversial was the policing of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in June 2020. With pre-planned, socially distanced protests organised in both Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on 6 June in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America (USA), approximately 70 fixed-penalty notices were issued to protestors. Organisers of the protests had been visited by the PSNI on the evening before and warned that they were potentially inciting the breaking of the COVID-19 regulations, an offence not actually covered, or which existed in the regulations (*ibid.*). While the PSNI initially defended their response to the protests, the OPONI subsequently found the police response to be discriminatory when compared with their response to a similar Protect Our Monuments protest held the following week which provided greater latitude to the rights of those protestors (OPONI, 2020). Following claims of institutional racism by the PSNI, the fines were rescinded by the PPS and the PSNI issued an apology for their policing of the events (BBC NI, 17 August 2021).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were formally revoked at 17:00 on 15 February 2022 by the (then) Health Minister, Robin Swann.

## 5.7 Legacy policing

The PSNI has been at the forefront of NI's response to investigating conflict-related deaths. This began in 2006 with the creation of the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team (HET), later replaced by the Legacy Investigation Branch (LIB). Both HET and LIB were the subject of controversy over the prioritisation of cases, investigators' associations with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and bias, real and perceived, in how investigations and suspects were being handled. As of May 2023, the majority of cases into legacy-related deaths remained unsolved, with the PSNI having a legacy caseload of over 900 cases, involving nearly 1,200 deaths. It has estimated, on the basis of existing resources, that it would take over 20 years to conduct human rights compliant investigations into its current caseload alone (Dawson *et al.*, 2022).

In response to accusations that military personnel have been unfairly targeted by the PSNI in its legacy investigations, the PPS has sought to make clear that cases relating to alleged offences involving republican and loyalist paramilitaries also remain active. Between 2011 and April 2019, the PPS took prosecutorial decisions in 26 legacy cases: 13 relating to alleged offences involving republican paramilitaries, 8 relating to alleged offences involving loyalist paramilitaries, and five involving former military personnel. There are

currently over 50 legacy inquests relating to almost 100 deaths proceeding through the NI Coroners' courts on this basis. Six of those inquests, involving 19 individuals, relate to military operations (*ibid.*).

Such developments should also be seen against the political backdrop since the previous last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018). Of particular importance is Boris Johnston's successful bid to become Prime Minister, during which he committed himself to ending what was described as unfair attempts to bring prosecutions for alleged crimes against former soldiers, including those who had served in NI. Johnson signed the Veterans Pledge drawn up by *The Sun* (a British-based tabloid newspaper), which included the intention:

*to introduce new legislation to end repeated and vexatious investigations into historical allegations against our service men and women, including in Northern Ireland* (The Sun, 11 July 2019).

In addition, a written ministerial statement from Brandon Lewis, then Secretary of State for NI, outlined proposals that would seek to *address the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland in a way that focuses on reconciliation, delivers for victims, and ends the cycle of reinvestigations into the Troubles in Northern Ireland that has failed victims and veterans alike* (Lewis, 2020).

Lewis's statement was examined by the Model Bill Team, a legal panel drawn from the Committee on the Administration of Justice in Belfast and academics at Queen's University Belfast (QUB). Their report provided an analysis of recent developments (McEvoy *et al.*, 2020), such as the criticism that the current batch of legacy investigations in NI were disproportionately focused on former soldiers. They suggested this was not supported by the relevant data, arguing such claims undermine the legitimacy of the criminal justice system in NI (*ibid.*). There was also criticism that proposals within the statement were incompatible with the UK government's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and possibly breached the commitments made in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as well as the Stormont House Agreement (HM Government, 2014). There was concern that the plan effectively ruled out future legacy inquests and potential civil actions relating to incidents during the Troubles. Plus, there was also uncertainty over those existing cases before the courts. On top of this was the statute of limitations which would ban all prosecutions and stop all legal actions against former members of the security forces in NI as well as ex-paramilitaries. In a rare show of unity, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion condemning the proposals (BBC NI, 20 July 2021).

The proposals prompted Amnesty International to submit a call to the United Nations (UN) which called on the UN Human Rights Council to challenge the government's plans (BBC NI, 16 September 2021). This was followed by an open letter to Brandon Lewis from the then Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovi, who made clear that removing the option of investigations and prosecutions fails to meet the wishes of a significant group of victims (BBC NI, 23 September 2021).

On 17 May 2022 Brandon Lewis introduced the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (NITLRB) in the House of Commons. A key provision within this Bill was that any offer of immunity from prosecution would be restricted to those who were prepared to fully cooperate with the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery.

However, the basis on which immunity would be given appeared vague. Measures in the Bill were consistently opposed by all NI political parties, as well as by groups representing victims of the Troubles.

In addition to the complex issues around this legislation, the former Chief Constable of Bedfordshire, Jon Boutcher, is leading an independent team conducting the Operation Kenova investigation into a range of activities of the British agent known as Stakeknife. The investigation is examining allegations of kidnap, torture and murder by the Provisional IRA during the Troubles, including whether there is evidence of offences having been committed by members of the British Army, the Security Services or other government personnel. Operation Kenova has generated 1,000 witness statements and approximately 12,000 documents comprising more than a million pages. The suspects under consideration include alleged paramilitaries and former members of the police, intelligence and security forces. Between October 2019 and February 2022, the Operation has provided the PPS with 26 investigation files. Reflecting on the investigation, Boutcher has stated:

*I have spent considerable time with Operation Kenova families. For most, the tragic events of the Troubles feel as if they occurred only yesterday, notwithstanding the time that has passed. They legally and morally deserve to know the truth of what happened and if this is denied them, the next generation will carry on their fight and the wounds will never heal and the legacy of the past will continue to cast dark shadows over Northern Ireland (Boutcher, 2020).*

The past also continues to play out in the accounts of collusive behaviour arising from the reports of the Police Ombudsman into RUC association with loyalist paramilitaries. These include significant investigative failures by the RUC in relation to the murder of 17 year-old Damien Walsh in 1993, as well as evidence of collusive behaviours by the police (OPONI, 2021b). The report into the RUC's handling of paramilitary attacks by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) between 1989 and 1993, which resulted in 19 murders and multiple attempted murders, identified collusive behaviours, and raised significant concerns about police conduct (OPONI, 2022b). Significant investigative and intelligence failures and collusive behaviours by the RUC were identified in relation to a series of murders and attempted murders by the UDA and UFF in south Belfast in the 1990s, including the Sean Graham bookmaker's attack (OPONI, 2022c). Most recently, a report into the abduction and murder of Patrick Kelly in 1974 found evidence of a wholly inadequate investigation by the RUC, involving the failure to act on intelligence about an active UVF unit that was indicative of collusive behaviour on the part of RUC Special Branch (OPONI, 2023).

The Police Ombudsman's investigations into collusion have not been without controversy (BBC NI, 13 February 2022). In *Re Hawthorne* [2020] NICA 33 (Judiciary NI, 2020a), two retired RUC officers challenged the legality of the Ombudsman's findings, expressed in a Public Statement, of loyalist-RUC collusion in the deaths of six people and the injury of five others at Heights Bar, Loughinisland in 1984. The Court of Appeal held that the Ombudsman lacked a statutory basis to make emphatic conclusions of collusion because this can amount to findings of criminal offences, something the Ombudsman has no statutory power to do. However, the Court of Appeal did accept, where the right to life (Article 2 ECHR) was engaged, it is appropriate for the Ombudsman to acknowledge when matters uncovered were very largely what the families claimed constituted collusive behaviour. As of May 2023,

former RUC officers are mounting a legal challenge in the High Court to these findings of collusive behaviour in the recent reports by the Police Ombudsman (Belfast Telegraph, 23 March 2023).

## 6. Security Situation and Paramilitarism

### 6.1 Overview and context

As of May 2023, there exists a *severe* threat from NI-related terrorism in NI, which means an attack is highly likely (Heaton-Harris, 2023). This must be set in the context of a brief reduction to *substantial threat* in March 2022 (the first reduction in assessment since 2010), followed by a return to *severe* following the attempted murder of John Caldwell, an off-duty PSNI officer. The current threat level for NI-related terrorism in Britain is *moderate*, which means an attack is possible but not likely. Of the 62 terrorist incidents reported to Europol in 2020, 56 were security-related incidents in NI (Hall, 2022). There has been no change to the list of 14 proscribed organisations in NI, a list that has remained unaltered since before the enactment of the Terrorism Act (TA) 2000. National security, special powers, and other provisions for dealing with terrorism are excepted matters, meaning these are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for NI, not the NI Executive.

The PSNI remains responsible for the investigation, with MI5, of terrorism offences, and provide a bridge with the NI Executive, the NIO and MI5. In the 2021 Report of the Independent Review of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, recommended efforts to increase public understanding of the approach to countering NI-related terrorism (*ibid.*). This included an explanation of the reasons why republican proscribed organisations attract a national security response, primarily using counter-terrorism powers by the PSNI's Terrorism Investigation Unit, while loyalist proscribed organisations attract a paramilitary response using criminal law powers by the PSNI's Paramilitary Crime Task Force. This recommendation was accepted by the Secretary of State for NI.

When it comes to paramilitarism more generally, the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) summed up 2022 by suggesting that NI is facing emerging challenges in its realisation of the Fresh Start Agreement's aspiration of ending paramilitarism once and for all when it stated:

*2022 has been another mixed year in respect of efforts to bring paramilitarism to an end. Reaction to political developments, particularly relating to the Protocol... 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 (IRC, 2022).*

This section gives an overview of the official figures and local reporting on the activities of proscribed organisations, the exercise of police counter-terrorism powers and the broader presence of paramilitarism and associated criminality since the previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018). The overall picture is one of mixed progress. Security-related incidents have remained at consistently lower levels than seen over the last two decades, and cross-government programmes to address paramilitarism are entering their second phase. However, the dissident republican groups continue to have the capacity and motivation to launch deadly attacks, and all paramilitary groups continue to exploit, attack and intimidate sections of their own communities.

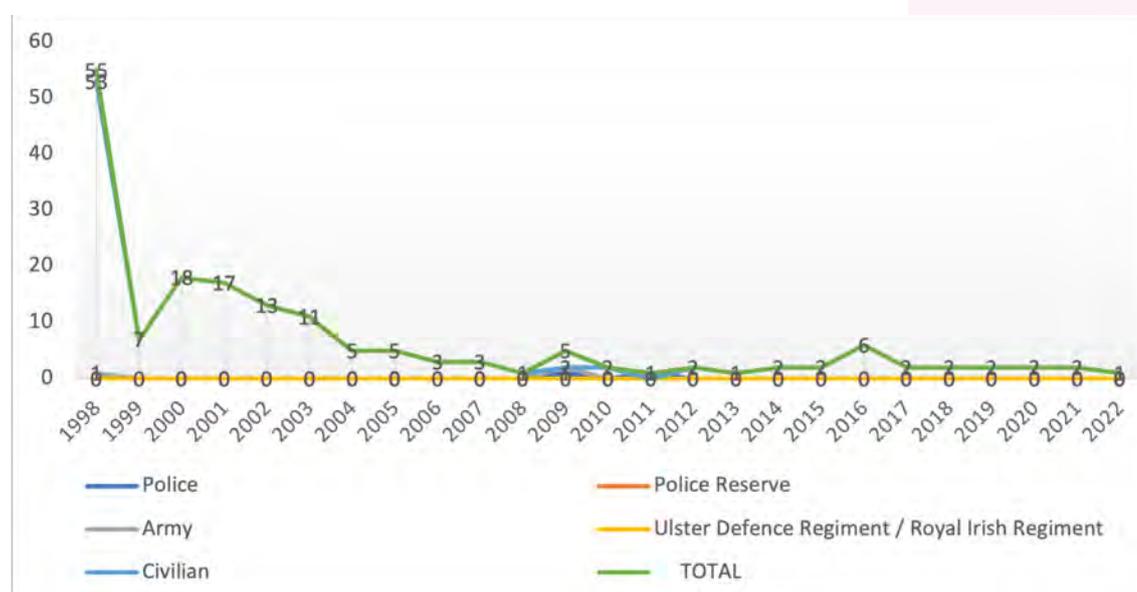
## 6.2 Overview of security-related incidents

Figure 14 shows the number of security situation (conflict-related) deaths in NI from 1998 to 2022 based on PSNI compiled figures. Such deaths are those which:

*are considered at the time of the incident to be directly attributed to terrorism, where the cause has a direct or proximate link to subversive/sectarian strife or where the death is attributable to security force activity (PSNI, 2023b, 5).*

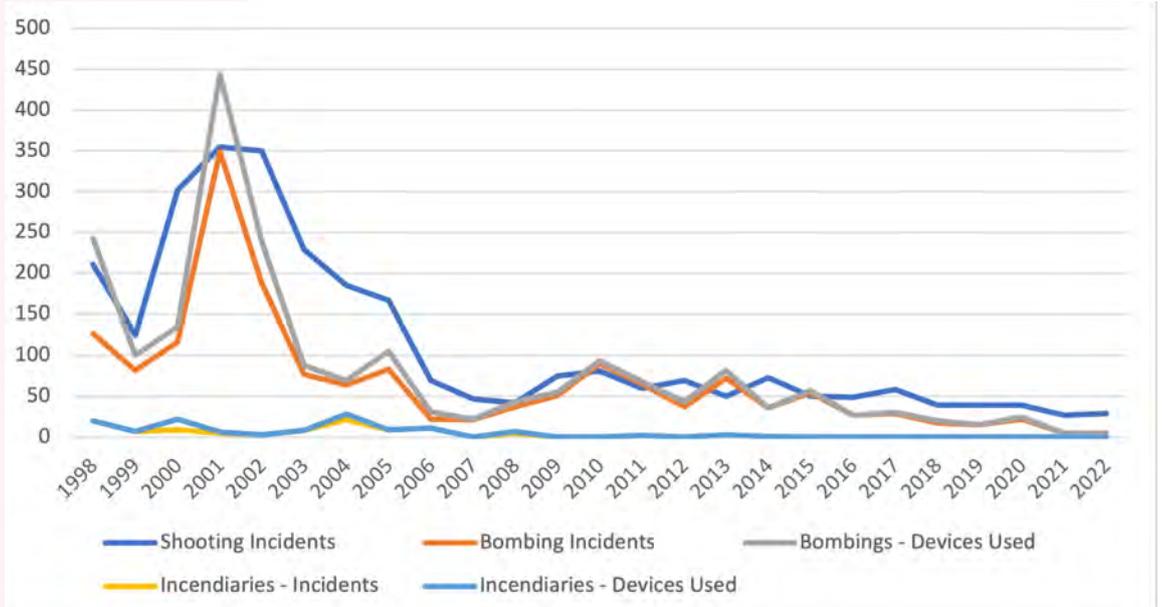
Figure 15 shows the security-related incidents from 1998 to 2022. Since 2018, the number of such incidents has remained below 50 per year in each category and represents a gradual reduction in incidents over the last decade.

**Figure 14: Number of deaths due to the security situation, 1998-2022**



Source: PSNIb (2023b)

Figure 15: Number of security-related incidents, 1998-2022

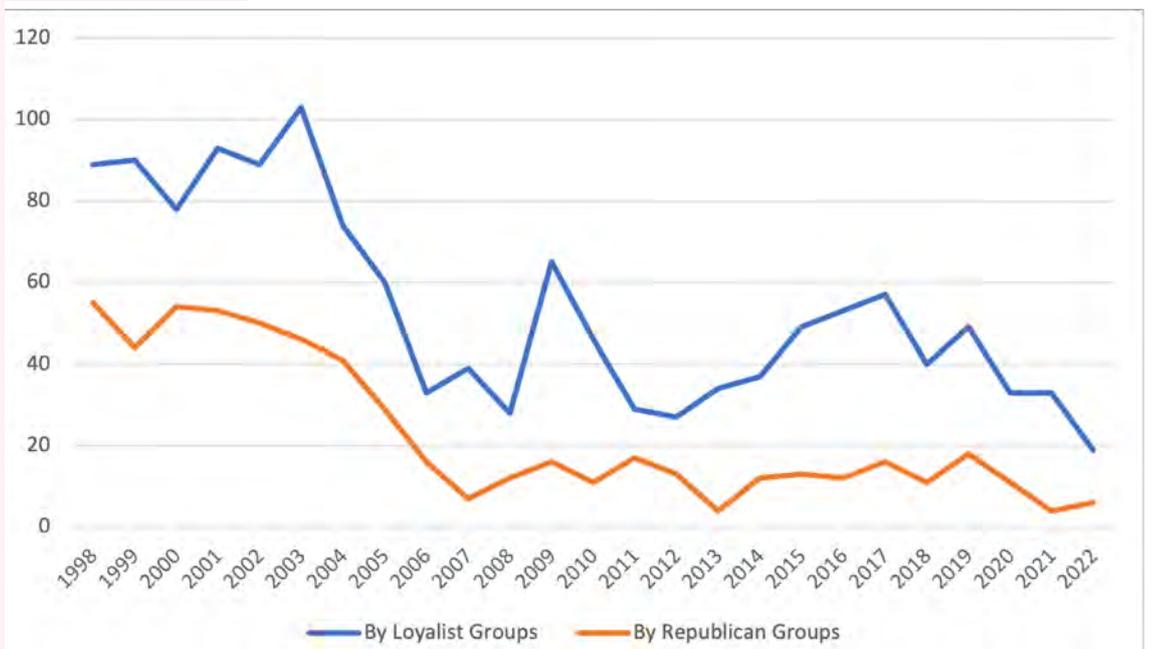


Source: PSNI (2023b)

The number of reported paramilitary-style assaults in NI carried out by loyalist or republican groups has generally fallen in the last two decades (Figure 16). These assaults do, however, remain an alarmingly persistent feature of intra-community relations and self-policing in some parts of NI. Paramilitary-style assaults are defined as those:

*... usually carried out by Loyalist or Republican groups on members of their own community as a so-called punishment. The assault will involve major or minor physical injury to the injured party typically involving a group of assailants armed with, for example, iron bars or baseball bats. (PSNI, 2023b, 6).*

Figure 16: Number of casualties due to paramilitary-style assaults in NI, 1998-2022



Source: PSNI (2023b)

Offences of intimidation were at their highest level between 2002/03 and 2005/06, before falling to the lowest level recorded in 2012/13. While the number of offences has risen since, the figure for 2021/22 is just over half of the level recorded in 2002/03 (PSNI, 2022a).

Insights into public perceptions of paramilitary groups can be gleaned from the 2022 NILT Survey (ARK, 2023c). While only 12 per cent felt that paramilitary groups have controlling influence over their local area, a higher proportion (25%) felt that paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour in their area. When it comes to local control and coercion, 17 per cent of respondents agreed that paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in their area (*ibid.*).

## 6.3 Detection and disruption of terrorism

Since 2015/16, there has been a 74% fall in the number of stops carried out under Section 43 (stop and search a person reasonably suspected to be a terrorist to discover whether they have in their possession anything which may constitute evidence that they are a terrorist) of the Terrorism Act 2000, despite a rise between 21/22 and 22/23 (PSNI, 2023c). Use of the other stop and search powers in this Act has also declined significantly in the same period. As suggested by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, the decline in the use of these powers in recent years may be attributable to the tendency of the PSNI's Paramilitary Crime Task Force to use non-TA powers.

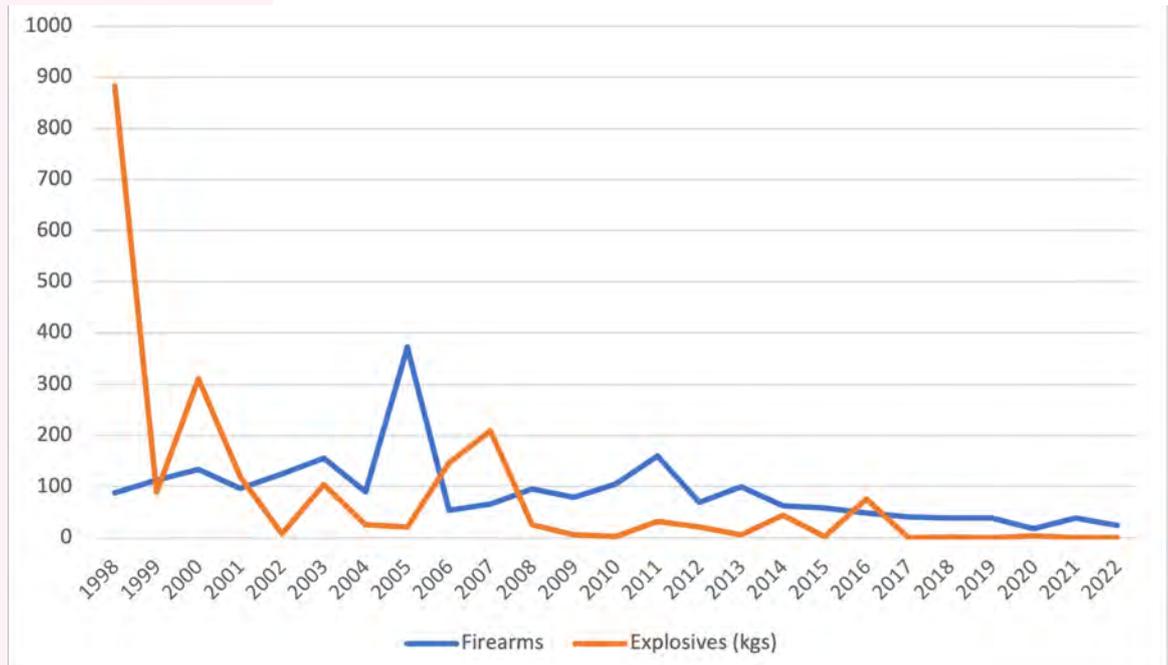
The Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 contains the provisions for suspicionless stop and search powers. The Act is accompanied by a Code of Practice that emphasises that there should be no discrimination on the basis of perceived religious or political opinion. In the case of *Ramsay (No 2)* [2020] NICA 14, the NI Court of Appeal considered the legality of the suspicionless stop and search powers. Relying heavily on the Code of practice, the Court of Appeal held there was a breach of the applicant's right to private and family life (Article 8 ECHR) when suspicionless searches are carried out by police, due to the failure to record the basis for the search in the record prepared at the time of the search. In addition, the Court of Appeal observed:

*In light of the nature and threat from [Dissident Republicans] it would come as no surprise to anyone in Northern Ireland that the impact on exercise of this power was more likely to be felt by the perceived Catholics and/or nationalists. (Judiciary NI, 2020b, Section 46).*

In response to the judgment, the PSNI established a group to consider various methodologies and practical ways of capturing community background information (Hall, 2022).

Between April and December 2021, the most recent reporting as of May 2023, there were 58 premises searched under warrant by the PSNI under Schedule 5 to the Terrorism Act (NIO, 2022). The number of such searches carried out over the last decade has fluctuated between 50 and 200 annually. Unlike terrorism in Britain, violence in NI continues to be perpetrated with munitions (firearms) and explosives (Hall, 2022). As illustrated in Figure 17, both munitions and explosives continue to be found by the PSNI, albeit the number of finds and amount of explosives has, with a few exceptional years, continued to fall over the last decade. An example of such a find was in the Creggan area of Derry/Londonderry in September 2019, where commercial explosives found in a parked car were said to be in an advanced state of readiness (BBC NI, 10 September 2019).

Figure 17: Number of firearms and explosives finds, 1998-2022



Source: PSNI (2023b)

Section 41 of the Terrorism Act enables police to arrest anyone reasonably suspected to be a terrorist. A person arrested under Section 41 may be charged with any offence and not necessarily an offence listed under the TA. There is a low charge rate. In 2020, for example, only 18 per cent of people arrested under Section 41 were subsequently charged (Hall, 2022). NI continues to account for a high proportion of the arrests made under Section 41 across the UK (*ibid.*). Of the 110 arrests in 2022, 51 of them occurred in Derry City and Strabane District Council and 32 occurred in Belfast (PSNI, 2023b). In April to December 2021, of the 90 people detained under Section 41, 89 were held for 48 hours or less. Seventy four people were released and 16 people were charged, including two charges of murder, eight charges of firearms offences, seven charges of throwing petrol bombs and seven for riotous behaviour (NIO, 2022). Between April and December 2021, 20 people were convicted of an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006 or the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008.

Most of the grounds listed in the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 which enable the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) for NI to issue a certificate authorising a non-jury trial on indictment relate to the proscription of illegal organisations. A total of 16 non-jury trial certificates was issued by the DPP between April and December 2021. Nine people had a non-jury trial, five of whom were found guilty of at least one charge (NIO, 2022). This means that, in 2021, only 0.6 per cent of all Crown Court cases in NI were conducted without a jury (HM Government, 2022). By comparison, the average number of Diplock Court (sitting without a jury) cases in the last five years that the system existed (up until 2007) was 64 per year. Over the last five years to date, there have been an average of 12 non-jury trial cases in the Crown Court per year.

