

groups. DR efforts to control communities and institute their own ‘policing’ through extortion, intimidation and paramilitary style assaults make any co-operation with the security services even less likely,¹⁸ and there appears to be little prospect of this improving.

17. Given the difficulty of building direct links with communities, MI5 are instead focussing on *** in reviewing HMG’s strategic approach to tackling Northern Ireland-related terrorism. This review will co-ordinate contributions across a broader range of government departments, and will focus on applying lessons learnt from the CONTEST Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

18. As a general approach to tackling terrorism, it is essential that non-national security departments are able to intervene if they spot signs of individuals beginning to become involved with terrorist groups, and to provide positive interventions to steer them away from the groups before their involvement becomes serious enough to fall under the remit of the security services.¹⁹ For example, local health and education services tend to be linked into their local communities and would be in a better position to spot warning signs (i.e. individuals demonstrating interest in terrorist groups). In the Northern Ireland context, we therefore consider that non-national security departments should be able to engage directly with individuals to steer them away before they become fully involved in DR groups.

19. This is not a new idea. In 2013, MI5 told the Committee that “*one of the benefits of the CONTEST strategy is that it was able to bring together the security response with the social policy response to a particular extremist sort of problem*”. However, at the time the devolution of powers in Northern Ireland had meant that it was “*more difficult to align social policy and so on to a single aim*”.²⁰ We asked whether the situation had improved since then, but MI5 said that it had remained challenging to align the security response with wider social policy aims – including the work undertaken by devolved departments – and to maintain momentum in the absence of the Stormont Assembly since January 2017.²¹ The Chief Constable of the PSNI made the same point, speaking in August last year:

*We need the Executive back in place so that policy can be implemented to improve the opportunity and living conditions of particularly young people who may become disaffected and be recruited in a vulnerable state by dissident republicans ... we need that support unequivocally.*²²

In January 2020, the governing parties in Northern Ireland agreed a deal and the devolved administration is now back in power. Progress should, therefore, now be possible.

¹⁸ Written evidence – MI5, 21 May 2019.

¹⁹ ***

²⁰ Oral evidence – MI5, 17 January 2013.

²¹ Northern Ireland was without an Executive between January 2017 and January 2020, because the governing parties failed to reach a power-sharing deal, which left the devolved administration unable to take major decisions or pass legislation during that time. We note that the devolved administration returned on 11 January 2020, after a new power-sharing deal was agreed.

²² ‘Political vacuum is being filled by dissidents, Chief Constable warns in plea to parties’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 August 2019.