Finally, the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) of Parliament published a critical report in 2020 which concluded that the criminal justice system in NI was in urgent need of an overhaul, citing, in particular, that criminal trials of terrorist suspects in NI suffer from systemic delays and of those convicted, lower sentences are imposed for terrorism offences than in the rest of the UK. The ISC noted that the use of oral committal hearings, which require multiple magistrates' court hearings before a case is sent to a higher court, and an absence of rules covering criminal case management were likely to be contributory factors in these delays (ISC, 2020). On this theme, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has also observed that:

*the slow pace and procedural heaviness of criminal proceedings in Northern Ireland has a deleterious impact on the use of terrorism legislation (Hall, 2022, 133).*

## 6.4 Dissident republican paramilitaries

Currently, the principal terrorist threat in NI emanates from two dissident republican groups, the New IRA and the Continuity IRA, which is consistent with the trend from 2011 to 2018. These groups oppose the Peace Process and regard violence as a legitimate means of achieving a united Ireland. Dissident republicans continue to target police officers, prison officers, and other individuals who are seen as embodying the authority of the state. The style of attack by dissident republican groups mostly involves firearms or small improvised explosive devices, such as pipe bombs. Attacks such as on the courthouse in Derry/Londonderry in January 2019, the mortar bomb left near a police station in Strabane in September 2019, and the holding up at gunpoint of a delivery driver who was forced to abandon his car outside Waterside police station in November 2022 are just some recent illustrations of the activity of such groups. This does not include the most recent attempted murder of a PSNI officer while off-duty in February 2023. Many dissident republicans are also heavily involved in criminal activities for personal gain, including smuggling and extortion (Security Service MI5, not dated).

As discussed in Dimension One, the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in April 2019 caused widespread public shock. Following the PSNI search of a property in the Creggan Estate in Derry/Londonderry for munitions, serious public disorder erupted with petrol bombs thrown at officers and police vehicles hijacked and burnt out. Gun shots aimed at the police by dissident republicans hit and fatally wounded the journalist. The New IRA admitted shortly afterwards that a republican volunteer had accidentally shot her while defending the community (Irish News, 29 April 2019). The statement followed a protest by Lyra McKee's friends outside the Derry/Londonderry offices of Saoradh, a republican party that reflects New IRA thinking. As described by reporters, several of the protesters smeared red handprints on the walls and on a republican sign at the Derry headquarters of the party to symbolise their claim that it had blood on its hands over the killing. Her death was condemned by all main political parties in NI and made headlines worldwide. As of May 2023, two men have been charged with this murder, and a further six men, all from Derry/Londonderry, have been charged with public order offences at the scene of the shooting (The Guardian, 23 January 2023).

Nevertheless, dissident republican groups continue to recruit new members, including significant numbers of young people, albeit this seems to be limited to particular parts of NI. The basis of such recruitment is not simply ideological persuasion but also the ability of dissident republican groups to offer young people a degree of status and purpose they feel they are lacking in their communities and society more generally (ISC, 2020). It has been acknowledged by MI5 that criminal justice interventions (such as the disruptions of plots, arrests of existing members, or seizures of dangerous or illicit materials) are not enough in addressing dissident republicanism. Instead, emphasis must be placed on dissuading potential recruits (*ibid.*).

## 6.5 Loyalist paramilitaries

Although loyalist paramilitary groups remain proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000, they function, by and large, as organised crime groups that exert significant control and influence over sections of their community. Loyalist paramilitaries are involved in drug dealing, racketeering, acting as loan sharks for vulnerable sections of society, and various other forms of criminality, mostly with the purpose of making profit. While groups use the badges and structures of the terrorist organisations active during the conflict, these symbols function as an apparent shield behind which they engage in criminal activities. The state's security and criminal justice actors are neither a central target of their violence, nor implicated in the broader ideology that motivated their activities. As observed by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, terrorism powers continue to be used against loyalist paramilitaries but they are being exercised to address criminality rather than to safeguard national security (Hall, 2020).

The fact that loyalist paramilitaries do not direct their violence towards the state does not, however, preclude them from being engaged in terrorism. The definition of terrorism in Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000 includes the use or threat of violence designed to intimidate the public or a section of the public. Threats or violence against one's own community, if in pursuit of purely criminal enterprises, rather than ideological ends, are more difficult to categorise as terrorism. (*ibid.*). Concern exists about loyalist anger over the NI Protocol and the potential for violence. Tensions are said to be greater than any point since the ceasefires of 1994 within loyalist communities, something expressed in a letter by the Loyalist Communities Council (an amalgam of grass-root unionists and loyalists across NI) which warned of dire consequences if there is no movement on the Protocol (The Newsletter, 28 October 2022). The Chief Constable of the PSNI, however, has sought to reassure the public that while the PSNI remain vigilant, they have not to date seen any corroboration of a heightened threat of violence from loyalists (BBC NI, 3 November 2022). But quite aside from this, the promotion or glorification of terrorism, per Section 3(5A) of the Terrorism Act 2000, includes the glorification of the commission or preparation of terrorism, whether in the past, in the future or generally.

## 6.6 Ending paramilitarism "once and for all"?

In 2015, the Fresh Start Agreement, (Northern Ireland Executive, 2015) concluded between the UK and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive, had the overarching goal to end paramilitarism once and for all. The Fresh Start Panel's 2016 Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups sought to create conditions in which groups would transform, wither away, completely change and lose their significance (Alderdice, McBurney and McWilliams, 2016). The panel emphasised personality, educational,

economic and social causes rather than political explanations for involvement in paramilitarism. The Independent Reporting Commission was established in 2017 to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity, and observed that:

*The Fresh Start process has established a whole new infrastructure to tackle paramilitarism, involving a wide range of measures and initiatives which are now beginning to gain real traction, and with a whole cohort of organisations and services, at public sector and community levels, actively engaged in the process (IRC, 2022).*

Prior to the collapse of devolution in 2022, the NI's Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminology and Organised Crime Programme included a public health approach to violence reduction (TEO, not dated). Over 80 projects and interventions to address complex, long-standing issues of paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control within communities were devised. Phase 1 of this Programme ran until March 2021, with Phase 2 running until 2024. In tandem with this has been a criminal justice response in the form of the PSNI's Paramilitary Crime Task Force, established in 2018. This comprises officers from the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Within the PSNI alone, many teams are involved in the task force's work, including Community Safety, Local Policing, Crime Operations and others (IRC, 2022). This signals an operational shift towards dealing with paramilitaries as organised crime groups and not as active terrorist organisations (Hall, 2020).

It might also be recalled that the Fresh Start Panel recommended that both the UK and Irish Governments should review the legislation relating to paramilitary groups, specifically the TA, to ensure that it remains in step with the transitioning status of groups in NI. The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has called for greater critical reflection on the proscription regime and NI paramilitary groups that continue to be placed on it, noting that the potency of the proscription regime demands rigour in its application (Hall, 2022, 117). More directly, Walker (2018) has suggested that a distinction must be drawn between those observing ceasefires since 1998 and those dissenting from that stance. Regarding the former, he argues that there must come a time when their indisputable past involvement in violence becomes historical and proscription becomes disproportionate on grounds of fairness and ineffectiveness (or even counter-productivity) as a strategic and political stance. Perhaps related to this is the IRC's concern about the absence of a plan to address the continuation of the structures and infrastructure of paramilitarism, which it believes:

*would be best addressed by our proposal for a process of engagement with Paramilitary Groups themselves with a view to Group Transition and disbandment. (IRC, 2022, 5).*

It notes that such a process is likely to involve a policing and criminal justice response and addressing the socio-economic challenges of the communities concerned (*ibid.*).

## 7. Prisons

Set against European and global contexts, NI retains its status as a country with a relatively low prison population. For nearly 20 years, the prison population has remained stable, at approximately 1,500 prisoners. This equates to approximately 90 prisoners per 100,000 people, compared with 82 in the Republic of Ireland, 119 in Portugal, 135 in England and Wales, 135 in Scotland (NISRA and DoJ, 2022), and 531 in the USA (World Prison Brief, not dated). In terms of the average daily prison population for 2021/22, there were 941 (63%) immediate custody prisoners, and 546 (37%) on remand (NISRA and DoJ, 2022).

Among immediate custody prisoners, 36 per cent were aged between 30 and 39 years, with 24 per cent aged between 21 and 29 years. Males accounted for 95.6 per cent of the prison population, of which 26.4 per cent were sentenced to less than one year in custody and 19.6 per cent were serving life sentences. By comparison, 59.3 per cent of the average daily female population during 2021/22 were sentenced to one year or less in custody, and 22.2 per cent were serving life sentences. Of those in immediate custody in NI, 34 per cent of sentences related to Violence against the Person, 18 per cent to Public Order Offences, and 12 per cent to Sexual Offences (*ibid.*).

The CJINI has been critical of the level of on-remand imprisonment in NI, which is higher than in England and Wales (CJINI, 2023b). They have stressed the need for reform of the bail and remand processes as part of wider criminal justice system efficiency, as well as questioning the efficacy of using imprisonment for fine defaults. CJINI have also highlighted that beyond systemic issues, prison conditions remain of concern. In particular, prisons have breached UN rules (The Mandela Rules) on solitary confinement as part of prisoner treatment in Care and Supervision Units (CJINI, 2022a).

In an unannounced inspection of Magilligan Prison in 2021, CJINI found a high proportion of prisoners either came into the prison with drug problems (50%) or developed a problem with illicit drugs after coming into prison (32%). Nearly one half (47%) of prisoners interviewed described it as quite or very easy to acquire illicit drugs while in prison, more so than for alcohol, which 14 per cent described it as quite or very easy to obtain (CJINI, 2022b). In their 2022 inspection of Maghaberry Prison, CJINI raised serious concerns related to prison education, access to drugs, and support for psychological well-being, along with evidence of prejudice experienced by Catholic prisoners. As a result, Maghaberry Prison has been downgraded from good to not sufficiently good by CJINI since their last inspection in 2018 (CJINI, 2023c).

The cost of imprisonment within the current financial climate is also pertinent. The actual cost per prisoner place per year in NI is £44,956 - more expensive than England/Wales or Scotland (Northern Ireland Prison Service, 2021). In addition, it is estimated that it cost £2m per year to segregate loyalist and republican prisoners in Maghaberry Prison (BBC NI, 6 October 2020).

Finally, in a report on reducing adult reoffending, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) was critical of the lack of a strategic approach and of robust measures to understand what interventions actually worked when it came to having an impact on adult reoffending (NIAO, 2023).

## 8. Conclusions

In overview of Dimension Two, the evidence points to somewhat of a contradictory picture with regard to crime, policing and security. On the one hand, NI exists as a relatively safe society in relation to standard measures, perceptions and definitions of crime. Yet on the other hand, of course much crime goes unreported. Race remains the most common form of hate motivation in NI, and the number of race crimes and incidents reported to the PSNI has increased significantly, along with levels of domestic abuse crime and sexual offences. In addition, issues of age, vulnerability, religion and violence continue to permeate available crime statistics. Or in other terms, the broad evidence around relative safety and security in NI is not experienced evenly across populations or geography.

However, significant legislative developments in the areas of domestic abuse and sexual violence are welcome. Key among these has been new legislation criminalising coercive control, legislation covering a range of sexual offences and trafficking which addressed some of the recommendations of the Gillen Review, and work on developing a framework on ending violence against women and girls.

As noted, a major source of controversy has been UK Government legislation on NI legacy issues, which includes a statute of limitations to apply equally to all parties in all Troubles-related incidents. While the legislation has united NI political parties and victims groups in opposition, it remains that the legislation is a *de facto* challenge to the rule of law and fundamental principles of human rights, as enshrined the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Analysis of policing over the time span of the report shows that NI has a higher number of police officers relative to the population compared to other parts of the UK. However, the service has faced growing financial constraints, leadership issues and increasing complexity of crime types and investigations. Similarly, PSNI must simultaneously deal with ordinary criminality while managing a severe terrorist threat. Diversity and representation within the organisation continue to be problematic for the PSNI. Early progress in the post-Patten years in recruiting more Catholics to the service has at best stalled, if not gone backwards; and there also remain issues relating to the representation of wider society beyond religion.

While COVID-19 was a public health emergency it also required a policing response and controversy arose over the policing of some events including the funeral of republican Bobby Storey and the Black Lives Matter protest, as well as other matters relating to the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations.

Beyond policing in isolation, evidence also points to wider criminal justice issues in terms of delay to case progression and low prosecution rates – and latterly, the experience of victims of crime as part of a wider criminal justice response. So too evidence raises questions as to the utility of prison system for offenders when such high proportions of prisoners are only in custody for short periods of time, while rehabilitative conditions within prisons remain less than optimal.

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# DIMENSION THREE

## Wealth, Poverty and Inequality

### Overview

This section of the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (NIPMR) has traditionally focused on social policy and has drawn attention to the extent and impact of inequality primarily with regard to income, the labour market, health, and education. Since the last report in 2018 (Gray *et al.*, 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the cost of living crisis have had profound impacts on the lives of citizens. As noted in the Economic Context section in the Introduction to this report, although increases in the cost of living are global in nature, lower-income regions are more impacted and experience greater levels of food and fuel poverty. As the current cost of living crisis has escalated, analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has found that people living in London, the North of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (NI) were disproportionately likely to report that they were experiencing hardships such as going without essentials, falling behind on bills, and being unable to keep their home warm (JRF, 2023).

Previous NIPMRs have drawn attention to the lack of data on prosperity and wealth inequalities in NI. The Wealth and Assets Survey, which first ran in 2006, is a biennial longitudinal survey conducted in Britain by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It measures the well-being of households and individuals in terms of their assets, savings, debt and planning for retirement and also examines attitudes and attributes related to these. It continues to be a significant omission that NI is not included in this survey.

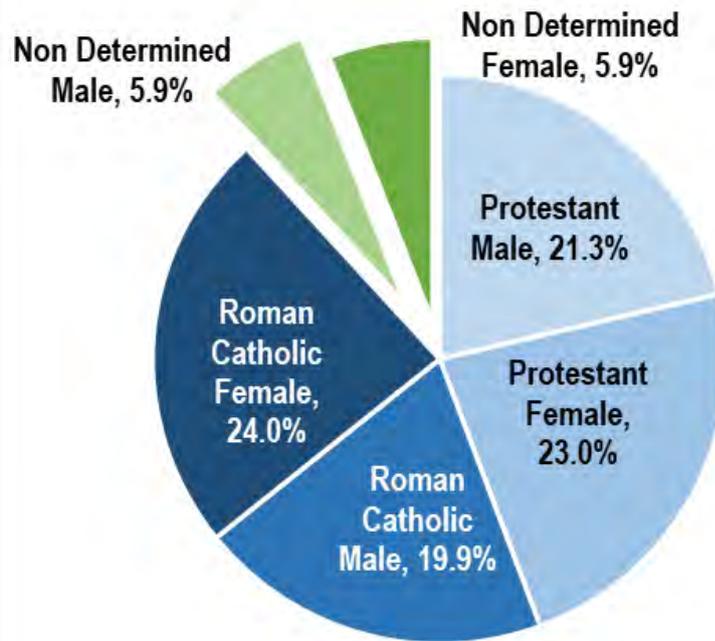
## 1. Workforce, Employment and Income

The Economic Context within the Introduction to this report provides analysis of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity figures. These show a mixed picture with low unemployment but persistently high levels of economic inactivity. This Dimension focuses on related employment and income issues.

### 1.1 Employment and religion

The Monitoring Report published by the Equality Commission for NI [ECNI] (ECNI, 2022) is based on an analysis of monitoring returns from 105 public authorities and 3,702 private sector employers received during 2020, covering 556,495 employees. In line with trends in recent years, Figure 1 indicates that members of the Protestant community marginally comprise the majority of the monitored workforce in NI while the share from those of a Catholic community background has continued to increase.

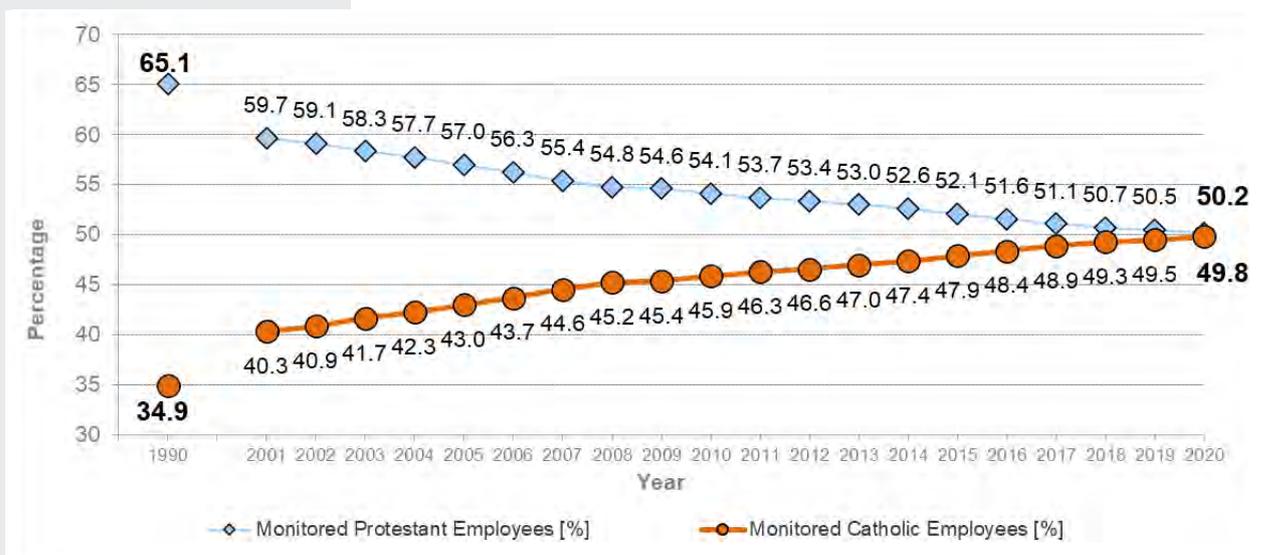
Figure 1: Monitored workforce composition, 2020



Source: ECNI (2022)

The ECNI report notes that the community background composition in the public and private sectors in the full-time workforce is reflective of the overall NI workforce position. However, if the part-time workforce is considered, within the private sector the proportion of employees from the Catholic community is higher than for overall workforce figures. Figure 2 shows how the composition of the monitored workforce has changed since 2001. In 1990, approximately two thirds of the monitored employers were Protestants. By 2020, the composition was fairly equal.

Figure 2: Composition of the monitored workforce over time



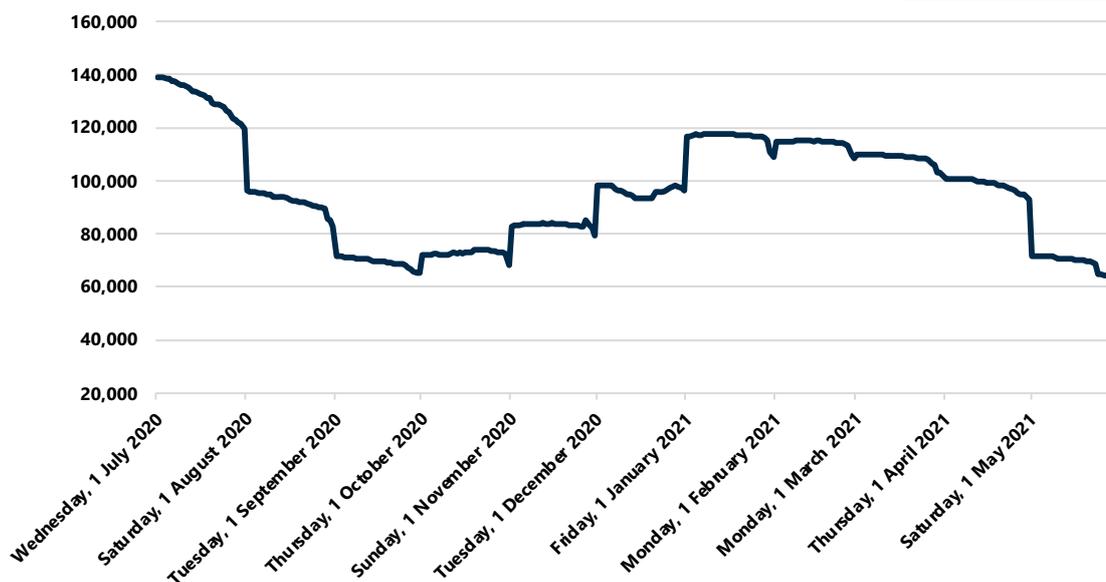
Source: ECNI (2022)

## 1.2 Employment and the COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market and on earnings was substantial. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) was introduced by the Westminster government on 1 March 2020. The scheme provided grants to employers whose businesses were impacted by the pandemic so that they could retain and continue to pay staff during coronavirus-related lockdowns, by furloughing employees at up to 80 per cent of their wages (up to a maximum value of £2,500 per employee per month). Adaptations were later introduced so that employees could be fully furloughed, or flexi-furloughed, where earnings would be no less than 80 per cent. Approximately 11 per cent of all employee jobs were identified as furloughed (NI Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2021a) and approximately seven per cent were identified as furloughed with reduced pay (i.e. earnings not topped up by their employer).

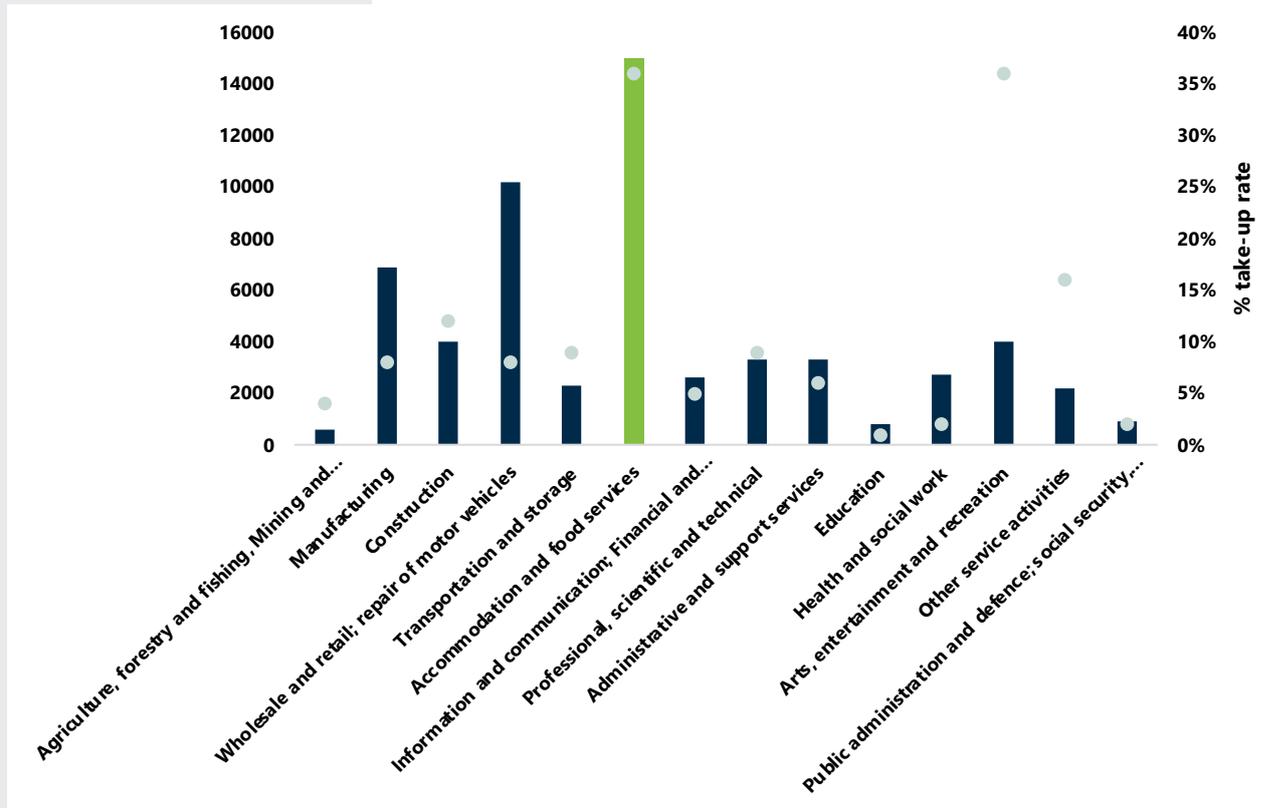
Figure 3 details the number of furloughed jobs in NI from July 2020 to May 2021, while Figure 4 focuses on furlough-related data according to industry. More detailed discussion can be found in Coates and Wilson (2021) but it is clear that, by far, the sector most affected was accommodation and food services.

**Figure 3: Number of furloughed jobs in NI, July 2020 – June 2021**



Source: Coates and Wilson (2021)

Figure 4: Number of furloughed jobs and take-up rate by industry in NI, June 2021



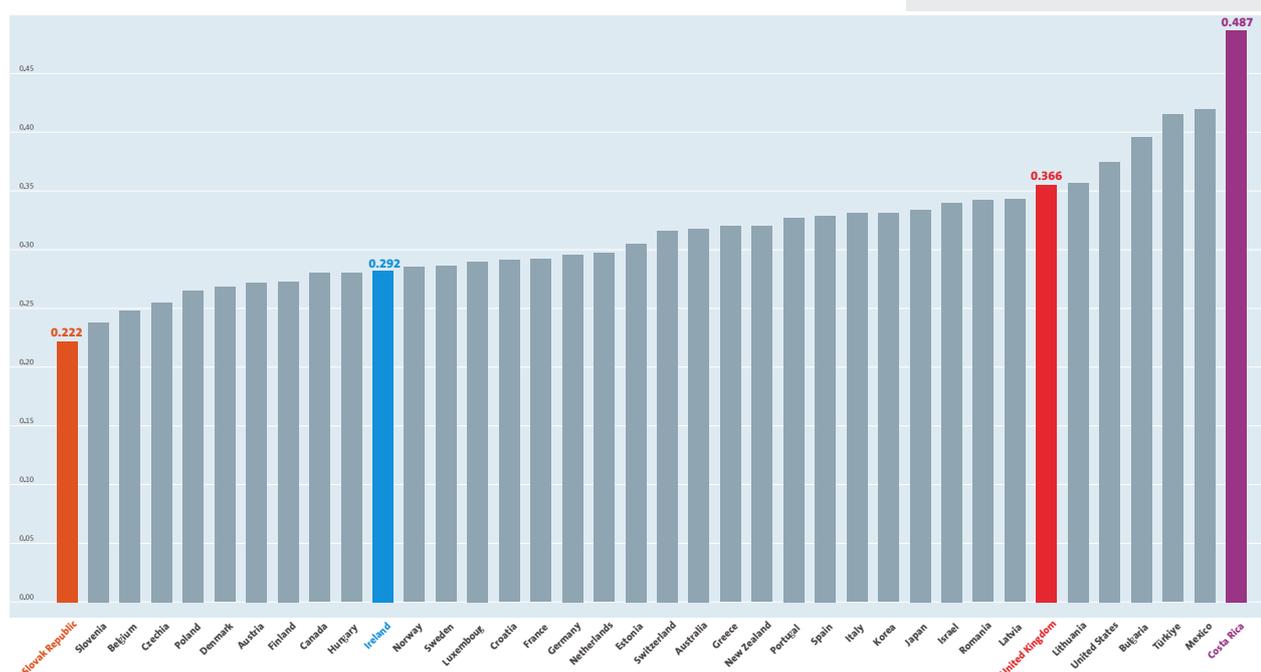
Source: Coates and Wilson (2021)

The impact of the pandemic to date has been disproportionately felt by young people and those with the lowest qualifications and earnings (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). In particular, a report from Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC, 2022) details how the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on disabled young people's labour market experiences. This group recorded the largest fall in employment rates relative to other age groups, to the extent that disability employment rate for those aged 16-24 fell to 22 per cent in the final quarter of 2021, the lowest employment rate on record.

### 1.3 Income inequality

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines income as the disposable income of a household in any given year consisting of earnings, self-employment and capital income and public cash transfers, and deducting income taxes and social security contributions (OECD, 2022). The OECD uses the Gini coefficient as a measure of income inequality in a society. This coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing a society where everyone has the same income and so there is no inequality, while 1 represents a society where only one person holds all income and the society has reached maximum inequality. In 2019, the United Kingdom's (UK) coefficient (0.366) was the sixth highest in the OECD, suggesting that its level of income inequality is high compared to other OECD countries (see Figure 5). The Slovak Republic had the lowest Gini coefficient in the OECD in 2019 (0.222) whereas Costa Rica's coefficient was the highest (0.487).

Figure 5: Gini coefficient OECD countries in 2019 or latest date available

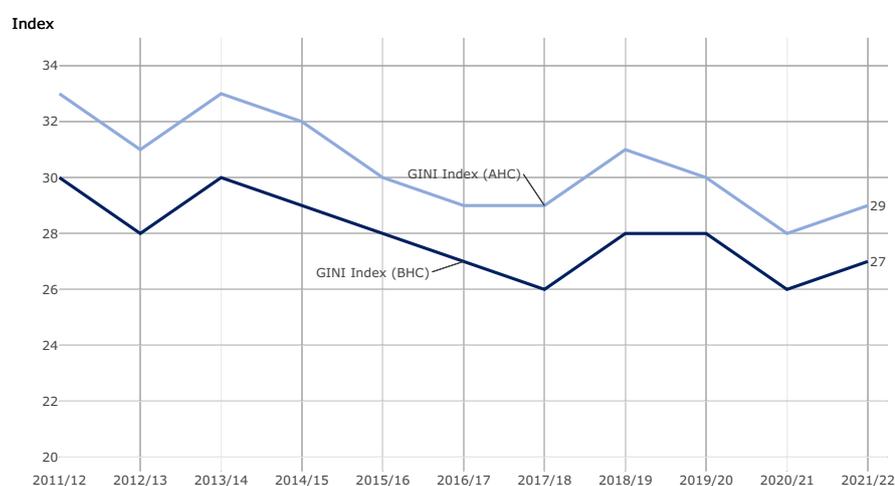


Source: OECD (2022)

ONS statistics show that while income inequality in the UK fell slightly in the financial year ending in March 2021, it remained in line with the average in the ten years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the financial year 2019/20, 42 per cent of total disposable household income (*before* housing costs) in the UK went to the fifth of individuals with the highest household incomes, while seven per cent went to the fifth with the lowest household incomes. If income *after* housing costs is considered, these figures change slightly to 45 per cent and 6 per cent respectively (Francis-Devine and Orme, 2023).

Figure 6 presents data on income inequality in NI (using the Gini Index)<sup>1</sup> from 2011/12 to 2021/22, and shows that NI income inequality in 2021/22 before and after housing costs was 27 per cent and 29 per cent respectively

Figure 6: Income inequality in NI, 2011/12-2021/22



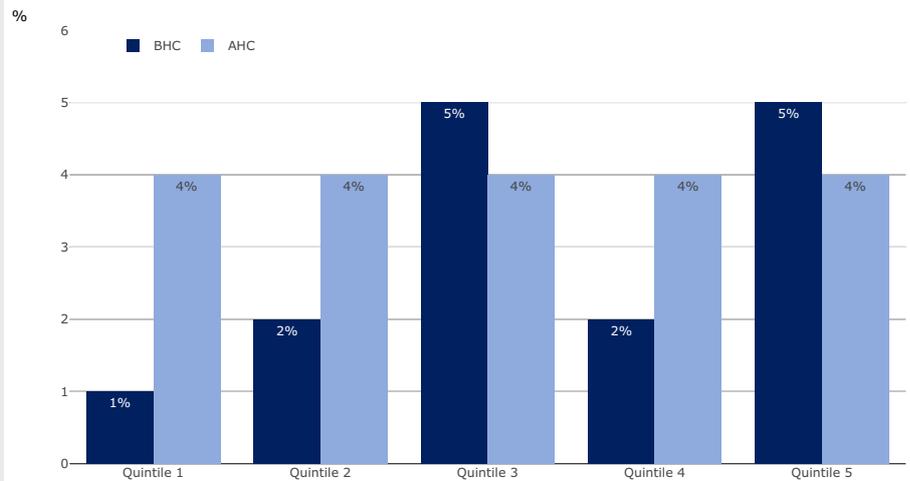
Source: Department for Communities [DfC] and NISRA (2023)

<sup>1</sup> The Department for Communities notes that the Gini Index measures the inequality between the households with the lowest and highest incomes. The index ranges from 0% (everyone has equal incomes) to 100% (one individual has all the income).

Households in the top quintile<sup>2</sup> (one fifth) of income distribution before housing costs (BHC) had a weekly income 3.4 times higher than those in the bottom. When considering net household income after housing costs (AHC) the ratio was 3.6 per cent. Respective figures for the UK were 3.9 per cent and 4.9 per cent.

The percentage change in equivalised net household income in each quintile is shown in Figure 7. In NI, household income before housing costs increased between 2019/20 and 2021/22 in all quintiles, with the largest increases in quintiles 3 and 5.

**Figure 7: Percentage change in equivalised weekly net household income by quintile, 2019/20-2021/22.**

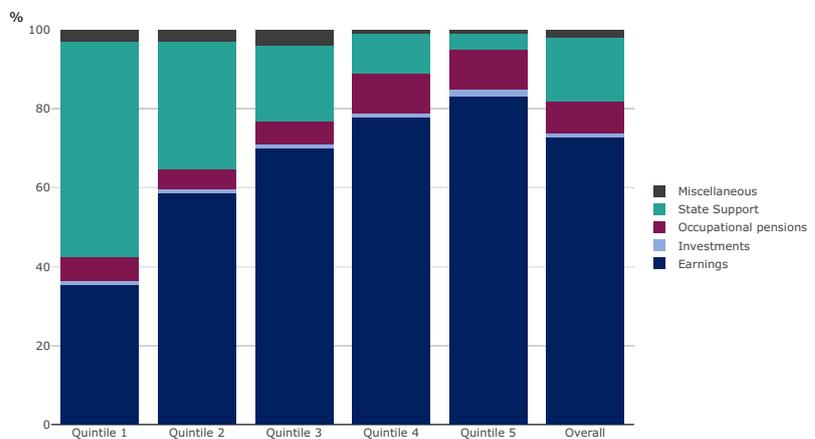


Source: DfC and NISRA (2023)

Two sources account for the majority of household income in NI – earnings (72%) and state support (16%), which is a picture similar to the UK overall. Figure 8 shows the proportion of income from each source for each quintile of the population. So, for example, in quintile 1 the main source of income is state support, while for other groups the main source is earnings.

**Figure 8: Income sources as a proportion of gross income (BHC) by income quintile (2020/21)**

The legend follows the same order as the stacks within the bars.



Source: DfC and NISRA (2023)

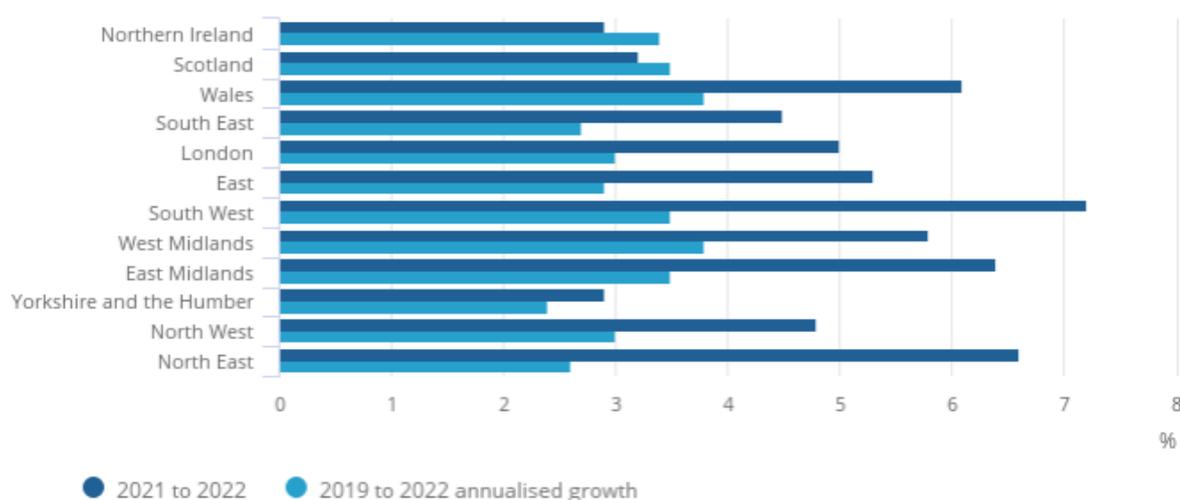
<sup>2</sup> In the field of income statistics, quintiles are used to find out how income is distributed among the population. The population is first divided into five equal parts depending on their level of income: the first quintile contains the bottom fifth of the population on the income scale (i.e. the 20% of the population with the lowest income), the second quintile represents the second fifth (from 20% to 40%) etc.; and the fifth quintile represents the 20% of the population with the highest income.

## 1.4 Earnings in Northern Ireland

Figure 9 shows the annual percentage change to median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees for each of 12 UK regions. The median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in NI in April 2022 was £592, an increase of 2.9 per cent from £575 in 2021. This followed an increase of 8.7 per cent from 2020. Average earnings in NI are lower than the UK average of £640, resulting in it ranking third lowest in the UK, similar to 2017. Average weekly earnings in the Republic of Ireland for April 2022 were €880 (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2022).

**Figure 9: Weekly earnings for employees in the UK (2022) by region**

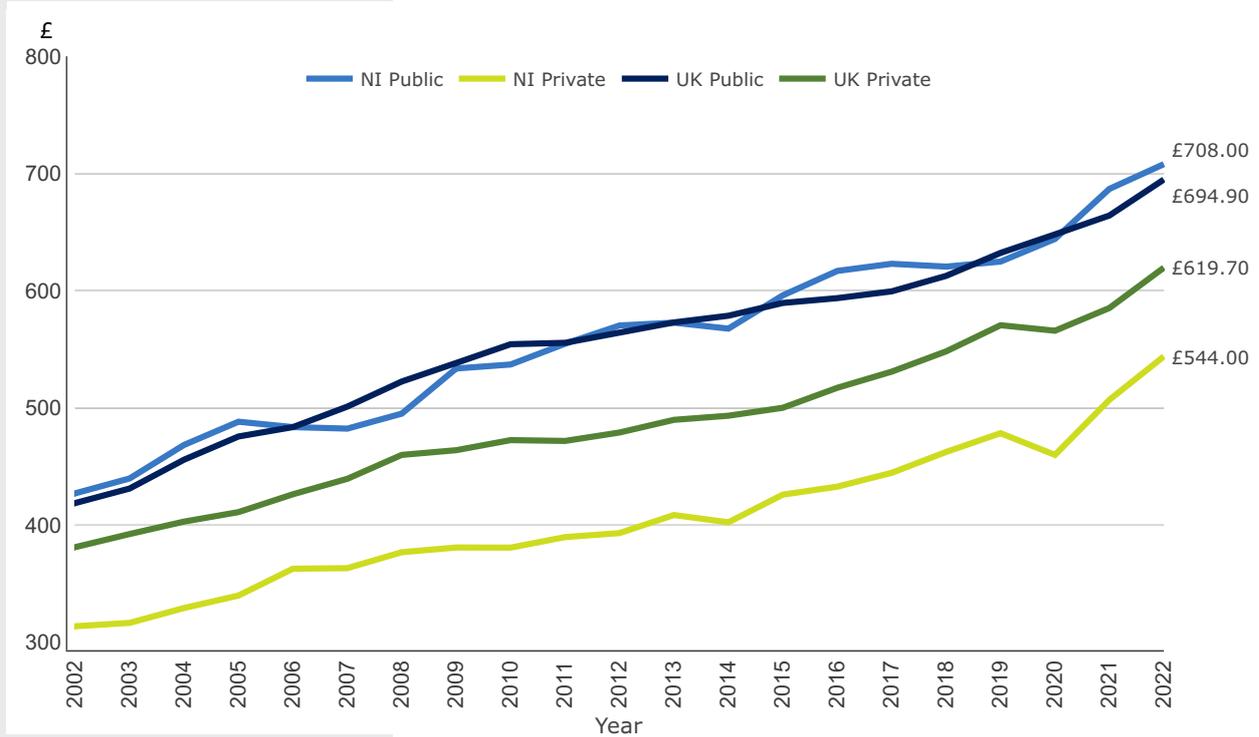
Annual percentage change to median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees, by workplace regions and countries, UK, April 2021 to April 2022 and April 2019 to April 2022 (annualised)



Source: ONS (2022A)

There continues to be a strong differential between earnings in the public and private sector in NI, with public sector earnings being 30 per cent higher than private sector earnings in 2022. Nevertheless, this is the smallest gap in the last 20 years, and is driven by increases in private sector weekly earnings over the two years up to April 2022. Median weekly earnings in the public sector in the year up to April 2022 were £708 compared to £544 in the private sector. As Figure 10 illustrates, public sector earnings in the UK overall and NI, are much more closely aligned than private sector earnings.

**Figure 10: Median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in the public and private sectors in NI and the UK, April 2002 to April 2022**

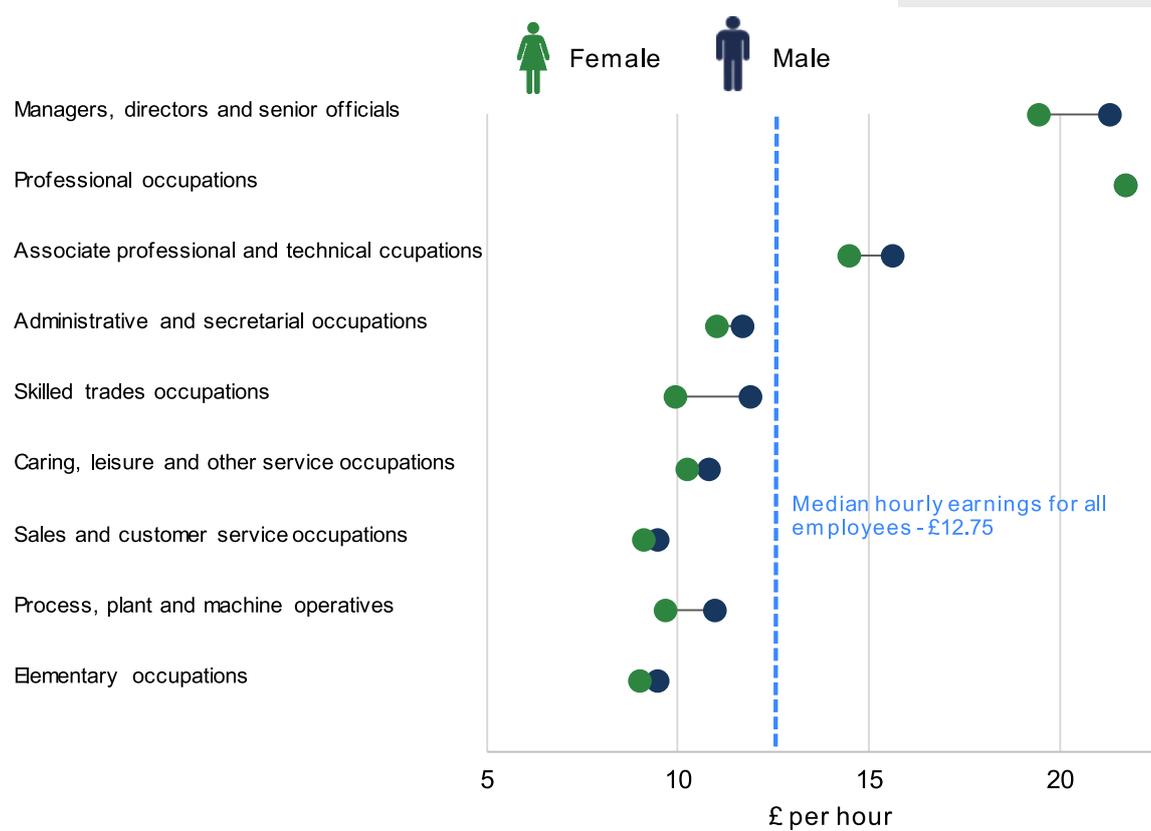


Source: NISRA (2022a)

In the UK, on average, women earned 15.4 per cent less than men (2022 data). NI is the only area of the UK where women working *full time* earn more per hour on average than men working full time. However, considering all employees regardless of working pattern, women earn 8.4 per cent less than men in NI (NISRA, 2022a). There are longstanding differences in the gender pay gap in the private and public sectors. Considering all employees (regardless of working pattern), women earned 78p per hour less than males in the public sector, while women earned £2.05 less than men in the private sector.

The largest gender pay gap across all age groups is in the 50 to 59 years age group, equivalent to a gap of 16 per cent. It is also the case that a lower proportion of women than men received earnings above the Real Living Wage (by 4 percentage points) – 83.4 per cent and 87.4 per cent respectively (Department for the Economy [DfE], 2022). In 2021, women earned less than men in eight out of nine occupation groups. The widest pay gap was for skilled trades occupations, where 90 per cent of employees are male (Figure 11). In this group, on average, for every pound earned by males, females earned only 83p. The only occupation group in which women earned more on average was professional occupations with a small difference of 1p per hour.

**Figure 11: Median gross hourly earnings excluding overtime for all employees in NI, by occupation and gender, April 2021**



Source: NISRA (2021)

The Social Mobility Commission (2021) concluded that opportunities for income mobility are more limited in NI than in the UK as a whole. Factors restricting opportunity include a reliance on lower paid and lower skilled employment, and lower levels of job creation. Among adults in NI, there is a lower proportion of people obtaining third level qualifications and a higher level of people with no qualifications compared to the UK average. In NI, 34.9 per cent of the workforce are educated to degree level compared with a UK wide figure of 39.2 per cent (Department for the Economy, 2020).

## 2. Poverty

In the previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) we noted that future months were likely to see increased rates of poverty due to the roll out of welfare reforms in NI. However, the lives of those on low incomes was to be further impacted first by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by the cost of living crisis. The Resolution Foundation (2022) estimated that an extra 1.3m people in the UK will fall into absolute poverty in 2023, including 500,000 children.

### 2.1 Poverty rates

Prior to the pandemic, analysis by the JRF (Birt and Majetic, 2022) indicate that between April 2017 and March 2020, poverty rates in NI were decreasing and were lower than Scotland, Wales and England. Table 1 shows trends in poverty in the four countries from 2009-2012 to 2017-2020. Even with the improvement in rates, one in five of the population in NI in 2020 (330,000 people) were living in poverty, including 110,000 children, 190,000 working-age adults and 30,000 pensioners.

Table 1: Trends in poverty 2009-2012 to 2017-2020 in NI, Scotland, England and Wales

Over the period 2009-12 to 2017-20, there were different trends in poverty in each UK nation, but Northern Ireland clearly had the most favourable statistics

Nation	Overall poverty rate in 2017-20 (change since 2009-12)	Child poverty rate in 2017-20 (change since 2009-12)	Working-age poverty rate in 2017-20 (change since 2009-12)	Pensioner poverty rate in 2017-20 (change since 2009-12)
Northern Ireland	17.9% (-3.5 percentage points (ppt))	24.0% (-2.4 ppt)	17.1% (-3.8 ppt)	11.8% (-4.0 ppt)
Scotland	19.3% (+1.8 ppt)	24.3% (+2.8 ppt)	19.4% (+1.3 ppt)	14.5% (+2.5 ppt)
England	22.2% (+0.5 ppt)	30.4% (+2.2 ppt)	20.7% (-0.9 ppt)	17.2% (+2.8 ppt)
Wales	23.1% (+0.4 ppt)	30.6% (-1.7 ppt)	22.3% (-0.1 ppt)	17.9% (+4.0 ppt)

Green – lowest level (greatest fall)

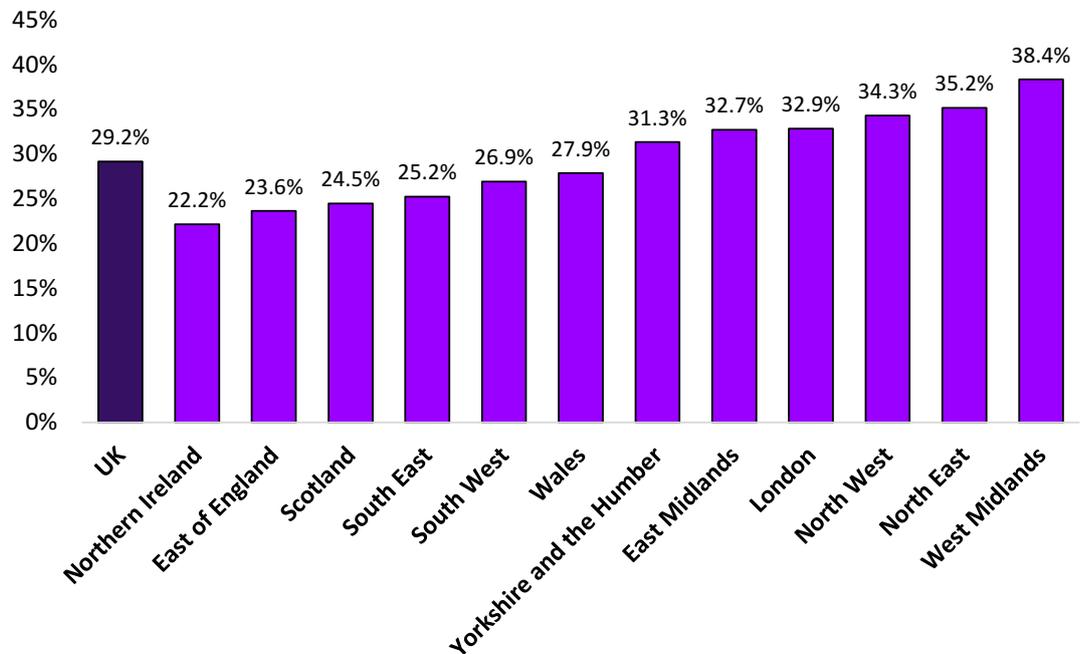
Red – highest level (greatest rise)

Source: Households Below Average Income, 2019/20, DWP

Source: Birt and Majetic (2022, 6)

Figure 12 provides data on the number of children in poverty in each region of the UK in 2020/21. The rate of child poverty in NI (22.2%) was below the UK average (29.2%) and considerably below the regions with the highest poverty such as the West Midlands (38.4%) and the North East of England (35.2%).

Figure 12: % of children in poverty after housing costs by region, 2020/21



shows that the highest rates of child poverty were in the parliamentary constituencies of Belfast West (28.5.6%), Belfast North (27.6%) and Newry and Armagh (26.3%), while the lowest was in North Down (15.3%). The data in Table 2 is calculated by the End Child Poverty Campaign based on analysis on Household Survey data alongside local area statistics on private rent levels. Statistics are calibrated to three year averages (2018/19 - 2020/21).

**Table 2: Children in poverty (%) after housing costs, by NI parliamentary constituency**

Belfast West	28.5%
Belfast North	27.6%
Newry and Armagh	26.3%
South Down	23.5%
Foyle	22.9%
East Londonderry	22.4%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	22.4%
West Tyrone	22.2%
Upper Bann	21.8%
Mid Ulster	21.8%
Strangford	21.0%
North Antrim	20.3%
East Antrim	18.6%
Belfast East	18.0%
South Antrim	17.6%
Belfast South	17.6%
Lagan Valley	15.7%
North Down	15.3%

Source: *End Child Poverty (2023)*

Some of the reasons for the reduction in poverty rates in NI before the pandemic and the cost of living crisis were rising employment rates and higher incomes, combined with the relative affordability of housing. Of note however, is that Birt and Majetic (2022) cautioned that the decline of the relative poverty rates across NI was not translating into improvements in the living standards of low-income families and did not tell the full story. Another important concern is the relatively small decrease in *child* poverty rates. In March 2021, Save the Children published a report assessing the change in child poverty in NI ten years after the first statutory child poverty strategy (Improving Children's Life Chances) was implemented. The report points out that the child poverty rates had only marginally declined whilst employment rates and earnings had grown. Two in five children in lone parent families faced poverty in 2021, just a two percentage point decline from 2011.

The proportion of children growing up in poverty in families in which both parents work went up over those ten years from 17 per cent to 35 per cent (Save the Children, 2021). The report also found that children living in lone parent families, children who have two or more siblings, and families whose youngest child is under the age of five face a much higher risk of poverty. For example, the risk of poverty for children living in single parent families is 42 per cent, which is double the risk of children living with two parents.

It is noteworthy that the areas in NI where poverty is highest has changed little over the time that the peace monitoring reports have been conducted.

## 2.2 Food insecurity

The JRF poverty monitoring report (Birt and Majetic, 2022) drew attention to food insecurity as one of the consequences of poverty, pointing out that 1 in 14 households in NI faced food insecurity. Food insecurity is an umbrella term closely linked to poverty and the cost of living. It is defined by the Food Foundation as skipping meals, going hungry or not eating for a whole day. In April 2022, data published by the Food Foundation reported that 7.3m adults in the UK were living in households that had gone without food or could not physically access food in the past month (Food Foundation, 2022), compared with 4.7m three months earlier. Research by the University of Sheffield (2021) shows that five of the ten areas in the UK where people worry most about food are in NI. This means that people in Derry City and Strabane, Causeway Coast and Glens, Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid Ulster, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon are at an increased risk of food insecurity.

The government has a duty to issue reports on food security to the UK Parliament. The information is based mainly on data collected through questions on food security included in the Family Resources Survey. The data for 2021/22 revealed that most individuals in NI lived in households that are food secure (96%), with four per cent (approximately 74,000 individuals) in households said to be food insecure (DfC and NISRA, 2022). The Trussell Trust in NI (2023) reported that in the financial year of 2022/23 they faced a 29 per cent increase in demand for food parcels in comparison to the same period in 2021/22. This followed a 36 per cent increase between 2019/20 and 2021/22.

### 2.3 Ability of households in NI to cope with increasing costs

In 2021, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey asked a random sample of the NI population about their views on a range of issues relating to income, taxes and social security, financial hardship and the cost of the living. The fieldwork for the survey took place during the final quarter of 2021, just before an Omicron wave of COVID-19 infections. Households had lived through the pandemic for about 20 months and household finances were beginning to experience the shock of soaring energy, food and fuel prices. Cost-of-living pressures on household finances were exacerbated by rising inflation which reached a 41 year high of 11.1 per cent in October 2022 (Harari *et al.*, 2023). The NILT data show that even before the cost of living increases escalated throughout 2022 and into 2023 a significant proportion of families were struggling to make ends meet (Bunyan *et al.*, 2022).

To gain an insight into how households might cope with further cost of living increases, respondents were asked two questions to establish the extent to which they struggle to afford a basic standard of living: *Could your household afford to pay an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £500?* (It is worth noting that £500 is at the conservative end of predicted average household energy bill increases) and *Did your household turn heating down or off because you could not afford the costs last winter, even though it was too cold in the house/flat?* Around 25 per cent of households could not afford to pay an unexpected £500 and a similar proportion of households reported having to turn the heating down or off due to costs. Looking at what groups would struggle the most with an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £500, fewer than one in ten of those aged over 65 said they could *not* afford this, rising to 40 per cent of those aged between 18 and 24 years, 36 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds and 33 per cent of 35 to 44 year olds. The proportion of respondents unable to afford a £500 expense is not surprising given that the Family Resources Survey 2019-20 found that 36 per cent of households have

no savings. Nor is it surprising that there is little difference in the proportion of those in paid employment (25%) and those not (26%) to afford an expense of £500 since official statistics show that so many of those in paid employment are living, objectively, in poverty (*ibid.*).

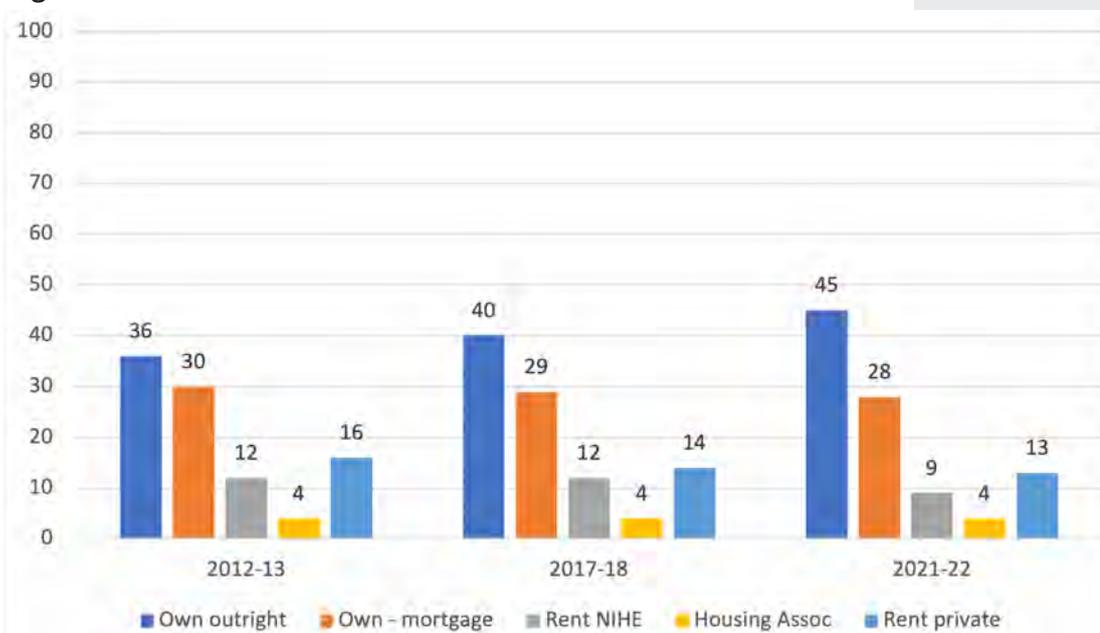
### 3. Housing

As noted earlier, historically NI has had lower housing costs relative to other UK areas, a factor which has offered a degree of protection for some households. However, in the years since the publication of the fifth NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), NI has faced increasing housing challenges, including lack of supply especially with regard to social housing. The consequence has been a growing reliance on the private rented sector (Gray *et al.*, 2022).

#### 3.1 Housing supply and waiting lists

Data from the 2021/22 Northern Ireland Housing Statistics indicate that nearly one half (45%) of dwellings in NI are owned outright, with an additional 28 per cent owned with a mortgage. As of April 2022, around 13 per cent of the total housing stock in NI (822,000) is social housing, comprising nine per cent being rented by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), and four per cent by a range of housing associations. The persistent trend over the past decade (see Figure 13) has been the decline in the proportion of people who are living in social housing and a corresponding growth in the private rented sector), which now makes up around 13 per cent of household tenure.

**Figure 13: Household tenure, 2008-09 to 2021-22**



Source: Continuous Household Survey (NISRA, not dated)

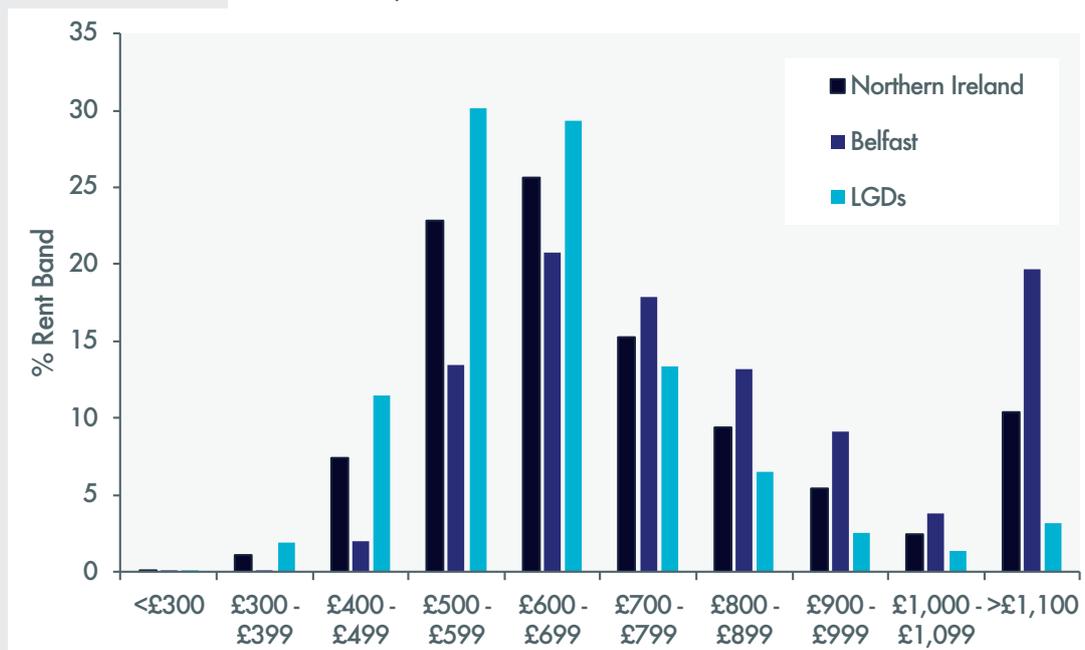
The NIHE Housing Management System holds data on all housing applications and allocations made through the social housing selection scheme. On 31 March 2022, there were 44,425 applicants on the social housing waiting list that had no existing NIHE or housing association tenancy - an increase of around 20 per cent on the March 2018 figures. Of the 2021/22 applicants, around 71 per cent were deemed to be in housing stress, including 12,237 applicants in Belfast and 5,531 in Derry City and Strabane district council areas.

Significant concerns have been raised for some time around the number of priority need applicants and the growing levels of homelessness. Between January and June 2022, 8,120 households presented to the NIHE as homeless, of which 4,802 (59%) were accepted as statutorily homeless (DfC, 2022a). This includes those living in overcrowded conditions, temporarily staying with friends, at risk of violence, or living in dwellings which are unsuitable for them. Of these households, 39 per cent (1,862) were families, 24 per cent (1,148) were single males, 17 per cent (808) were single females, 17 per cent (797) were pensioner households and four per cent were couples. These figures also included 3,495 children. Issues with supply leads to significant numbers of people being placed in temporary accommodation. As of July 2022, 3,658 households had been placed in temporary accommodation (including private single lets, voluntary sector hostels and hotels/B&Bs) by the NIHE. Of these, 57 per cent had been living in temporary accommodation for less than 12 months. However, five per cent of these had been living in temporary accommodation for five or more years (*ibid.*). Rough sleeping is another element of homelessness. The Rough Sleeper Street Count undertaken by NIHE in 2021 estimated that 23 people were sleeping rough in NI, down from 28 in 2018 (NIHE, 2022a).

### 3.2 Cost of renting

The average cost of rent to household income increased in most regions of the UK, including NI, from December 2020 to December 2021. Ulster University's (2022) survey of the private rented sector reports that average rents in the second half of 2022 had increased by 8.5 per cent over the year, with the average rent being £778 per month. One fifth of rents in Belfast were over £1,100 per month. The authors note the quick escalation in average rents in most areas towards higher pricing bands, which raises concerns about rental affordability. Figure 14 shows the proportion of properties let by rent band in the second quarter of 2022.

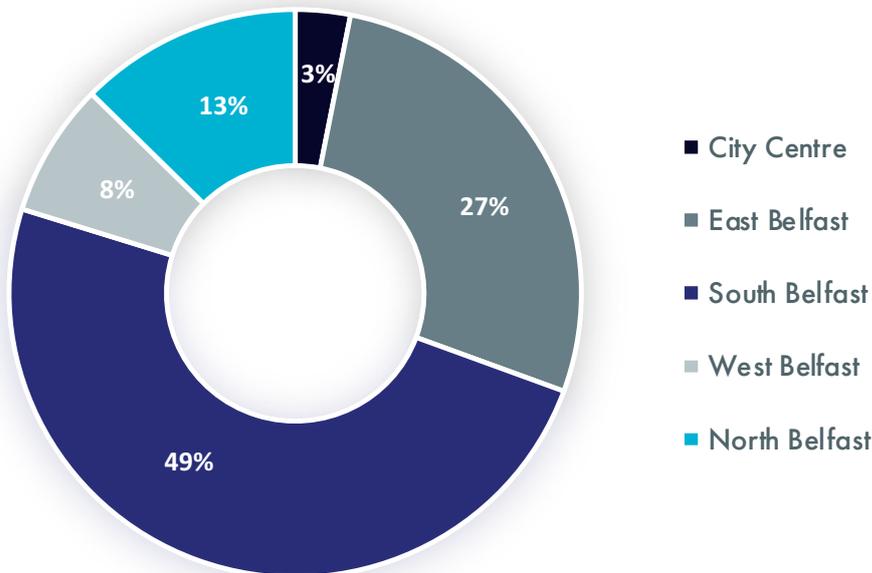
**Figure 14: Proportion of properties let by rent band – NI, BCCA and other LGDs, H1 2022**



Source: Ulster University (2022)

The average proportion of rent cost to household income increased in most regions of the UK, including NI, from December 2020. Data published by the ONS (2022b) on private rental affordability show that in NI the median rent is the equivalent of 23 per cent of the average household income. This is similar to the position in Wales, but less than the 26 per cent figure for England (see Figure 15).

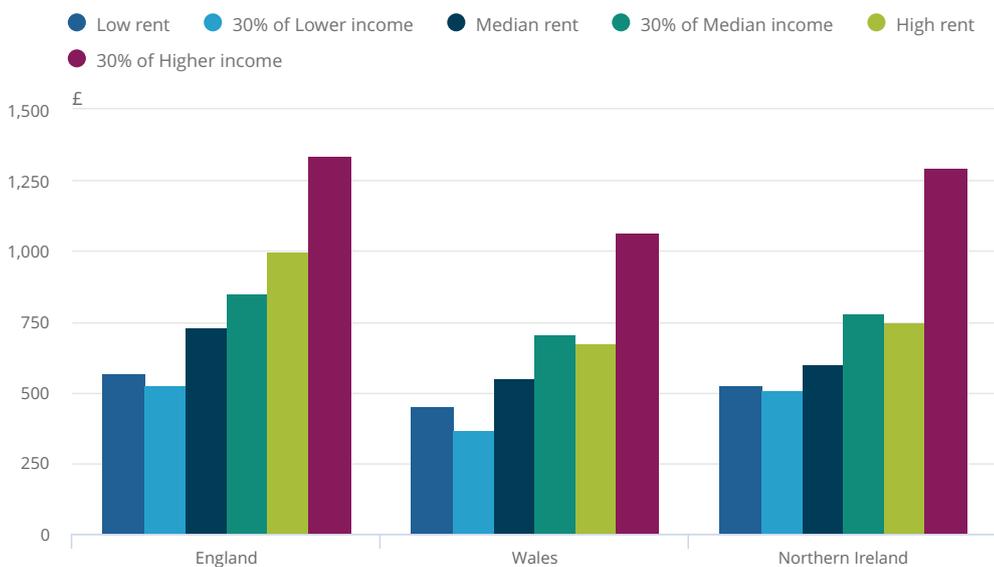
**Figure 15: Proportion of lettings by sub-market, Belfast City Council**



Source: ONS (2022b)

Data analysed by the ONS compares lower and higher rents and incomes using quartiles. Using 30 per cent of income as an affordability threshold, Figure 16 shows that in England, Wales and NI lower income households are below the rent affordability threshold.

**Figure 16: Rents, and 30% shares of private renting household income, by country and quartile, financial year 2021**



Source: ONS (2022b)

### 3.3 Housing costs as a contributor to poverty

An Expert Evidence Review completed for the development of an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland (Horgan *et al.*, 2020) identified housing as one of the cross-cutting issues for inclusion in such a strategy. Of particular concern is the vulnerability and precarity of low income households in the private rented sector as a result of higher rents. Statistics published by the DfC show that in 2021 the average weekly rent for private sector housing was £104 per week and for social housing it was £82 (DfC, 2021). Also of concern are the poor conditions in this sector, and less security of tenure than in the public sector.

A major cause of housing insecurity is the shortfall between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and actual rents. LHA for people receiving Housing Benefit is based on the lowest 30 per cent of rents. Northern Ireland Housing Executive figures show that less than ten per cent of rented properties are in that bottom 30 per cent of rents, meaning that private rented sector tenants have to make up the rest of their rent from their disposal income. The loss of rented accommodation is one of the top three causes of homelessness in NI, and low income households in the private rented sector are among those most likely to live in poor quality housing (Gray *et al.*, 2022).

### 3.4 Policy response

In 2021, the DfC and the NIHE published a number of strategies including a consultative Housing Supply Strategy 2022-2037 and a Private Tenancies Bill. One of the Housing Supply Strategy's key objectives is to create affordable options across all tenures to meet housing need and demand (DfC, 2021). This includes delivering more than 100,000 homes over 15 years, a third of which are to be in the social sector. The draft strategy does *not* contain a commitment to end the mandatory sale of NIHE properties, meaning that NI would continue to be out of step with other devolved jurisdictions. The Private Tenancies Bill did pass into legislation in April 2022 and one of the immediate impacts was to increase the notice periods for private tenancies. Other provisions, including limiting increases to rents to once in a twelve month period and placing limits on deposit amounts, require changes to regulations (NI Assembly, 2022a). In March 2022 the NIHE published Ending Homelessness Together – Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 (NIHE, 2022b), which included three strategic objectives: prioritise homelessness prevention; address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support; and support customers to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation. As of May 2023, there is no timeline for progressing many of these issues due to the lack of government in NI.

## 4. Education

The Social Mobility Commission Report (2021) highlights religious segregation as one of two characteristics which mark NI out from the rest of the UK. Firstly, the NI school system continues to be dominated by division with the majority of children attending either Catholic maintained or controlled schools (predominantly Protestant). This is discussed in more detail in Dimension Four. Secondly, NI has maintained a grammar school system based on academic selection.

## 4.1 Selection

As identified in previous NIPMRs, the Eleven Plus selection system, which had been in operation since 1947, was officially removed in 2008 by the then Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness. However due to a failure of the main parties to agree on an acceptable alternative, two parallel systems came into being with selection tests run privately outside of the Department of Education (DoE). One company, AQE Ltd, was established to run and manage the Common Entrance Assessment (CEA) which mainly operated within controlled grammar schools. The GL assessment was part of the Post Primary Transfer Consortium used by 34 schools. The dual test system attracted consistent criticism, and in March 2022 57 of the 66 grammar schools in NI agreed to run a single common transfer test from 2023. By the time this was implemented, 62 schools had agreed to use it. The plan was initiated by grammar schools which have now formally established the Schools' Entrance Assessment Group.

The system of selection has attracted consistent criticism with the Social Mobility Commission (2021), highlighting that in NI:

*social mobility through education is dependent for many on the outcome of the transfer tests, which children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to succeed in (ibid., 93).*

This means that social class and socio-economic division is perpetuated at post primary level, as outlined below in the discussion on post primary education.

In October 2021, an Independent Review of Education was established as part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020). This Review was to consider systemic educational issues such as post-primary transfer and a single education system, and to produce an interim report in October 2022 with a final report in September 2023. The Review panel has indicated that it has focused on the large number of unsustainable small schools, the poverty-related attainment gap, the outdated model of school governance, increasing incidence of special education needs, concerns about wellbeing, and how to better meet the needs of the economy (Independent Review of Education, 2022). As of May 2023, the final report has not been published.

## 4.2 Performance

### Primary education

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) was conducted in 2019 and is an international comparison study of mathematics and science at ages 9 to 10. The TIMSS findings for NI in 2019 show that attainment for this age group remains high and indeed scores have remained relatively static since 2011. In 2019, NI outperformed 51 of the 58 countries taking part in the study. The TIMSS report noted that in NI there was gender equality in the mathematics and science attainment of Year 6 pupils, with the only notable difference being science reasoning skills, where girls scored higher than boys. Also of note is that pupils who indicated that they had many resources had higher scores than those who said some resources. Likewise, pupils in the most affluent schools outperformed those in the most disadvantaged schools in terms of mathematics and science.

In 2016, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) was conducted among Year 6 pupils (age 9 to 10 years). Pupils in NI outperformed 41 of the 49 participating countries, and again performance has remained stable since 2011. However, other countries including the Republic of Ireland and England improved significantly since 2011. There were some gender differences with attainment in reading favouring girls, and the gap between boys and girls increasing since 2011.

Although these are positive results in terms of performance, overall the two surveys indicate that at primary level, lower socio-economic groupings will score lower in maths and science whilst boys will score lower in reading and literacy.

### **Post-primary education**

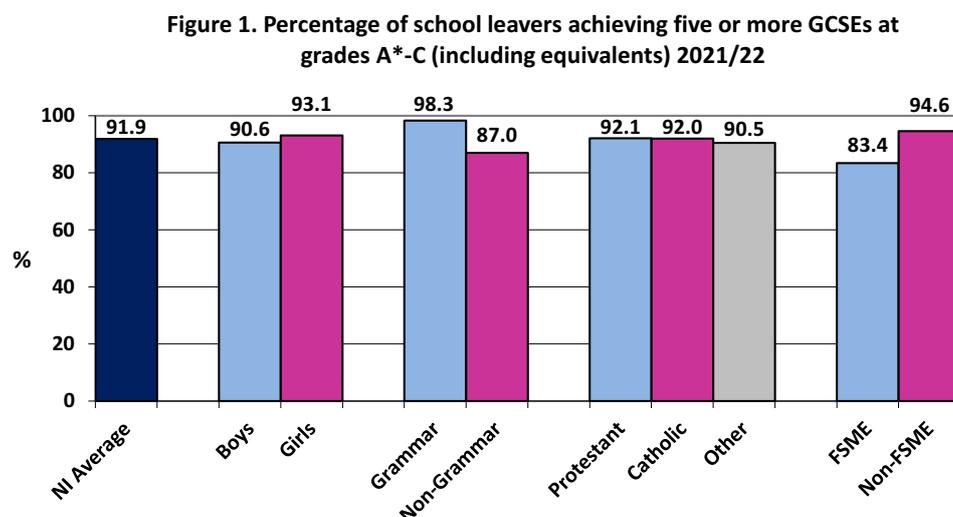
The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been conducted every three years since 2000 in NI and is led by the OECD. The 2018 figures are the latest figures as the 2021 study was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study assesses the ability of 15 year olds in science, maths and reading although each study will focus on one area, with reading being the focus in 2018. In 2018, the mean reading score in NI was significantly above the OECD average for the first time. With regard to science, there were no significant differences from 2015. Gender differences were noted with girls outperforming boys in reading and also doing significantly better in sciences. No significant differences in gender were recorded for maths. As with the TIMSS scores, socio-economic differences are evident with reading scores being higher in more advantaged areas as well as being higher in grammar schools.

It should be noted that the DoE suspended the Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER) process in 2020 to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The DoE and NISRA published data on the destinations and qualifications of Northern Ireland school leavers (NISRA/DoE, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. Based on this data, Figure 17 shows the percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs Grades A\*-C.

Since 2016/17, the proportion of school leavers achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A\* to C (or equivalent) has increased by 8.1 percentage points to 91.9 per cent. As Figure 17 shows, higher levels of attainment are evident among girls, grammar school pupils, and those not eligible for free school meals. The proportion of young people with a statement of special educational needs achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A\*-C or equivalent was 77.4 per cent. However, attainment levels do not vary significantly according to religious affiliation.

<sup>3</sup> The Department notes that given new methods of awarding grades due to COVID-19, caution should be taken when drawing any conclusions relating to changes in student performance.

Figure 17: School leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs Grades A\*-C (including equivalents) 2021/2 (%)



Source: NISRA/DoE (2023)

The data also show that if two of these GCSEs (or equivalent) are in Maths and English, then the rate of achievement is 78.0 per cent - 8.4 percentage points higher than for five years previously. There is a very marked gap in the achievement of those not entitled to free school meals achieving five GCSEs which include Maths and English (84.2%) and those who are entitled to free school meals (59.1%). This represents a gap of 25.1 percentage points between these two groups which compares with a gap of 30.0 percentage points in 2016/17.

The proportion of young people from a minority ethnic background achieving five GCSEs (A\*-C) is 88.3 per cent compared to 92 per cent of white school leavers. When English and Maths are included in the five subjects the figures are 69.4 per cent and 78.3 per cent respectively. Young people from a minority ethnic background who continue to A-Level and gain 3+ qualifications (A\*-C) are as likely to do as well as those of a white ethnic origin: 45.8% and 45.2% respectively (*ibid.*). (The classifications and terms in the above section are those used by the DoE. Ethnicity of pupils is recorded by the school and as reported by the parent/ guardian).

## 5. Health

In the period since the last NIPMR was published (Gray *et al.*, 2018), the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has had profound consequences for health systems globally. In NI, as in many other countries, health and social care staff showed commitment and resilience in coping with the pandemic and rolling out the vaccines. However, the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in the NI health and social care system and exacerbated longstanding problems. In 2018 we reported that, on a number of key indicators, the health service was not performing well (*ibid.*). At the time we reflected on how the problems predated the (then) latest political crisis and had grown over the life of the NI Assembly since 2008. This section details data relating to hospital waiting times and population health and provides a brief review of policy developments.

## 5.1 Health service waiting times

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed substantially to increased waiting times across the UK and Ireland, due not just to the care for COVID-19 patients but reduced capacity across services. However, waiting times in NI are *by far* the longest in the UK and this is a problem which long predates the pandemic. Departmental targets for inpatient and outpatient care have not been met by any of the five health and social care trusts for some years. The NI Audit Office (2022) describes a widening gap between rising population demand for care and the health and social care available to meet this. Long-term deficits in funding, challenges with workforce recruitment and retention, and limited progress in transforming services are contributory factors.

As of March 2023, 121,879 patients were waiting to be admitted to hospital in NI either for inpatient or day case, a three per cent decrease on the previous year. Department of Health (DoH) targets for the maximum number of patients who should be waiting for 13 weeks (55%) and 52 weeks (no patients) were not met by any of the five health and social care trusts. Figure 18 shows the percentage of people waiting for inpatient and outpatient care for 2016, 2018 and 2023. The statistics show that 77.4 per cent of patients waiting in March 2023 for inpatient care were waiting more than 13 weeks and 52.9 per cent of those waiting had been waiting more than 52 weeks (DoH, 2023a). With regard to outpatient care, the departmental target is that 50 per cent of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment and no patient should wait longer than 52 weeks. At March 2023, 401,201 people were waiting for a first appointment, 7.3 per cent more than in March 2022. The vast majority of patients in each health and social care trust (81.3%) had been waiting more than nine weeks. The number of people who had been waiting longer than 52 weeks at March 2023 was 49.2 per cent, compared to 32.1 per cent in March 2018.

**Figure 18: Waiting times for inpatient/day case admissions and consultant led first outpatient appointments**

	2023		2018		2016	
	number of weeks % waiting					
Inpatient/ day case admission	13+ weeks	52+ weeks	13+ weeks	52+ weeks	13+ weeks	52+ weeks
	77.4	52.9	63.1	21.6	55.3	12.6
Outpatient appointment	9+ weeks	52+ weeks	13+ weeks	52+ weeks	13+ weeks	52+ weeks
	81.3	49.2	73.2	32.1	72.4	19.1

Source: DoH (2023a)

While targets and the period for which waiting time data are published varies across UK jurisdictions, waiting lists have been a growing problem in all geographical areas. Key waiting time standards have not been met for several years in England (The Kings Fund, 2022), Scotland (Public Health Scotland, 2022) or Wales (Audit Wales, 2022). The Republic of Ireland is also experiencing lengthy waiting lists and, again, the problem precedes the COVID-19 pandemic. While not directly comparable with NI due to the very different funding and payment system and targets, figures published by the National

Treatment Purchase Fund (Republic of Ireland) for 2021/22 show that waiting times have been an issue for a number of years. In November 2021, 636,695 people were waiting for an outpatient appointment and 75,740 were waiting for treatment for inpatient or day care. The number waiting for more than 18 months - the target for outpatient appointments - was 165,266 with 11,686 waiting for inpatient care (National Treatment Purchase Fund, not dated).

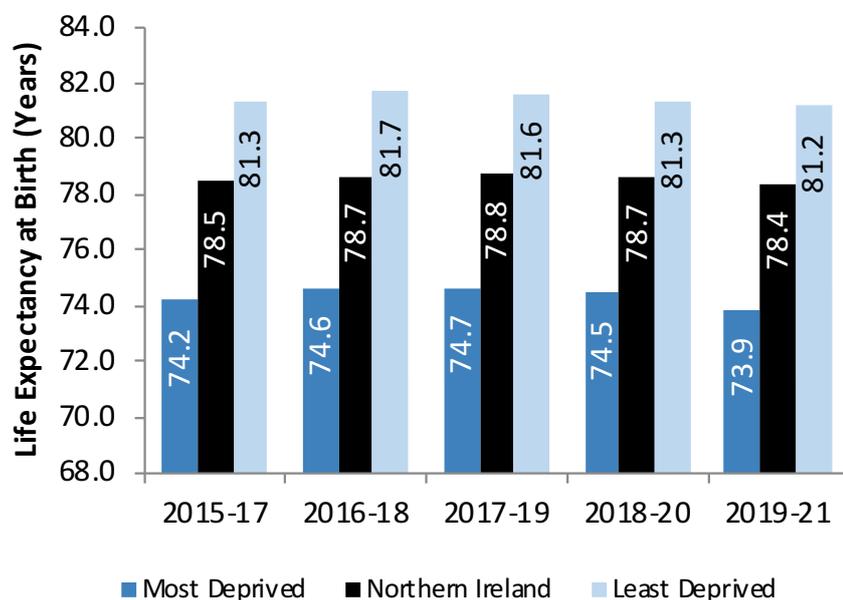
Nevertheless, the evidence shows that the problems have been more longstanding in NI and more severe. For example, before the COVID-19 pandemic there were 100 times more people waiting over a year for a consultant-led appointment in NI than in England (Anderson *et al.*, 2022).

## 5.2 Population health

### Health inequalities

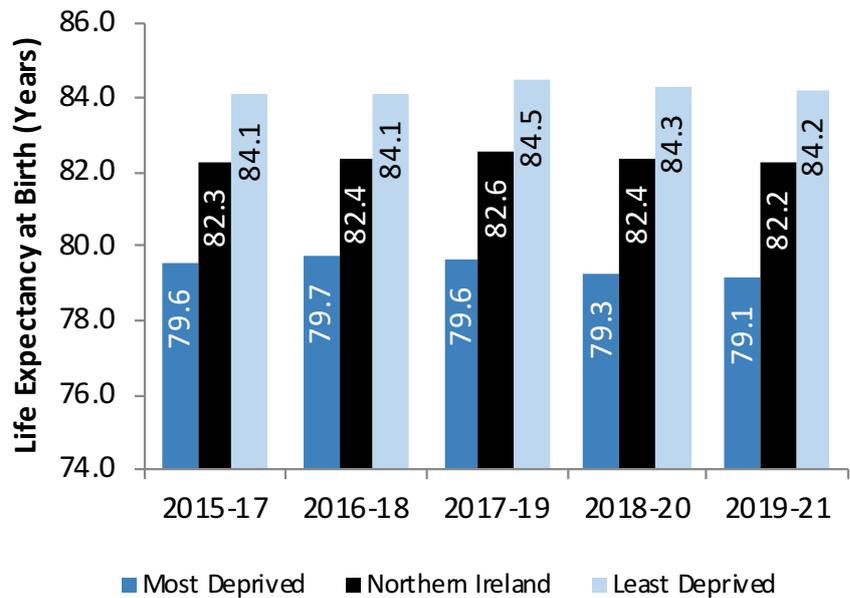
Across a range of indicators evidence shows substantial health inequalities. Life expectancy figures illustrate how inequalities between men and women have persisted over time. For males, the deprivation gap (the difference between the figure for the most deprived quintile and the least deprived quintile) is 7.3 years, similar to 2015/17 (Figure 19). For females, the life expectancy deprivation gap is 5.1 years – which has widened from 4.5 years in the period since 2014/16 (Figure 20).

**Figure 19: Trends in rates over time for male life expectancy at birth in Northern Ireland, the 20% most deprived areas and 20% least deprived areas**



Source: DoH (2023b)

**Figure 20: Trends in rates over time for female life expectancy at birth in NI, the 20% most deprived areas and 20% least deprived areas**



Source: DoH (2023b)

Infant mortality figures for 2017-2021 show that in the most deprived areas the infant mortality rate was 5.1 per 100,000 people (virtually unchanged since 2012), whereas in the least deprived it was 4.0 (the NI average is 4.3). A similar picture of inequality can be seen with regard to low birth weight. In 2021 this was 7.2 per 100,000 people in the most deprived areas compared to 4.6 in the least (the figure for NI overall is 5.9). In the period from 2013 to 2017, the low birth weight gap has widened due to improvement in the least deprived areas not being matched in the most (DoH, 2023b). The extent and impact of inequalities can also be seen in disability free life expectancy figures where there has been no improvement in the deprivation gap since 2014-2016, or with regard to preventable mortality. The overall NI average figure for potential years of life lost remained constant at about 8.8 per 100,000 people, and the rate in the most deprived areas was more than double that in the least deprived. This is particularly striking with regard to respiratory deaths in the under 75s where the death rate in the most deprived areas was 3.5 times higher than those in the least deprived.

### Self reported health

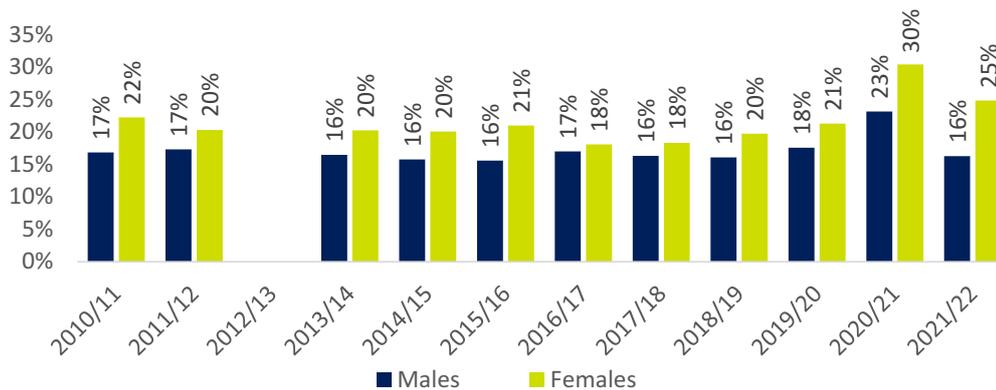
Nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents to the Health Survey for NI (2021/22) described their health as good or very good. This is lower than the figure in 2020/21 (79%) but is similar to the pre pandemic figure (DoH, 2022a). Here too, inequalities are evident. In 2021/22, people living in the most deprived areas were less likely to rate their health as good or very good than those living in any other deprivation quintile area (61% compared with 72% to 80% respectively). Those living in the most deprived areas were four times as likely to rate their general health as bad or very bad compared with those living in the least deprived areas (17% and 4% respectively). Those living in rural areas were more likely to rate their health as good or very good compared with those living in urban areas (79% and 70% respectively).

Almost one third of respondents to the Health Survey (30%) said that they had a longstanding illness that reduced their ability to carry out day to day activities, a figure similar to 2020/21. Twenty one percent had high scores

on the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12) indicating a potential mental health problem, with women more likely to score higher compared to men (25% and 16% respectively). These figures are significantly lower than in the previous year (30% and 23% respectively), and the figure for males is now close to the pre pandemic level – see Figure 21 (DoH, 2022a). Of note is the high prescription rates for mood and anxiety disorders which increased regionally between 2017 and 2021 with the rate in the most deprived areas being 66 per cent higher than in the least deprived areas (DoH, 2023b).

**Figure 21: High GHQ12 score by year and sex**

#### High GHQ12 score by sex and year



Source: DoH (2022a)

#### Death from suicide

Since the previous NIPMR report was published (Gray *et al.*, 2018) a review of suicide statistics in NI has taken place following the identification of a classification issue in published statistics for the period 2015-2020 (NISRA, 2022b). The review reported that 84 per cent of all cases reviewed (2015 to 2020) moved from undetermined cause of death into accidental cause of death categories, thus falling outside the suicide definition. This reduced the number of suicide deaths in NI between 2015 and 2020 by almost 30 per cent per year between 2015 and 2017, with a 23 per cent reduction in 2018 and a 17 per cent fall in 2020. Prior to this review, NI had the highest age-standardised rate of suicide in the UK. The revised figures show that NI had a lower suicide rate than Scotland in the years in question. In 2020, NI had an age standardised rate of 13.3 suicides per 100,000 people compared to Scotland at 15.0, and England and Wales at 10.0. Figures for 2021 show the highest number of registered deaths from suicide in NI since 2015. Of the 237 deaths from suicide, 176 were men and 61 women, and NI's most deprived areas had a suicide rate that was almost twice that of the least deprived areas (DoH, 2023b). There were 14.3 deaths from suicide per 100,000 people in NI - slightly higher than the rate in other UK regions.

The NISRA has noted that the suicide rate for men and women has been on an upward trajectory since 2019 (NISRA, 2022c).

## 5.3 Wellbeing

The economic wealth of a nation or region is typically measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross Value Added (GVA). However, the importance of wellbeing is becoming increasingly recognised. NI's wellbeing performance presents a mixed picture. The region is ranked top in terms of adults who rate their happiness as very high and typically has on average lower levels of anxiety or stress.

There are sub-population differences in the wellbeing results for many of the measures. For example, people aged 65 years or over have the highest average scores for happiness and lower scores for anxiety than other age groups, especially compared to those in 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 age groups. People living in more deprived areas, had significantly lower scores for all questions than those living in the least deprived areas. People with disabilities have lower scores across all questions than those without a disability.

However, as noted earlier, NI performs poorly across a range of other mental health indicators. The DoH's Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 (DoH, 2021), states that NI has the highest prevalence of mental health problems in the UK, with a 25 per cent higher overall prevalence than England. Work has also drawn attention to men's mental health and the link between mental and physical health (Devine and Early, 2020). The Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Study found 11.9 per cent of respondents experienced emotional problems; one in six of 11 to 19 year olds engaged in a pattern of disordered eating disorder; and one in ten in the same age group reported behaviours of self-harm (Bunting *et al.*, 2020).

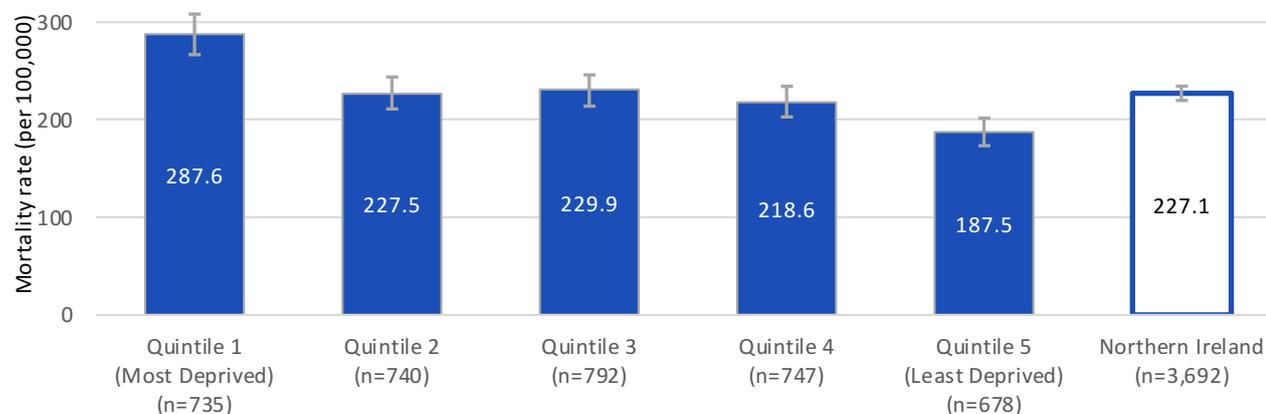
The relationship between the conflict in NI and mental health and well-being has been documented (Bunting *et al.*, 2013; O'Connor and O'Neill, 2015). Studies have also examined the impact on children, particularly relating to transgenerational legacy and psychological trauma (Shevlin and McGuigan, 2003; Austin, 2019). An increasing focus in recent years has been how the legacy of the conflict continues to affect the lives of children and young people growing up in NI. Recent work by McAlister *et al.* (2021) takes a holistic approach to examining the continuing transgenerational impacts of the conflict on the lives of children and young people aged 14 to 24 years and parents throughout NI and the Border Region of Ireland. It examines the ways in which young people learn about the past and their identity and culture, and explores the impacts of conflict legacy across four themes: divided space; health and well-being; family life and parenting; and paramilitarism and policing. The findings point to an enduring relationship between poverty, the conflict and poor health which is impacting the current generation of young people.

## 6. COVID-19 and Health Inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on those already experiencing poverty and disadvantage. In the ten per cent most deprived areas of NI, the infection rate was almost two thirds higher than the rate in the ten per cent least deprived areas (as measured by cases per 100,000 people) and more than one and a half times the NI average. There was also a strong age differential with the infection rate among those aged 65 or over being four fifths higher in the ten per cent most deprived areas than in the ten per cent least deprived areas, and almost double the NI average. While infection rates were highest in the ten per cent most deprived areas, the ten per cent least deprived areas had the second highest infection rate for over 65s (DoH, 2020).

From March 2020 to October 2021, 3,692 COVID-19 related deaths were recorded in NI, accounting for 13.0 per cent of all deaths (NISRA, 2021b). Over half (52.9%) were male and 47.1 per cent were female. The mortality rate from COVID-19 increased with age especially among those over 80 years. Across all age groups, males had a higher age-specific COVID-19 mortality rate than females (Devine and Early, 2020). The highest death rates were in the most deprived areas (287.6 per 100,000 people) and the lowest in the least deprived areas (187.5 per 100,000 people). Taking into account the age structure of the population, the COVID-19 mortality rate was 53.3 per cent higher in the most deprived areas compared to the 20 per cent least deprived areas (Figure 22) (*ibid.*).

**Figure 22: Age-standardised mortality rates of COVID-19 related deaths, by area deprivation, 1 March 2020 -31 October 2021**



Source: NISRA (20)

## 7. How has the NI Assembly performed with regard to social policy making?

One way of assessing the impact of devolution is to consider the extent to which the government has addressed NI specific needs and issues. The Assembly resumed in January 2020, following agreement between the parties around a set of commitments set out in the NDNA document. Within the first few months of restoration, challenges emerged with regard to Brexit as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy priorities agreed by the NI political parties included: the development of a new multi-year programme

for government and multi-year budget; transforming the health service with a long-term funding strategy and, a new action plan on waiting times; and delivering broader reforms on health and social care as set out in previous review documents.

It could be argued that there has been little progress on many of these issues. The potential of devolution had been seen in 2016 when the Assembly put in place a number of welfare mitigation schemes designed to alleviate the impact of specific changes to social security benefits as a result of welfare reform. These have provided some protection to the most vulnerable individuals and families in NI. They were to last until 2020 but were then temporarily extended. A Discretionary Support Scheme established by the DfC to provide crisis support meant that, compared to other devolved jurisdictions, NI was relatively well served (McKeever *et al.*, 2023). Prior to the collapse of Assembly in 2022, the DfC had appointed an independent advisory panel to review the welfare mitigation measures and provide recommendations with regard to future mitigations (DfC, 2022b) and an independent review of discretionary support (DfC, 2022c). However, with no ministers in place, decisions have not been made on the recommendations set out in the reviews.

Between 2020 and the collapse of the institutions again in 2022 there was evidence of a stronger focus on social policy. In September 2020, the Executive commenced work on a suite of equality strategies on gender, disability, sexual orientation and poverty, as committed to in NDNA. The DfC progressed work on the strategies including the commissioning of a number of expert advisory reports (Gray *et al.*, 2020; Byrne *et al.*, 2020; Ashe *et al.*, 2020 and Horgan *et al.*, 2021), followed by a co-design process on the development of the strategies. These strategies were due to be published by the end of 2021 but this has been impacted by the collapse of the institutions. Other social policy developments included the appointment of a Mental Health Champion in 2020 and the publication of a new draft Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan (DoH, 2021) aiming to address longstanding mental health challenges, some of which have been directly linked to the legacy of conflict, as discussed earlier.

A more sustained focus on social policy can also be seen in the increase in Private Members' Bills on social policy topics. A notable feature of the 2017-2022 mandate was the number of private members' bills which made their way into legislation – 9 out of a total of 45 primary legislation bills (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Private members bills gaining Royal Assent in 2017-2022 mandate**

Title of Bill	Sponsor
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill	Jim Allister (TUV)
NIA Bill 31/17-22 Autism (Amendment) Bill	Pam Cameron (DUP)
NIA Bill 23/17-22 Integrated Education Bill	Kellie Armstrong (Alliance Party)
NIA Bill 51/17-22 Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill	Chris Lyttle (Alliance Party)
NIA Bill 40/17-22 Hospital Parking Charges Bill	Fra McCann (transferred to Aisling Reilly) (Sinn Fein)
NIA Bill 39/17-22 Period Products (Free Provision) Bill	Pat Catney (SDLP)
NIA Bill 56/17-22 Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill	Alan Chambers (UUP)
NIA Bill 41/17-22 Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill	Rachel Woods (The Green Party)
NIA 25/17-22 Defamation Bill	Mike Nesbitt (UUP)

A key milestone was the passing of the first NI Climate Change Bill in March 2022. While there are UK-wide targets for climate change, because it is a devolved matter the lack of legislation in NI was a major inhibitor to progress. There was a commitment to a climate change act in the NDNA agreement but for some time there was little indication that the then Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots, was keen to progress on legislation. Movement towards legislation was accelerated by cross party collaboration and political and civil society partnership on a Private Members Bill. The Bill, led by Green Party MLA Clare Bailey, but co-sponsored by a number of parties, was introduced to the Assembly in March 2021. The Minister then published a separate consultation on a separate climate change bill in December 2021. As an Executive Bill it had greater priority in the legislative process than the private members bill. While less ambitious than the private members bill, it was influenced by the content of the latter and by the groups which had contributed to its development. The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022b) came into force in June 2022 and measures include net zero targets by 2050, carbon budgets, just transition principles and the establishment of an Independent Office of the NI Climate Commissioner.

However, in a number of substantive policy areas there has been much less progress. As of May 2023, a long awaited NI childcare strategy has not appeared and this has to be seen alongside further policy commitment and funding for childcare provision in Scotland, Wales and England (Welsh Government, 2022; Scottish Government, 2023; HM Treasury, 2023). As highlighted earlier, NI has the longest waiting lists in the UK and the health and social care system has been under increasing pressure. However, no major health and social care policy initiatives have been progressed. Only in 2022 did the DoH publish a consultative document on reform of adult social care (Department of Health, 2022b) despite primary legislation being more than 40 years old.

The UK Conservative government has not introduced Direct Rule in the absence of an Executive and Assembly in NI; nevertheless, it has been willing to intervene on some NI social policy issues by legislating at Westminster. The NI (Executive Formation) Act 2019 decriminalised abortion in NI and legalised same sex marriage. The Westminster Government had been previously resistant to the idea that it should exercise powers to legislate for these issues, repeatedly arguing that they were devolved matters. The prospect of the NI Assembly legislating on these matters was remote given the strong opposition of the DUP despite evidence of strong public support in NI for reforms in both these areas (ARK, 2019). Following years of campaigning by victims and a public inquiry, the Westminster Government also passed the Historical Institutional Abuse (NI) Act which provided a legal framework for the administration of a publicly funded compensation scheme. In February 2023 legislation needed to allow an opt-out organ donation system, previously passed in the NI Assembly in February 2022, was enacted in Westminster.

In the period since the abortion legislation was passed by the Westminster Government there has continued to be opposition by some in the Executive and Assembly to the full implementation of the legislation. The Department of Health in NI was required to implement regulations so that services could be implemented across the health and social care trusts. The Health Minister, Robin Swann, argued that this would require full Executive approval and this was not forthcoming. Ultimately, arguing that the secretary of state was acting to ensure implementation of the legislation, the Secretary of State intervened through additional regulations in December 2022 directing NI the Department of Health to commission abortion services (Department of Health, 2022c).

## 8. Conclusions

Since the publication of the last NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), the economy and society in NI has experienced major shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and EU Withdrawal and a cost of living crisis. Addressing these has presented challenges for social policy, which has consistently faced longstanding structural and systemic problems in NI. The ability to address these new pressures has been further hindered by political instability and the non functioning of the Assembly and Executive for much of the period.

There has not been a final Programme of Government (PfG) in NI since 2015 with the Executive not getting beyond a draft and delivery frameworks which were periodically updated. Despite this, there was evidence of a stronger focus on social policy in the Assembly towards the end of the last mandate with some important legislative developments, including the introduction of climate change legislation. Unfortunately, the lack of government has meant that implementation of this has not progressed. The overall picture with regard to social policy is that some major structural problems have not been addressed over the period of devolution. The unenviable record with regard to long-term unemployment and economic inactivity persists; there continues to be stark educational inequalities, particularly with regard to socio-economic background; health inequalities remain a key public health challenge; and the health and social care system is under severe pressure leading to poorer access for patients and increasing levels of unmet need.

Addressing economic inequality has long been recognised as an important aspect of peace building in post conflict societies. Therefore, the political institutions, when reinstated, will have much to do. Dealing with broader structural issues will require stronger inter-linkage between economic, social and environmental policies.

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# DIMENSION FOUR

## Cohesion and sharing

### Overview

The issues covered in this Dimension are broad ranging but all are relevant to attempts to build cohesion and sharing in Northern Ireland (NI). Since 2018, when the previous NI Peace Monitoring Report (NIPMR) was published (Gray *et al.*, 2018), NI has become a more diverse society, as outlined in the Introduction to the report. This Dimension looks at cohesion and sharing with regard to minority ethnic communities, as well as between the two main communities in NI, by examining the state of community relations. It considers the key policies and initiatives aimed at supporting cohesion and sharing and at the role of civil society. It also examines the impact of the political stalemate which has been a key feature of the period since 2018.

### 1. The Policy Context

Since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed, both the NI Executive and the NI Office (NIO) have designed and introduced various policy frameworks aimed at tackling division, sectarianism and mistrust, and improving the levels of cohesion and sharing within and between communities. Previous NIPMRs have detailed the challenges of developing an ambitious and coherent approach which does not assume a solely two-community division within NI. The most recent policy document, entitled *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)* was published in 2013 by the NI Executive as the framework for government action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance while seeking to address division, hate and separation (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [OFMdfM], 2013). Tackling the issue of racism is not, however, comprehensively addressed within T:BUC, and a separate Racial Equality Strategy (2015-2025) provides an additional framework for government departments to tackle racial inequalities and eradicate racism and hate crime (OFMdfM, 2015).

#### **The T:BUC framework contains four key priorities:**

- Our children and young people
- Our shared community
- Our safe community
- Our cultural expression

Seven strategic Headline Actions are also outlined, which include targets on the development of new shared housing schemes, the establishment of new shared education campuses and the removal of interface barriers by 2023, among others.

As reported in the previous NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018), The Executive Office (TEO) publishes annual reports outlining progress on the headline actions and across the key priority areas. In March 2023, the T:BUC at Ten report marked the ten year anniversary of the T:BUC Strategy. It reported on updates on the seven Headline Actions and provided detail on a range of projects being delivered under various funding streams. This includes more than 750 T:BUC camps with young people; a number of interventions to divert young people from anti-social behaviour and to deal with tensions

around interfaces during the summer period; and a number of capital projects completed in the five designated Urban Villages.

**A range of good relations indicators was developed by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2014 to monitor progress on the T:BUC strategy. Within the four key priorities, indicators included:**

- Our Children and Young People
  - Improved attitudes between young people from different backgrounds
  - Young people engaged in bringing the community together
- Our Shared Community
  - Increased use of shared space and services (e.g. leisure centres, parks, libraries, shopping centres, education, and housing)
  - Shared space is accessible to all
- Our Safe Community
  - Reduction in the prevalence of hate crime and intimidation
  - A community where places and spaces are safe for all
- Our Cultural Expression
  - Increased sense of community belonging
  - Cultural diversity is celebrated

The indicators are measured using a range of data sources, including the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey of adults aged 18 years or over, the Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey of 16 year olds, the School Omnibus Survey, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Hate Crimes Survey. Monitoring takes place every year, with an annual report being published by NISRA and TEO. The 2020 Good Relations Indicators Report was published in March 2023 (TEO, 2023). It is anticipated that analysis of these indicators over the 10-year period of T:BUC will be prepared to further inform the development of a new policy framework.

In addition to the four key priorities, TEO supports a range of other targeted good relations work, such as that undertaken by the Community Relations Council (CRC). This includes programmes, funding streams and engagement work, such as the regular convening of the T:BUC Engagement Forum to directly connect government departments and associated bodies with the community and voluntary sector. Funding is directly provided to the District Councils Good Relations Programme, with Councils providing 25 per cent of the overall funding for the Programme. A TEO Central Good Relations Fund provided £3.4m to 98 community projects in 2019/20.

In early 2022, TEO announced a Strategic Review of the T:BUC strategy. A consultation with stakeholders was initiated in the spring of 2022 and, as of May 2023, is near completion. Notably, any significant changes to the programme will require ministerial agreement and a functioning Executive.

## 2. Civil Society and Peacebuilding

Civil society continues to play an active role in wider peacebuilding activities, including the building of relationships between different communities, supporting and advocating for those impacted by the conflict, and addressing wider social, political and economic challenges. Various government strategies (including T:BUC) provide opportunities for government-civil society collaboration through partnership arrangements for policy delivery

and funding streams to support other activities. There has traditionally been a strong voluntary and community sector in NI. Research by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) estimates that the sector currently employs over 50,000 people, representing seven per cent of the total NI workforce (NICVA, not dated). However, there is ongoing concern about the negative impact of cuts in government funding to the sector.

An important role for civil society organisations is to hold government to account and provide a space for debate, dialogue and scrutiny of legislation. For example, organisations have vociferously challenged the NI Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (see Dimension Two on dealing with the past). Substantial financial assistance to support civil society's engagement in peace-enhancing activities has been made available from a range of sources over the past five decades. The European Union (EU)'s Peace and Reconciliation programme, first established in 1995, continues to be a significant (albeit diminishing) source of financial support for civil society. The most recent programme, PEACE IV (2014-2020) allocated €270m in its final stages of delivery and evaluation. This fourth programme focused on similar priority areas as T:BUC, including Shared Education; supporting marginalised children and young people; the provision of shared spaces and services; and building positive relations, with encouragement of cross-border cooperation in project design and delivery. With an emphasis on larger-scale strategy programming and the involvement of local authority-led partnerships, direct access to smaller grant awards for local community and voluntary sector organisations has been more limited than in previous rounds of the funding.

After several years of negotiation, consultation and planning, the PEACE PLUS programme was formally adopted by the European Commission in July 2022. Worth €1.1bn, including contributions from the United Kingdom (UK) and Irish governments, as well as the NI Executive, this new programme combines the previous INTERREG and PEACE funding strands into a new programme for the 2021-27 period. It will be administered by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

**The programme targets investment in six key thematic areas:**

- 1 Building peaceful and thriving communities
- 2 Delivering economic regeneration and transformation
- 3 Empowering and investing in our young people
- 4 Healthy and inclusive communities
- 5 Supporting a sustainable and better-connected future
- 6 Building and embedding partnership and collaboration

Other funding organisations, including the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), continue to support the work of civil society in building sustainable peace. Established in 1986 as part of an agreement between the British and Irish governments, it aims to develop economic and social opportunities for people affected by the conflict across the island of Ireland. The fund has focused significant investment in a Peace Walls programme, a Youth Development programme and a Peace Impact Programme in areas of historically low levels of engagement in peacebuilding work. The most recent (2020-24) strategy, entitled Connecting Communities (IFI, 2021) builds on an evaluation of previous strategies and continues a focus on youth development, peace impact and a Peace Barriers programme.

Theoretical and empirical analysis of the impact of the EU peace funding is limited (Laguna, 2021). In a recent publication focusing on the Peace IV programme, Knox *et al.* (2023) explore the intersection of three themes: policy implementation, conflict/peacebuilding, and the role of the EU and of EU policies in that process within NI. They argue that despite substantial investment of EU resources, key policy outcomes in NI have remained largely the same, pointing to failures across two axes that lead to the policy implementation deficit in NI: the prevalence of high conflict over the goals of implementation and the absence of discretion (low ambiguity) in the means of implementation.

In October 2020, the then Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Micheál Martin announced the establishment of a new Shared Island unit within the Department of An Taoiseach. The objective of the initiative was to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island of Ireland, and to build consensus around a shared future. The Irish Government committed €500m in ring-fenced funds to be distributed over five years in support of strategic North/South investments, including cross-border infrastructure projects on the Ulster Canal and the Narrow Water Bridge. In addition, the North/South Research Programme was established in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the National Economic and Social Council (NESCC) in order to strengthen links between higher education institutions, researchers and research communities on the island of Ireland. In addition, a Shared Island Dialogues Series was established to support dialogue with a diverse range of civic representatives from across the island on a range of key themes, including health, environment, education, sport and equality. In January 2023, the Irish Government launched a Shared Island Civic Society Fund, worth €0.5m in the first year, to support civil society and community sector organisations to develop new, or build on existing cross-border links and partnerships and promote practical North/South cooperation and engagement.

In December 2021, a new civil society partnership project between The Wheel (the Republic of Ireland's national association of charities, community groups and social enterprises) and NICVA, on Shared Island practice was also launched. Supported by both the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Fund and the Department for Communities (DfC), the Shared Island, Shared Practices initiative aims to identify and promote community-led responses that promote shared-island economic and social collaboration on a range of issues, including rural sustainability, digital inclusion and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

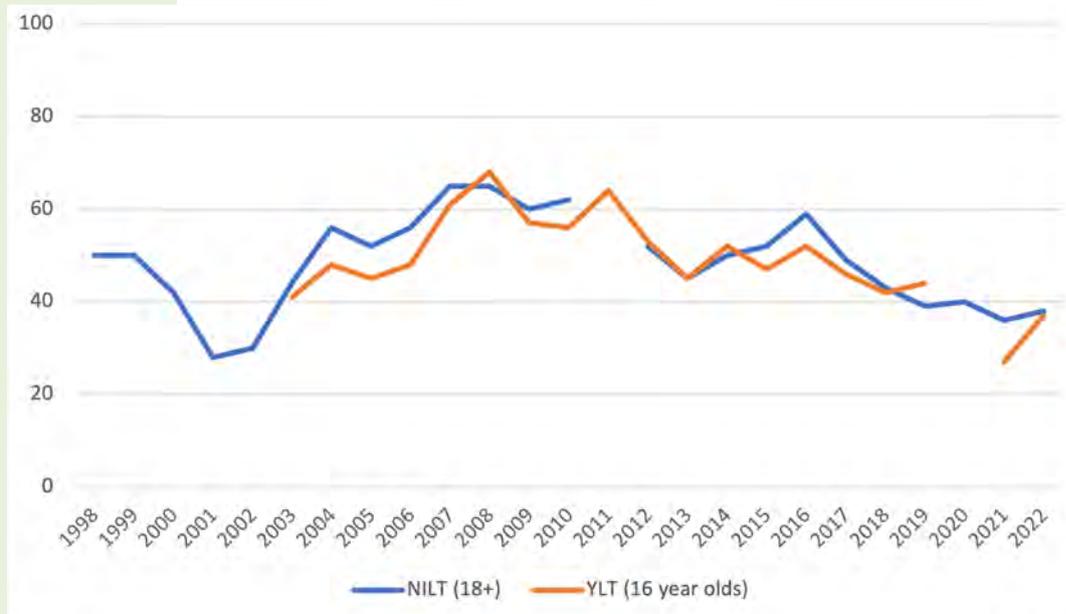
The former Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) leader, civil rights campaigner and Nobel Laureate, John Hume, died in August 2020. In November that year, the John and Pat Hume Foundation was launched with a leadership and board from diverse backgrounds, including academics, community activists, former political leaders and members of the Hume family. Established to promote the peaceful legacy of John Hume and his wife Pat (who passed away in September 2021), the Foundation aims to work on the advancement of peaceful change, social and economic justice, democratic progress, and the building of inclusive and resilient communities in divided societies nationally and internationally.

### 3. State of Community Relations

#### 3.1 Progress on community relations

As reported in previous NIPMRs, the NILT and YLT surveys continue to record respondents’ perceptions of relations between Catholics and Protestants. Figure 1 indicates that the proportion of NILT respondents believing that relations between Catholics and Protestants are better than five years ago has fallen from 59 per cent in 2016 to 38 per cent in 2022 (ARK, 2023a). Nevertheless, during the same time period, there was an increase of 11 percentage points in the proportion of respondents who felt that relations between the two communities were about the same as five years ago, from 33 per cent in 2016 to 44 per cent in 2022. There has also been a fall in the proportion of YLT respondents feeling that inter-communal relations have been improving in recent years, dropping from 52 per cent in 2016 to 37 per cent in 2022 (ARK, 2023b).

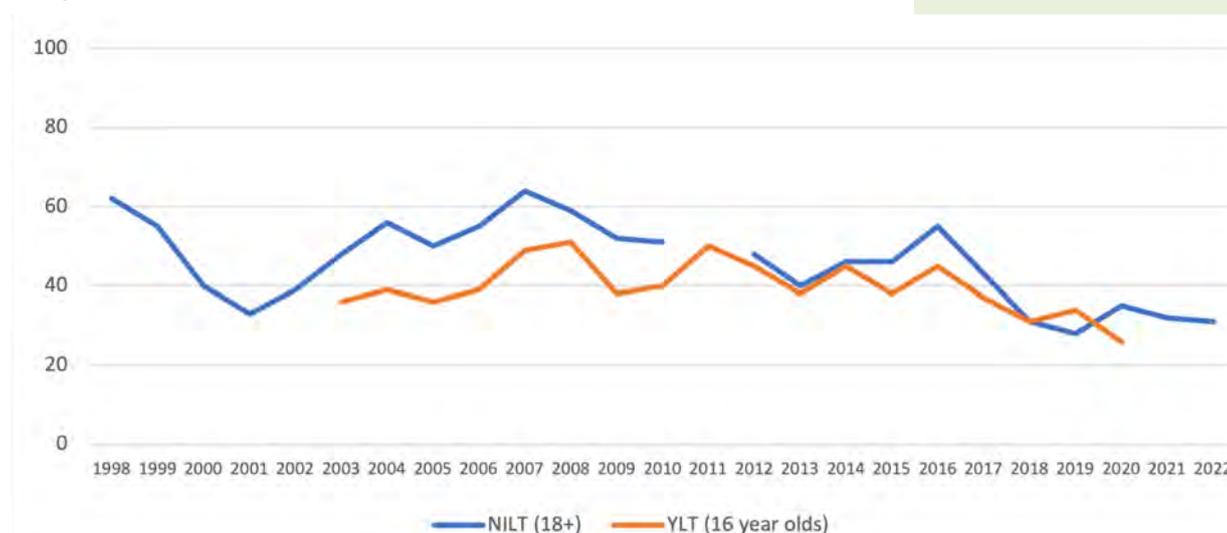
**Figure 1: Relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago, 1998-2022 (%)**



Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023a); Young Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023b)

When asked about relations between Catholics and Protestants in five years’ time, NILT respondents have become more pessimistic: 59 per cent in 2016 felt that relations would be better in five years’ time, compared with 31 per cent in 2022. In addition, the proportion thinking that inter-communal relations will get worse has risen from four per cent in 2016 to 15 per cent in 2022 (ARK, 2023a). Responses from YLT indicate a similar downward trend in optimism since 2016 (ARK, 2023b) – see Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Relations between Protestants and Catholics would be better in 5 years' time, 1998-2022 (%)**



Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023a); Young Life and Times Survey (ARK, 2023b)

## 3.2 Ethnic minority population

The 2021 Census of Population indicates increased demographic diversification of NI, with 65,600 people (3.4% of the population) belonging to a classification other than white. This is a significant rise from the figures reported in both the 2001 and 2011 census data (0.8 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively). Nevertheless, the proportion of the population of NI identifying as white (96.6%) is much higher than the equivalent figure for England and Wales (81.7%). However, it must be acknowledged that Census classifications conflate the concepts of race, ethnic background and nationality, and vary across the UK. For example, Roma and Irish Traveller are not classified as white in NI, whilst the reverse is true in Scotland, England and Wales (HM Government, not dated).

There have been long-established Traveller, Chinese and Jewish communities in NI, complemented by newer arrivals in the past decade. In 2021, the largest minority ethnic groups were Mixed Ethnicities (14,400 or 0.8%), Black (11,000 or 0.6%), Indian (9,900 or 0.5%), Chinese (9,500 or 0.5%), and Filipino (4,500 or 0.2%). Irish Traveller, Arab, Pakistani and Roma ethnicities each constituted 1,500 people or more.

The level of diversification in 2021 was not uniform across the 11 Local Government Districts, ranging from 1.4 per cent in Causeway Coast and Glens, to 7.1 per cent in Belfast (NISRA, 2022a). All Local Government Districts are more diverse than they were both ten and 20 years ago. The number of people living in NI who were born outside the UK and Ireland has grown from 81,500 people (4.5%) in 2011 to 124,300 people (6.5%) in 2021, and is the highest ever recorded. There has been a rise in the number of people aged 3 years or over with a main language other than English, from 54,500 (3.1%) in 2011 to 85,100 people (4.6%) in 2021. The most prevalent main languages other than English were Polish (20,100 people), Lithuanian (9,000), Irish (6,000), Romanian (5,600) and Portuguese (5,000).

Another indication of the increasing diversity of the population is the number of newcomer pupils in schools. The Education Authority (EA) defines a newcomer pupil as a pupil whose home language is not English or Irish and who may require support in school for this reason. In 2022/23, there were nearly 19,500 newcomer pupils, accounting for 5.5 per cent of the school population. This has risen by nearly 4,300 pupils since 2017/18. In March 2023, the Department of Education (DoE) reports that in 2022/23, there are approximately 90 first languages spoken by pupils enrolled in schools in NI, with Polish and Lithuanian being the most common behind English. (DoE, 2023).

A report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) on the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in NI (NIAC, 2022) noted that the growing diversity of NI is not reflected in political representation, either at local government level or at the Assembly. None of the 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the 2017-22 Assembly were recorded as being from a minority ethnic background. In 2019, only one member of a District Council was of a recorded minority ethnic background, out of a total of 462.

### 3.3 Refugees and asylum seekers

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status. An asylum applicant who does not qualify for refugee status may still be granted leave to remain in the UK for humanitarian or other reasons. In line with UK-wide figures, the number of asylum seekers in receipt of support in NI has risen since 2017, with a particularly marked rise evident throughout 2021. The Home Office does not release regular statistics by region, and data on where asylum seekers live in the UK is only available for individuals that receive some form of housing and/or financial support.

Figures from the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, indicate that NI hosted an average of 7.5 asylum applicants and 9.7 resettled refugees per 10,000 resident population in December 2021, making it the region of the UK with the largest number of resettled refugees, relative to its population (Walsh, 2022). The distribution of asylum seekers and resettled refugees across NI is unevenly spread, with Belfast's asylum seeker and resettled refugee population by December 2021 being 1,440 (42 per 10,000 people), Antrim and Newtownabbey was 413 (29 per 10,000 people), while Derry City and Strabane was 94 (6 per 10,000 people) and Causeway Coast and Glens was 39 (3 per 10,000 people).

DfC has administered a number of refugee resettlement schemes. Following the violent conflict which erupted in Syria in 2015, the UK government announced that 20,000 Syrian refugees would be resettled in the UK under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Programme (SVPRP). The then First Minister and deputy First Minister signalled to the UK Government willingness to welcome some of the most vulnerable refugees and Syrian families began arriving in NI in December 2015. As of February 2020, 438 Syrian families comprising of 1,814 individuals were resettled in NI under the scheme (DfC, 2020).

The previously-cited report from the NIAC on the experiences of ethnic minority groups in NI praises the partnership working of the public and voluntary sectors (NIAC, 2022). However, it also pointed towards the mixed

experiences of refugees regarding provision of services once they were settled. These are described as patchy in some settings, and the Belfast-centric distribution makes them inaccessible to refugees living in rural areas. Thus, the report urged the NI Executive to reflect on the lessons learned from the SVPRP and to apply them to the settlement schemes for refugees arriving from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

In September 2021, the NI Executive agreed to resettle Afghan refugees fleeing their country following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. By early 2022, the UK government had formally opened the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). The government planned to resettle 5,000 people in the first year of the scheme and up to 20,000 thereafter. Priority was given to people who had assisted the UK's efforts in Afghanistan as well as women and girls at risk, members of ethnic and religious minority groups at risk, and LGBTQI+ people. In December 2022 it was reported in the Assembly that only three families had come to NI under the relevant government schemes - the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy and ACRS.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, hundreds of thousands of families were forced to leave their country and seek safety across Europe and beyond. The UK government created three schemes through which people fleeing the invasion of Ukraine can apply for a visa. The Ukraine Family Scheme issues visas for Ukrainians who have a family member in the UK. The sponsorship scheme, Homes for Ukraine, allows people who live in the UK to sponsor Ukrainians who are fleeing the war. The Ukraine Extension Scheme allows Ukrainian individuals who were in the UK on temporary visas before 18 March 2022 to apply to extend their visa for three years. All schemes have been criticised heavily for long delays in the issuing of visas and for the complexity of the requirements.

NI is the only part of the UK without a refugee integration strategy. The Racial Equality Strategy 2015-25 (OFMDfM, 2015) recommended the development of a refugee integration strategy, and the Executive Office published a draft strategy in November 2021 for public consultation (TEO, 2021). This document identified four high level outcomes and associated actions: refugees and asylum seekers are valued and respected; refugees and asylum seekers are safe and feel secure; refugees and asylum seekers exercise their rights and responsibilities; refugees and asylum are supported to achieve their full potential. As of May 2023, a strategy has not been published.

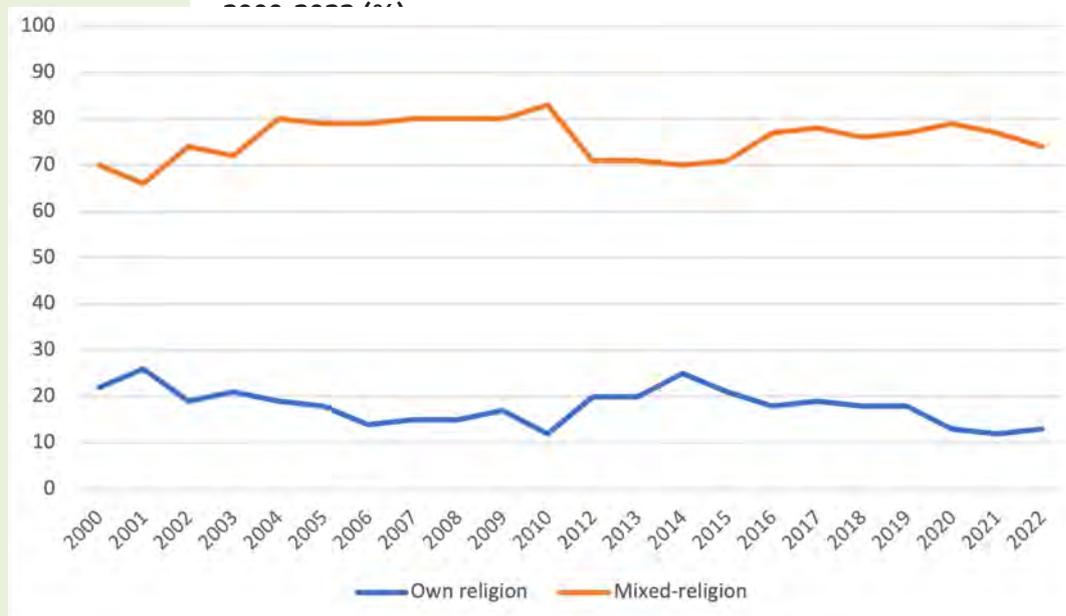
## 4. Sharing and Separation in Housing

Earlier NIPMRs have commented on the overall picture of residential segregation across NI. Previous Census figures (2011) have indicated that the pace of change in levels of segregation has been slow, although there has been an overall decline in the proportion of single-identity electoral wards (those above a threshold of 80% of one religion) over the previous two decades. As of May 2023, the electoral ward-level demographic information gathered in the 2021 Census related to residents' religious and community background had not been released.

Since 2000, NILT has regularly recorded respondents' preferences to living in single-identity or mixed-religion neighbourhoods. Figure 3 shows that the proportion of respondents preferring to live in a neighbourhood with people of

their own religion has fallen from 22 per cent in 2000 to 13 per cent in 2022. Over the same period, preference for living in a mixed-religion neighbourhood has risen slightly from 70 per cent to 74 per cent (ARK, 2023a).

**Figure 3: Preference for mixed-religion or own religion neighbourhood, 2000-2022 (%)**



Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (ARK, 2023a)

The aim of the NI Housing Executive (NIHE)'s Community Cohesion Strategy (2015-2020) was to address the highly segregated nature of social housing (NIHE, 2015). The NIHE is responsible for renting and maintaining around nine per cent of the housing stock in NI. The Fifth NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) provided an overview of the strategy, which included five key themes and associated targets to support the development of good relations within NIHE communities and neighbourhoods. A comprehensive evaluation of the 2015-20 Strategy, which will assess successes and outcomes against the Action Plan, is being undertaken in 2023. With some delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider political environment, it is envisaged that a new Five-Year Strategy for Community Cohesion will be published for public consultation by the last quarter of 2023. In the interim, the NIHE continues to align its community cohesion work with the 2015-20 Strategy.

Led by DfC, the Shared Housing Development Programme has its origins as a headline action within T:BUC. The delivery of shared housing was subsequently included in the Draft Programme for Government 2016-2021 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016) badged as Housing for All, as well as in subsequent political agreements seeking to break the political deadlock in NI, including Fresh Start (Northern Ireland Executive, 2015) and New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) (UK Government and Irish Government, 2020). DfC initially committed to delivering approximately 200 shared social housing units per year as part of the programme. As of March 2023, there are 69 shared schemes being delivered as part of the Housing for All programme. The schemes involve the development of five-year Good Relations Plans, as well as the delivery of bonding programmes for new tenants and bridging programmes which engage new residents with those living within a five-mile radius of a shared housing development. In addition, these Good Relations

Plans include the establishment of advisory groups which draw membership from statutory bodies, the local council's Good Relations Officers and community and voluntary sector organisations. As of May 2023, 33 shared housing developments have been completed, and 44 Good Relations Plans are in development or being delivered. Previous NIPMRs (Wilson, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2018) have reported on ongoing challenges which have faced a minority of the schemes, including the intimidation of residents by paramilitary groups, the flying of flags both inside and in the surrounding areas of the new estates, and graffiti intended to create a threatening environment for potential or new residents.

## 5. Sharing and Separation in Schools

### 5.1 The management of schooling

NI has a complex set of educational structures, with a variety of management types at nursery, primary and post-primary levels. There are seven distinct school types at both primary and post-primary levels, and include schools which are de facto Protestant schools (in the Controlled sector), de facto Catholic Schools (in the Maintained sector) and Integrated Schools, which have been established to ensure that children from both Catholic, Protestant and other backgrounds are schooled together.

The 2022/23 school enrolment figures for funded pre-school education and primary and post-primary schools (including Special Schools) indicate a rise of around 10,000 students since 2017/18, from 344,128 pupils in 2017/18 to 355,968 in 2022/23. This includes a reduction of seven per cent in the number of pupils identified as Protestant, a rise of two per cent in the number of students identified as Catholic and a 33 per cent rise in the combined number of students who are recorded as Other Christian/Non Christian/No Religion/religion not recorded.

It is notable that 25 years after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the vast majority of pupils attend a single-religion school as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of pupils by religion in schools, by school type, 2022/23**

	Protestant	Catholic	Other Christian, Non Christian, No religion, not recorded	Total
Total Nursery schools/classes and reception/voluntary and private pre-school centres (funded places only)	5,705	10,516	6,494	22,715
<b>Primary (Year 1-7)</b>				
Controlled	43,914	6,156	27,451	77,521
Catholic Maintained	643	72,027	4,651	77,321
Other Maintained	252	3,050	416	3,718
Controlled Integrated	1,532	1,260	1,865	4,657
Grant Maintained Integrated	1,809	2,512	2,184	6,505
<b>Total Primary</b>	<b>48,150</b>	<b>85,005</b>	<b>36,567</b>	<b>169,722</b>
<b>Preparatory departments (Year 1-7)</b>				
Controlled			46	80
Voluntary			711	1,397
<b>Total Preparatory departments</b>	<b>490</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>757</b>	<b>1,477</b>
<b>Secondary (non grammar)</b>				
Controlled	22,511	1,498	7,457	31,466
Catholic Maintained	742	37,780	2,302	40,824
Other Maintained			64	64
Controlled Integrated			1,272	1,272
Grant Maintained Integrated	3,714	4,381	2,770	10,865
<b>Total Secondary</b>	<b>29,269</b>	<b>45,456</b>	<b>13,865</b>	<b>88,590</b>
<b>Grammar (Year 8-14)</b>				
Controlled	9,231	1,786	3,697	14,714
Voluntary schools under Catholic management	414	28,168	1,414	29,996
Voluntary schools under other management	11,672	3,223	6,117	21,012
<b>Total Grammar</b>	<b>21,317</b>	<b>33,177</b>	<b>11,228</b>	<b>65,722</b>
<b>Special schools</b>				
Controlled	2,050	2,657	1,756	6,463
Catholic Maintained	11	331	37	379
Other Maintained	26	29	33	88
<b>Total special schools</b>	<b>2,087</b>	<b>3,017</b>	<b>1,826</b>	<b>6,930</b>
<b>Total Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) centres</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>
All funded pre-school, nursery, primary, post-primary, special schools and EOTAS centres	107,024	177,411	70,742	355,177

Source: DoE (2023)

As highlighted in Dimension Three, there continues to be a high level of educational and socio-economic segregation at post-primary level, with the maintenance of grammar schools and academic selection at age 11 years.

## 5.2 Integrated education

The 2021/22 academic year marked the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the first integrated school (Lagan College in Belfast) by a campaigning parent group in 1981. In 1989, the DoE was given an explicit duty as part of the Education Reform Act (1989) to encourage and facilitate integrated education. Currently, around 7.7 per cent of pre-school pupils, 6.1 per cent of primary and nine per cent of post-primary pupils in NI are educated in 70 formally integrated schools (DoE, 2023). As Table 1 indicates, some non-integrated schools also have a mix of pupils from different religious backgrounds, as well as those who do not identify with any religion.

In 2021, Alliance Party MLA Kellie Armstrong brought forward a Private Member's Bill which broadened the definition of integrated education to include educating pupils from different religions, socio-economic backgrounds and abilities together (Early *et al.*, 2023), as well as increasing the scope of the statutory duty. The Act, which passed into law in April 2022, requires the DoE to bring forward a strategy which reflects the new statutory duty to increase the number of integrated school places and to set targets for the number of children being educated in integrated schools in NI.

In July 2022 the then Secretary of State for NI, Brandon Lewis, announced a £1.9m funding package to support the development of integrated education for the 2022-25 period. Funding was distributed to two key organisations supporting the sector: the Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF). NICIE offers advice and support to parents and schools in the ballot process which sees parents vote on whether or not to transform to an integrated school. The IEF raises awareness of the transformation process and the merits of integrated education. In partnership with Ulster University, the IEF delivers a Transforming Education Project, which has produced a series of briefing papers on aspects of the education system in NI to stimulate debate among teachers, educationalists, decision-makers and the wider public. In October 2022, the IEF received a significant corporate donation of £1m from private housing developer Hagan Homes (IEF, 2022a), to support the growth and development of integrated schools in NI. In its 2022-25 Strategic Vision document, launched in June 2022, the IEF set an ambitious target of 100 integrated education schools (from around 70 currently) within three years (IEF, 2022b).

With the support of the integrated education sector and the DoE, a small number of schools seek to transform to integrated status each year. However, one of the future drivers of integrated education may be the challenge of maintaining a duplicated system, including budgetary constraints, transport and the distribution of places. A key aim of area planning is to establish a network of viable schools of the right type, right size, and located in the right place (Education Authority, 2019). In September 2021, four primary schools began the new school year as integrated. Among these was the first Catholic primary school (in the small coastal town of Glenarm) which formally changed its status to integrated, following a three-year process. This included a high level of public involvement facilitated through a process of Community Conversations (Bates and O'Connor Bones, 2021).

### 5.3 Shared Education

As well as a growth in integrated education, the past two decades have seen a growth in Shared Education, which supports the development of collaborative school partnerships and the sharing of space, buildings and lessons across school campuses. This growth has been encouraged by the introduction of the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 which provided legislative provision and a duty on both the EA and the DoE to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education. In this context, this includes sharing education across schools and pupils of different religious beliefs, as well as differing levels of socio-economic deprivation. Shared education aims to facilitate sustained interaction between pupils from different groups, harnessing the benefits of contact for improving intergroup attitudes while enabling schools to retain their religious character (Gallagher, 2016). Investment for Shared Education has come from not just the NI Executive, but also from The Atlantic Philanthropies and the EU.

In accordance with the 2016 Act, the DE prepares a biennial report for the Assembly to detail progress on advancing Shared Education (DoE, 2018; 2020; 2022). These reports provide detail on levels of participation and provide some high-level assessment of the extent to which aims have been achieved. There are a variety of views on the Shared Education policy. Some critics have suggested it is largely a gesture towards social cohesion which the churches and the political parties can agree to, but will not ultimately have significant impact in terms of addressing the institutional mechanisms that maintain community division (Roulston and Hansson, 2018). Others argue that Shared Education has the potential to create spaces for building relations between pupils, although more clarity at a policy level is needed as many meanings can be attached to Shared Education. For example, Donnelly and Burns (2020) found that teachers variously referred to Shared Education as either a curricular initiative whereby they were obligated to teach about the causes of conflict and group difference, or as a simple contact endeavour whereby the focus was on building pupil relationships on the basis of what they had in common.

### 5.4 Newcomer pupils

In the past two decades, the number of pupils enrolled in Irish medium education (including nursery and pre-school, primary and post-primary) has risen from 1,602 pupils in 2001/02 to 7,310 pupils in 2022/23 (DoE, 2023). In the past decade (2011-21), the number of newcomer pupils has risen by 112 per cent from 8,674 in 2011/12 to 19,471 in 2022/23. DoE has defined a newcomer pupil as a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher (*ibid.*). An Intercultural Education Service sits within the EA and provides advice, guidance and support to schools, families and other education support services to ensure equality of access and full inclusion and integration for those from differing cultural backgrounds. This includes an Asylum Seekers and Refugees Support Team, a Traveller Education Support Service, and most recently, providing support for Ukrainian Newcomer pupils.

## 6 Sharing Public Space

Previous NIPMRs have recorded the ways in which forms of cultural expression have often raised community tensions to the extent that they directly impact on general political discourse. The period covered by this report would once again suggest that this remains largely the case. Notwithstanding the unique circumstances brought on by COVID-19 and the restrictions that this brought to everyday life, the challenge for policy makers remains that of finding a way out of the culture wars that continue to affect society in NI.

### 6.1 Flags

Perhaps the best place to begin looking at the issue of flag-flying in NI is to highlight the apparent fate which has befallen the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT). Established in June 2016, the Commission had been given a remit to examine the issue of flags and emblems, as well as wider matters relating to identity, culture and tradition in NI. Initially it was meant to produce a report within 18 months and to publish its findings by December 2017. This proved to be an overly ambitious target and the deadline passed without any sort of publication from the Commission. Not surprisingly this began to raise questions about its work as well as the costs involved (Gray *et al.*, 2018).

A further difficulty that the FICT had to face was that it was forced to operate within a political vacuum given the collapse of the devolved institutions in January 2017. This gave rise to suggestions from some politicians that the Commission should be suspended in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly. Amidst the ongoing political stalemate, the FICT continued on with its work. With the restoration of the Executive and Assembly in early 2020 there were renewed expectations that a final report would soon appear. This proved not to be the case and it was not until December 2021 that it did so (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, 2021). In justifying this further delay the FICT made clear that the agreement on which the devolved institutions had been restored – New Decade, New Approach - contained elements that were directly relevant to the FICT and required further consideration.

As for the report itself, it was undoubtedly a substantial piece of work with 17 chapters and covering some 178 pages. Recommendations could only be made when consensus was reached. Given the diverse backgrounds of the FICT members, it was always going to be difficult for a consensus to be found on many of the issues that were considered. The text indicates points of difference between FICT members and where challenges remain (*ibid.*, 3).

Not surprisingly, when the report finally appeared on 1 December 2021, it received a mixed response. Both the then First Minister (Paul Givan) and deputy First Minister (Michelle O'Neill) acknowledged the significance of the report. They also announced that an already established working group led by the two junior ministers within TEO - Gary Middleton of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Declan Kearney of Sinn Féin (SF) - would consider how matters raised by the report could be developed. However, other parties in the Assembly were critical of the lack of an action plan to implement the 44 proposed recommendations. For instance, the Alliance Party leader and then Justice Minister, Naomi Long told Radio Ulster:

*I think it is scandalous that £800,000 was spent on a report that we have had to wait almost two years to see... We were told it would be published with an implementation plan (News Letter, 1 December 2021).*

Any further progress on the report was stymied by the deterioration in the political situation and the collapse of the institutions in February 2022.

## 6.2 Bonfires

In the period covered since this report, apart from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some bonfires have been a source of tension and dispute. Issues include where they are sited and built; the associated risk to public safety and the question of liability and responsibility for any of the costs or damage that may arise; the placing of hazardous waste such as tyres on them; and finally, the sectarian element of some bonfires with the burning of effigies, flags or other elements.

In 2019, there had been some promising signs and most of the bonfires lit across NI on the eve of the Twelfth of July passed off without serious incident. The NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) responded to 34 bonfire-related calls, representing a 40 per cent decrease on the number of bonfire incidents attended during the same period in 2018 (NIFRS, 2018). Of the estimated 80 to 100 bonfires in Belfast, only one emerged as posing a potential flashpoint. Located on the car park at Avoniel Leisure Centre, the bonfire had been built without permission on property belonging to Belfast City Council. This prompted the Council, citing fears over health and safety, to try to remove the structure. In turn this provoked a furious response from residents and community representatives in the locality with claims that the move was being prompted by Sinn Féin, then the party with the largest representation on the Council (The Guardian, 12 July 2019).

When the Council then took steps to hire independent contractors to remove the bonfire, a barricade was formed at the entrance of the car park. This was followed by reports that men involved with the barricade had threatened staff from entering the Leisure Centre, resulting in its temporary closure (BBC NI, 7 July 2019). The situation escalated further when personal details relating to the private contractors that were hired to clear the site were leaked, and graffiti containing threats against them appeared around the Leisure Centre. The PSNI warned of a risk of serious violence if the removal went ahead due to suspected involvement of the loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). As a result, the Council abandoned its efforts to remove the bonfire (BBC NI, 12 July 2019).

Difficulties also arose in other areas that summer. In August, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), along with the NIHE, engaged contractors to dismantle a republican bonfire in the New Lodge area of North Belfast. When attempts were made to do so, violence broke out between local youths and PSNI officers deployed to ensure the safety of the contractors. As the situation deteriorated, the police were forced to withdraw after a number of officers were injured. As a follow up, the NIHE advised residents of the nearby flats to leave their homes as it was judged that the bonfire was too close to ensure their safety (Belfast Telegraph, 8 August 2019).

Unique circumstances were then to have a major impact on the situation in 2020. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, health restrictions were in still in place as the summer began. These regulations stipulated that no more than 30 people were allowed to meet outdoors whilst also adhering to social distancing guidelines. This advice was mostly adhered to, although in some areas people congregated at bonfire sites. Media reports indicated that this was related to recent controversy about the funeral of Bobby Storey (see Dimension Two) (Belfast Telegraph, 12 July 2020). There were, however, no serious incidents, although community tensions were increased at interface areas in North Belfast (The Journal, 12 July 2020).

Most restrictions eased in the summer of 2021, and 250 bonfires were lit across NI. The NIFS attended 81 bonfire-related incidents (BBC NI, 12 July 2021). The most contentious bonfire was constructed in North Belfast at the Adam Street interface close to the unionist Tiger's Bay area and the nationalist New Lodge on land belonging to DfI (BBC NI, 2021b). The then Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, employed contractors to remove the bonfire. However, this was halted by a PSNI decision not to provide protection for the contractors on the grounds that it ran the risk of creating further disorder (BBC NI, 9 July 2021). This resulted in Nichola Mallon, and the then Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, initiating a judicial review aimed at forcing the police to act (Irish Times, 11 July 2021). The judicial review failed, and the bonfire proceeded without major incident.

Bonfires continued to be an issue for local councils. In 2021, the Sinn Féin group on Belfast City Council introduced new proposals, supported by SDLP councillors, relating to the construction of bonfires on public land. This set out a plan to create an application process for bonfires which needed to be brought forward by what was described as a constituted organisation. Other measures included requirements for completion of a risk assessment, obtaining public liability insurance, and providing details of consultation with local residents, as well as submitting an event management plan and a site cleansing plan (Irish News, 4 October 2021). Initially the proposal made some progress but was eventually defeated at a full meeting of the Council. Instead, an amendment proposed by the Alliance Party was passed that called for a review of the 2021 bonfire season, a request to the NI Executive for a detailed plan of action around a range of cultural issues like bonfires, and the immediate release of the FICT report (*ibid.*)

The summer of 2021 also saw a critical analysis of the environmental damage caused by the emissions from the number of bonfires – largely constructed from wooden pallets – lit across Northern Ireland that summer. In particular, Tomlinson (2021) estimated that these produced 50,456 tons of carbon dioxide which equated to the average emissions of 5,000 people. Thus, given the scale of the current climate emergency and the associated risks to public health he posed the question as to whether the bonfires could be justified, whilst voicing his regret that the political consensus to do so was completely absent.

In 2022, some familiar issues emerged, even though many local councils had been working alongside other agencies to develop programmes and schemes seeking to address the most controversial elements from the bonfire season. These include initiatives to stop the burning of toxic waste such as old tyres, the lighting of beacons rather the traditional bonfires and the creation of a more rounded community event. The best example of this was the continuation of Summer Community Diversionary Festivals Programme run

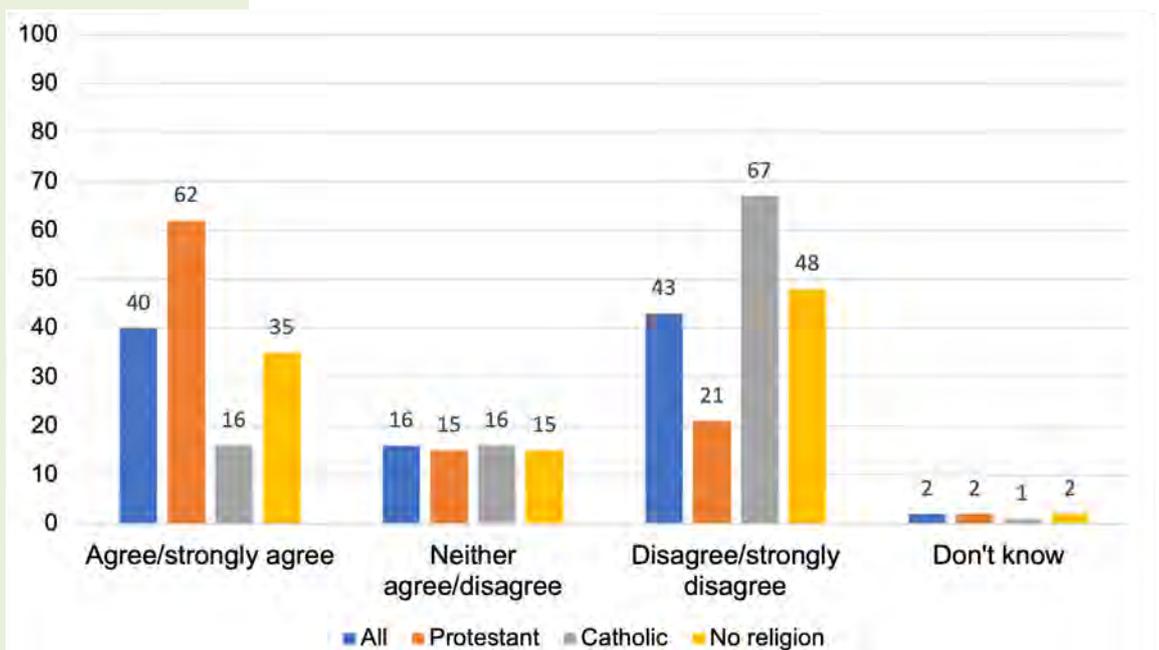
by Belfast City Council and scheduled to run over July and August. For 2022, £500,000 was allocated to a number of community groups in both unionist and nationalist areas of the city (Belfast City Council, 2022).

A tragedy occurred on 9 July 2022 with the death of John Steele, who had fallen from a bonfire he had been helping to build in the Antiville area in the town of Larne, County Antrim (Irish Times, 16 July 2022). In the days that followed, attention switched elsewhere to the burning of flags, emblems and effigies on a number of bonfires (BBC NI, 2022a). The incident which attracted the most coverage was a bonfire in Carrickfergus on which effigies of Naomi Long (Leader of the Alliance Party), Michelle O’Neill (Sinn Féin, deputy First Minister) and Mary Lou McDonald (President of Sinn Féin) were burned (RTE, 13 July 2022). These actions were criticised, including by the leader of the DUP Jeffrey Donaldson, who commented:

*Displaying effigies of serving political leaders with the inference that they should be hung for their political views is wrong, it is unjustifiable, it is indefensible* (BBC NI, 14 July 2022).

These events and debates highlight the dilemma faced by policymakers and others tasked with finding a way forward. These challenges are also apparent in public attitudes on the topic, as measured by NILT in 2022. As can be seen in Figure 5, 40 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural celebration, whilst a similar proportion (43%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. However, opinion is split largely along religious/community background lines, with 62 per cent of Protestant respondents supporting the idea that bonfires were a legitimate form of cultural celebration and only 21 per cent disagreeing with this. For Catholic respondents, the figures are 16 per cent and 67 per cent respectively), whilst for those with no religion, opinion is less polarised (35% and 48% respectively).

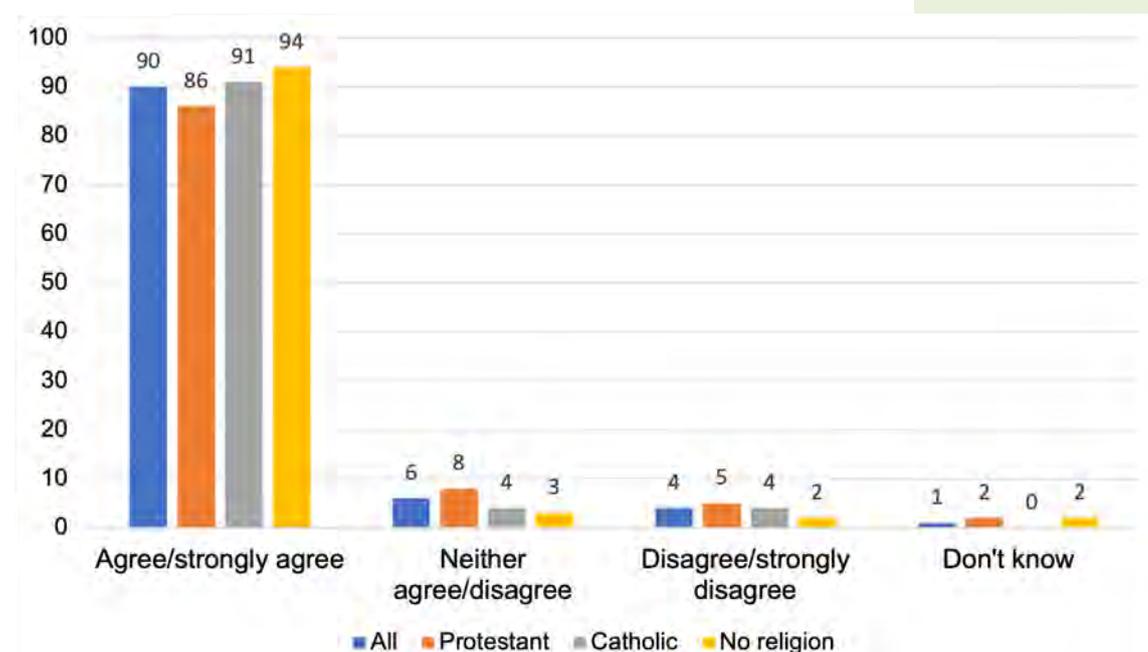
**Figure 5: Are bonfires a legitimate form of cultural celebration?, 2022**



Source: 2022 NILT, (ARK, 2023b)

In addition, as shown in Figure 6, there was extensive support (90%) for the idea that bonfire organisers should be held to account if there is property damage or injuries as a result of their bonfires, with only four per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. In contrast to the question concerning the legitimacy of bonfires as a form of cultural celebration, there was little difference between groups.

**Figure 6: Bonfire organisers should be held to account if there is property damage or injuries as a result of their bonfires, 2022**



Source: 2022 NILT, (ARK, 2023b)

## 6.3 Parades

The notable easing of tensions around the issues of parades noted back in the fifth NIPMR (Gray et al., 2018) has largely continued. While the number of parades in 2020-21 was lower than in previous years, there was little change in the number of parades deemed sensitive (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Parades in Northern Ireland**

	Total notifications	Protestant, unionist, loyalist	Catholic, republican, nationalist notifications	'Other' notifications	Deemed sensitive'	Restrictions Applied
<b>2017-18</b>	4,499	2,435	126	1,938	190	174
<b>2018-19</b>	4,229	2,523	107	1,599	183	135
<b>2019-20</b>	3,793	2,312	99	1,382	186	133
<b>2020-21</b>	1,113	690	30	393	59	19
<b>2021-22</b>	2,488	1,846	42	600	141	120

Source: Parades Commission (2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022)

Most parades in the summer of 2019 passed without major disturbance. However, controversy arose regarding a number of different nationalist/republican parades, including in August 2019 when complaints arose over the restrictions applied by the Parades Commission to an anti-Internment parade in Belfast (Irish News, 9 August 2019). Twelfth of July parades in 2020 did not take place due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The easing of restrictions later in the summer meant that some parades did take place. Of these, 39 were deemed sensitive by the Parades Commission.

The continuance of some COVID-19 restrictions in the summer of 2021 resulted in a more localised approach to parades, and the cancellation of large demonstrations. In July, the PSNI deployed 2,000 officers for the parades in the Ardoyne area in Belfast and in the city centre around St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street (Irish News, 12 July 2021). Traditional parades resumed in 2022 with no major controversies.

The progress made over the past 25 years with regard to contentious parades is noteworthy, with examples of resolution being achieved through local engagement and agreement. This is reflected in data from the 2022 NILT survey. Four out of ten respondents (38%) agreed or strongly agreed that people are more tolerant of parades than they used to be, compared to 29 per cent thinking this in 2015. There was also strong support for the idea that parades should only be allowed if the organisers and local residents agree to the arrangements: 70 per cent in 2015 and 74 per cent in 2022.

## 7. Arts and Sports

### 7.1 The arts

Like many other areas of the economy and society, the arts sector was badly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (McCallion, 2020). In 2021, the results of a survey of 100 organisations demonstrated the negative impact of the pandemic on the arts sector (Arts Council of Northern Ireland [ACNI], 2021). For example,

- Total income fell by nine per cent (£4.5m) compared to 2019/20. Earned income fell by £16m (69%) compared to 2019/20. This loss was offset, to an extent, by increases in income from public sources, including the ACNI's Emergency Funding Programme and contributed sources, both of which increased by 22 per cent.
- There was a 99 per cent reduction in income generated in 2020-21 from ticket sales compared to 2019/20.
- 4,800 people were employed by core arts organisations (those in receipt of Annual Funding from the ACNI). Overall, this represented a 25 per cent reduction compared with 2019/20, including a 27 per cent decline in contract/freelance staff and a 0 per cent reduction in permanent staff.

In March 2020, the Minister for Communities announced £1m of emergency funding for artists and arts organisations. This was followed with more announcements of funding totalling over £4m. In July 2020, the UK Government announced a rescue package of £1.57bn for arts and culture, of which £33m was apportioned to NI. Further funding was made available from DfC (£29m) in November 2020. However, the immediate future for the arts sector in Northern Ireland remains challenging and in April 2023 the

ACNI warned that looming budget cuts meant that the amount of annual funding it could provide was likely to be cut by 10% (BBC NI, 8 April 2023). Undoubtedly, this is a worrying prospect for many groups and organisations. In addition, it also poses significant risks for social cohesion given the role of the arts in expressing identities, connecting communities, and sharing people's stories.

A prime example of this type of work at community level came in July 2022 when the ACNI was able to make awards of over £51,000 to support nine projects. The nature of each project varied but all sought to allow people to engage with the arts through creative, community-based projects (ACNI, 2022). At this stage it is unclear what may happen to such initiatives if the financial resources are not there to allow them to take place.

In spite of these difficulties, some positive signs can be found with NI continuing to act as an attractive base for television and film production. Northern Ireland Screen is supported by a number of government departments to promote sustainable film, animation and television industries. Among its responsibilities are the administration of Lottery funding for the film industry in NI, and the running of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. Early in 2022 there were positive reports that this would lead to an expansion of the Belfast Harbour Studio (BBC NI, 26 March 2022). On top of that has come the remarkable success in recent years of the Channel 4 (C4) comedy series *Derry Girls*. First aired back in 2018, the programme charting the teenage life of four teenage girls in Derry/Londonderry at the end of the 1990s achieved not only critical success but attracted a large audience for C4 and picked up numerous awards. After only a third series the show ended its run in 2022, but memories of Erin, Clare, Orla and Michelle plus a wee English fella are likely to remain.

## 7.2 Sport

Previous NIPMRs have highlighted the way in which sport can bring people together, whilst also highlighting the divisions within NI society. On its own, sport cannot solve such problems but it is seen as having the potential to contribute to good relations. An example of this is the long-standing project Sport Uniting Communities, first launched back in 2015. Building on existing partnerships, the three main sporting bodies in NI – Ulster Rugby, the Irish Football Association (IFA) and Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) – with the support of the NI Executive, sought to work together across the areas of social inclusion, education, health and community development. This was further developed in 2018 with the launch of a four-year Sport Uniting Communities/Joint Peace IV Programme. In addition to a grant of almost €1.8 million, there was matched support from TEO and the Department of Rural and Community Development in the Republic of Ireland.

Sport has not been without controversy. Many players and teams have been criticised for singing the song *Celtic Symphony* by the group *The Wolfe Tones*, who since their formation in the early 1970s have established themselves as the most well-known Irish rebel folk music band. The song itself has lyrics which includes the words *oh ah up the Ra* and its singing was widely seen as expressing support for the Provisional IRA's campaign during the NI Troubles. In 2019 the Belfast boxer Michael Conlon faced criticism when these lyrics were played before one of his fights in New York (Irish News, 10 May 2019). The issue flared up again when social media footage showed members of the Armagh camogie team singing the lyrics (BBC NI, 7 December 2020) and

when an Irish League soccer player was forced to leave his club (Larne) after a picture emerged of him attending a concert wearing a t-shirt with the slogan printed on it (Belfast Telegraph, 15 August 2022).

The NI soccer team had to deal with two separate incidents. One involved a player caught making a sectarian remark to a member of the public, and the other concerned historical footage which emerged of the player using the *oh ah, up the Ra* slogan when he was a teenager (Irish Times, 1 October 2022). In October 2022, the Football Association of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland women's team manager apologised after film emerged of the team singing the chant following their World Cup play-off win (BBC NI, 12 October 2022). Controversy over the song rumbled on and in early 2023 Leinster Rugby apologised after the song was played over the public address system at one of the club's home games (Irish Times, 1 January 2023).

The task of dealing with incidents of sectarianism off the field of play is something that the IFA have always had to contend with. On the international stage the problem of sectarian singing and chants has been virtually eliminated at all matches, especially those which attract the most attention involving the senior international men's team. The success of the Football for All strategy established in the early 2000s has been maintained and the behaviour of fans at Northern Ireland matches in both home and away fixtures continues to draw praise (Glasgow Evening Times, 31 August 2019). Unfortunately, at the domestic level problems still can arise at NI Premier League matches. The last few seasons have seen isolated incidents and suggest that more work still needs to be done (Irish News, 19 December 2020).

The challenges faced by sport in the context of Northern Ireland have also been brought to the fore with the problems faced in recent times by the formation of a club in East Belfast to play and promote Gaelic games. In May 2020 changing demographics led a group of enthusiasts to come together to establish East Belfast GAA Club, which was the first such club in that part of Belfast for a generation. From the outset the club set out its intentions to attract members from all backgrounds in the area. The club's colours were to be a neutral yellow and black with its crest featuring the red hand, shamrock, thistle and the iconic image from the locality namely the cranes at the Harland Wolfe shipyard as well as the word *together* in Irish, Ulster Scots and English. However, in the club's short existence it has had to deal with a series of incidents and security alerts which continue to impact on its activities (BBC NI, 24 May 2023),

Wider issues around sport have also been caught up in the ongoing political stalemate in NI. A notable example is the ongoing debate about the redevelopment of Casement Park, in west Belfast, into the major venue for Gaelic games in Ulster. This dates back over 15 years when plans were first announced to build a shared stadium with over 40,000 seats for soccer, rugby and Gaelic games on land at the former Maze Prison site (Irish News, 28 July 2021). This proposal was shelved in favour of the three sports redeveloping their own existing stadia at Windsor Park, Ravenhill and Casement Park respectively with a package of financial support from the NI Executive. Whilst the work at Windsor Park and Ravenhill progressed relatively smoothly, it was to be a different story with Casement Park. The original plan was to turn the existing ground into a modern, all-seater stadium with a capacity of 38,000 at a cost of £77m – with £15m coming

from the GAA and the remaining £62m from the Executive. However, local residents in the area immediately surrounding Casement Park raised objections and towards the end of 2014 they succeeded in having the original planning approval overturned in the High Court. Following a new planning application in 2017, a new business case was submitted to DfC with an estimated cost of £110m. However, nothing progressed due to the collapse of the devolved institutions.

The NDNA document in January 2020 contained a commitment to advance with plans to complete both the regional and sub regional stadia programmes, including Casement Park. In 2020 Nichola Mallon, then Infrastructure Minister, gave her approval for work on the stadium. While planning permission was granted in 2021, that decision was again subject to a legal challenge by local residents. This was not successful, but wider political events once again intervened. For some time, the DUP had expressed concern about the rising cost of the project, heightened further by the GAA declaring that it would not increase its contribution. To add to these difficulties, NI lacked a functioning government due to the collapse of the Executive in February 2022. Thus, if and when the Executive is restored it is likely that the issues surrounding the re-development of Casement Park will be yet another issue to be addressed.

## 8. Participation in Public Life

### 8.1 Women in politics

Whilst there is still some way to go, women's political participation has improved dramatically since the devolved institutions were established in 1998. At that time, out of 18 MPs elected to Westminster for NI none were women; 14 per cent of local government representatives were women; none of the three Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were women; and for the first elections to the NI Assembly, 13 were women. Since the fifth NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) there have been four significant elections: a European Parliament election in May 2019, a Westminster General election in December 2019, a NI Assembly election in May 2022, and a local government election in 2023.

A Westminster by-election in May 2018, called following Sinn Féin's Barry McElduff resignation, resulted in his replacement by party colleague Orfhlaith Begley. Ms Begley held her seat in the 2019 Westminster General Election in 2019, as did SDLP's Claire Hanna and Sinn Féin's Michelle Gildernew. Carla Lockhart entered Westminster for the first time, holding the DUP seat previously held by David Simpson in Upper Bann. Overall, one quarter of candidates put forward for the 18 NI constituencies in the Westminster elections were female, a similar proportion to the 2015 General Election (Galligan, 2020). With only four of the elected 18 MPs being female, these election results highlight that there was still some significant way to go to ensure women's representation in the UK parliamentary system. The final election to the European Parliament before the UK exited the European Union was held in May 2019. For the first time, women were elected to all three seats: Martina Anderson (Sinn Féin), Diane Dodds (DUP) and Naomi Long (Alliance Party).

The re-establishment of devolution in 2020 saw two female politicians hold the most senior positions in the Executive – the First Minister (Arlene Foster,

DUP) and deputy First Minister (Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Féin). Going in to the NI Assembly Election in May 2022, two of the main political parties (Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party) were led by women. Until 2021, the DUP had been led by Arlene Foster, but on her resignation after an internal party no-confidence vote, she was replaced by Edwin Poots. There was a greater number of women candidates than in previous elections: 56 per cent of Sinn Féin candidates, 50 per cent for Alliance Party, and 45 per cent for SDLP, while a third of the UUP and a quarter of DUP candidates were women. Following the 2022 Assembly elections, 32 of the 90 newly elected MLAs were women, representing an increase of 5 MLAs from the 2017 elections.

In the 2023 local government elections, only 32 per cent of candidates were women. This is a marginal increase on the 28 per cent of women who stood as candidates in 2019. Thirty one per cent of those elected were women compared to 26 per cent in 2019. The proportion of women elected is below the average share of council seats held by women in England (34%) and Wales (36%) and on a par with Scotland (26 per cent) (Fawcett Society, 2023).

An increasingly prevalent issue for women's political representation centres on the widespread harassment of politicians, particularly with the rise of the use of social media by candidates and elected representatives as a tool for engagement with the public. Personal attacks on female political party candidates running for elections were reported in the media. Furthermore, Hannah Kenny (People before Profit) was physically attacked and was subject to verbal abuse of a misogynistic and sectarian nature while canvassing for the NI Assembly election in April 2022 (BBC NI, 30 April 2022). In June 2022, then Justice Minister, Naomi Long proposed a forum to tackle online abuse of politicians, citing her growing concerns at the rise in the use of intimidation and aggressive behaviour during the May 2022 Assembly elections, and identifying harassment of female politicians as a particular issue (BBC NI, 1 June 2022).

The Alliance Party's Kellie Armstrong (who topped the polls in the Strangford constituency) spoke publicly of the 2022 Assembly election campaign being particularly vicious for women candidates, and her personal experience of online bullying and being sent images of aborted fetuses, which was particularly upsetting given her experience of suffering multiple miscarriages (BBC NI, 10 May 2022). Other female candidates, including Sorcha Eastwood (Alliance), Diane Forsythe (DUP) and Cara Hunter (SDLP) spoke publicly about the online circulation of fake or false videos, sexually violent and threatening abuse and comments on their physical appearance. The PSNI confirmed they were investigating a number of complaints made about the online abuse of female candidates during the May 2022 elections. This is not a new phenomenon. The DUP MP Carla Lockhart has spoken out for several years of her experience of online personal abuse, including during a Westminster parliamentary debate in April 2021 (Belfast Telegraph, 9 May 2022).

In 1998, 32 per cent of public appointments in NI were held by women. A public appointment is generally an appointment, made by a government minister, to the board of a public body. Public Bodies are not part of

government departments, but carry out their functions, to differing extents, at arm's length from their sponsoring department. The Annual Report of Public Appointments in NI (TEO, 2022) indicates that in 2018/19 (the latest figures available) 42 per cent were held by women, due in part to the setting of gender equality targets related to public appointments. Furthermore, 28 per cent of chair positions were held by women.

## 8.2 LGBTQI+ rights and visibility

At the time of publication of the 2018 NIPMR (Gray *et al.*, 2018) NI remained the only part of the UK which had not legalised same-sex marriage. As detailed in Dimension Three, same-sex marriage was legislated for in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act. The change in the law was the culmination of a long-standing campaign to align legislation in NI with the rest of the UK (The Guardian, 22 October 2019). On the day that same-sex marriage was legalised, Labour MP Conor McGinn, who had introduced the amendment on same-sex marriage, said:

*Everyone who values equality, love and respect can celebrate today. It's a good day for Northern Ireland, an important day for citizens' rights across these islands and an exciting day for same-sex couples who can now register to marry (BBC NI, 13 January 2020).*

Patrick Corrigan from Amnesty International NI told the news outlet, it was a historic day for equality and human rights in NI (*ibid.*).

In September 2020, weddings for same-sex couples were legalised within religious settings and religious bodies granted legal permission to provide same-sex weddings (Amnesty NI, 2020).

As highlighted in Dimension Three, following NI Executive approval on 24 September 2020, work began within DfC on the development of the four distinct Social Inclusion Strategies on Sexual Orientation, Disability, Anti-Poverty and Gender Equality. In October 2020, an expert panel to provide an evidence review to underpin the proposed Sexual Orientation Strategy was appointed. The report of the panel was published in March 2021 (DfC, 2021), which recommended that the title of any strategy should be the LGBTQI+ Strategy. The evidence review drew attention to the need for the rights of LGBTQI+ people to be fully protected in law. It highlighted relevant health inequalities, as well as the challenges faced by transgender people in accessing healthcare services to transition. There was also a focus on the need to ensure that educational settings were inclusive and recognised diversity in identity and sexuality. The panel proposed that in addition to an annual review of progress, an implementation fund should be established.

An ongoing source of controversy had been the use of conversion therapy which aims to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. A ban on this therapy was debated in the NI Assembly in April 2021, following a motion put forward by Ulster Unionist Party MLAs Doug Beattie and John Stewart (Irish News, 20 April 2021). Although the vote was non-binding, it was passed by 59 votes to 24. The then Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, signalled her intent to bring forward legislation. As of May 2023, this has not been progressed.

NI had been out of step with the rest of the UK in not permitting gay or bisexual men to donate blood three months after their last sexual activity. This was reversed in August 2021, when the then Health Minister, Robin Swann, announced a change in the rules (BBC NI, 12 August 2021). This marks the second significant change on the rules of blood donation, following the previous decision taken in 2016 by the then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, to end a lifetime ban on gay men donating blood, which had been first introduced across the UK in the 1980s (AgendaNI, 2020).

There has been increasing evidence of the change in public opinion in NI towards acceptance of LGBTQI+ rights (Carr *et al.*, 2015; BBC and ARK, 2017; McAlister and Neill, 2019). Political attitudes have also shifted. In July 2021 PinkNews hosted an online event on LGBTQI+ rights which was attended by representatives from the six main political parties. During the discussion, the DUP's deputy leader, Paula Bradley, apologised for remarks made by some of her party colleagues during the previous 50 years regarding the LGBTQI+ community (BBC NI, 1 July 2021). John O'Doherty (Director of the Rainbow Project) welcomed the apology saying that he hoped that these comments represented the first step towards significant change within the DUP (Rainbow Project, 2021). However, Paula Bradley's comments were challenged by the DUP MLA for South Down, Jim Wells, who said that he did not believe that Ms Bradley was speaking for the whole party (BBC NI, 2 July 2021).

In 2017, Sinn Féin and Alliance Belfast City Councillors proposed the commissioning of a stained glass window in Belfast City Hall to commemorate the contribution of LGBTQI+ citizens to public life in Belfast. In May 2022, it was announced that this would be installed and dedicated to the LGBTQI+ community in the city (Belfast Live, 27 May 2022).

Much of the attitudinal and policy change was due to the work of civil society organisations in NI. During Belfast Pride in 2019, the Rainbow Pride flag was flown on Belfast City Hall, which the then Lord Mayor John Finucane observed as a hugely significant moment (BBC NI, 3 August 2019). Over 60,000 people, including the then Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, took part in the parade. Leading up to the event BBC NI had distanced itself from the march because the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) party had raised concerns that the news outlet's involvement in this event showed bias and undermines its impartiality as it endorses same-sex marriage (The Guardian, 3 August 2019). However, BBC NI's director declared that the BBC was not backing Belfast Pride in a formal capacity, and employees of the broadcaster participated in the celebration as private individuals. Pride returned to Belfast's streets in July 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increased number of groups registered to take part in the event, including Ulster Rugby and the Ulster GAA participating for the first time (BBC NI, 30 July 2022). The first Trans Pride parade in NI took place in Belfast in 2019. The festival's theme was celebrating gender diversity and included an art exhibition, discussions, and a parade in Belfast city centre.

The inclusion and visibility of LGBTQI+ identities with regard to the Peace Process in NI have also begun to attract research attention. A major research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2015 explored LGBTQ visions of peace in a society emerging from conflict. Based on the premise that the creation of visions of peace had been dominated by the powerful groups that brokered the peace, the project worked with NGOs to facilitate the participation of LGBTQ people in developing alternative visions of peace locating them as agents of social change in NI (Ashe *et al.*, 2018).

## 9. Conclusions

While the past 25 years have seen increasing population diversity in NI, this is not reflected in public and political spheres. Nevertheless, ideas about inclusion and social cohesion have moved beyond Protestant and Catholic particularly with regard to the inclusion of minority ethnic groups and LGBTQI+ people. There is some pessimism relating to community relations, and in particular, the proportion of people, including young people, who believe that relations between Catholics and Protestants are better than five years ago has fallen.

There are examples of compromise and agreement, such as those relating to parades. However, in recent years bonfires have become more contentious. As discussed in the other dimensions in this report, the lack of functioning institutions in NI for much of the period has negatively impacted on policy development and the ability to progress policy relating to these issues. This has been the case with the strategic review of T:BUC, the publication of a number of social inclusion strategies, and a planned refugee integration strategy.

Civil society plays an active and important role in wider peacebuilding and holding government to account and there are examples of organisations working towards transformation. However, there are concerns about the ability of the sector to do this in the absence of political institutions and in the face of budgetary cuts.

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# Glossary

## Dimensions One, Two, Three, Four

ACNI	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
ACRS	Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme
AHC	After Housing Costs
BHC	Before Housing Costs
BIC	British-Irish Council
BIPA	British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly
BLM	Black Lives Matter
C4	Channel Four
CEA	Common Entrance Assessment
CJINI	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
CJRS	Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
CRC	Community Relations Council
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DfC	Department for Communities
DfE	Department for the Economy
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DoJ	Department of Justice
DPP	Director of Public Prosecutions
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EA	Education Authority
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECNI	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
FICT	(Commission on) Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GB	Great Britain
GDHI	Gross Disposable Household Income
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHQ12	12-item General Health Questionnaire
GVA	Gross Value Added
HET	Historical Enquiries Team
HMRC	His Majesty's Revenue and Customs
ICP	Independent Commission on Policing
IFA	Irish Football Association
IFI	International Fund for Ireland
IEF	Integrated Education Fund
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IRC	Independent Reporting Commission
ISC	Intelligence and Security Committee
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex, plus other sexual and gender identities
LHA	Local Housing Allowance
LIB	Legacy Investigation Branch
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NDNA	New Decade, New Approach

NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAC	Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICIE	(Northern Ireland) Council for Integrated Education
NICVA	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
NIFRS	Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NILT	Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NIPB	Northern Ireland Policing Board
NIPMR	Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report
NISA	Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (Survey)
NISCS	Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey
NISCTS	Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFMDFM	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
ONS	Office for National Statistics
OPONI	Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
PfG	Programme for Government
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
POC	Petition of Concern
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
QUB	Queen's University Belfast
RHI	Renewable Heat Incentive
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
REU	Rest of the European Union
ROW	Rest of the World
SAER	Summary of Annual Examination Results
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SEUPB	Special EU Programmes Body
SVPRP	Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Programme
TA	Terrorism Act
T:BUC	Together: Building a United Community
TEO	The Executive Office
TIE	Total Identifiable Expenditure
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
UUEPC	Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
(WGUR)	Working Group on Unification Referendums
YLT	Young Life and Times









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