Barriers to Participation and Progression in Education and Employment for those at risk of becoming involved with Paramilitary Organisations in Northern Ireland

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Executive summary

The Institute for Conflict Research was commissioned by the Department for the Economy to conduct a study into the barriers to participation and progression in education, training and employment for young people aged 16-24 and at risk of involvement in paramilitary organisations. The present report was undertaken to support action D1 of the Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime (2016) which commits to:

'prioritise steps to significantly and measurably improve the educational and employment prospects of children and young people in deprived communities, focusing particularly on those who are at greatest risk of educational under-attainment.'

Paramilitarism and organized crime impact on the lives of young people in three primary forms: radicalisation for the purpose of political violence; recruitment for involvement in criminality; or victimisation through threats or paramilitary style attacks. A number of risk factors are identified to explain the vulnerability of a minority of young people in Northern Ireland for whom paramilitary organisations are a real and immediate presence or threat.

These include the community context in which a young person lives. This factor refers to the local level dynamics of paramilitary leadership and community history; particularly the normalisation of political violence through its continued physical memorialisation and celebration in local tradition and narratives; and persistent legacy-linked distrust of the police and policing and the state more generally.

Social and economic marginalization is also identified as a motivating factor leading to youth involvement in paramilitaries as a lifestyle choice and source of income when legitimate options may be limited.

A common experience shared by many in the cohort looked at in this study was early experiences of trauma which have been linked to reduced wellbeing in later life and a reduced resilience to the influence and coercive control of paramilitary groups. The range of traumas experienced is elaborated upon in the body of the report but includes child abuse, domestic violence and parental offending amongst others. The mental health impact of these traumas was often linked to increased substance and alcohol abuse and addiction by participants in the fieldwork. Drug use, in particular, was seen to bring young people into contact with paramilitary organisations in a number of ways; primarily, as a tool of manipulation, through recruitment as dealers, or becoming targets for owing drug debts.

The overwhelming majority of young people affected are male and participants suggested that this gender dimension could not be ignored, drawing attention to a need to challenge accepted ideals of masculinity.

Beyond those risk factors already identified, four groups of young people were identified as being specifically vulnerable; that is, looked after or care experienced young people, those experiencing homelessness, young people growing up in areas where paramilitary groups have typically had an influence and those involved with the criminal justice system.

In light of the factors placing young people at risk of involvement with paramilitaries, the report then went on to lay out the main barriers to participation and progression in education, training and employment experienced by the same demographic. The barriers most commonly identified fell into the category of poverty and economic barriers. While impacting heavily on the early educational outcomes of individuals which persisted into adulthood, economic factors also constituted practical obstacles for young people; especially in relation to insufficient financial support to facilitate training, inaccessible childcare and transport costs.

A high level of chaos also characterised the lives of young people in this study and meant that individuals often had many competing priorities which regularly overshadowed education, training or employment. In many cases this involved securing a stable home environment or base from which to live the rest of their lives.

Many interviewees stressed the increasing numbers of young people with special educational need and a rising demand for additional support which schools, training centres and further education (FE) colleges were ill-equipped to adequately meet. This was thought to be having a direct impact on the prospects of many individuals.

Mental health and often associated substance abuse or addiction was thought to lower the capacity and heavily disrupt the learning opportunities of the young people forming the focus of this study. There was significant stigma and at times fear around accessing support services and training centre staff and those working within youth services reported feeling inadequately trained or resourced to address these issues.

Intergenerational unemployment and benefit dependency was thought to impact negatively on the outcomes of young people through undermining the place of the home as a learning environment. The effect was exacerbated by wider structural changes in the UK economy which has seen a reduction in manual job opportunities particularly in the youth labour market.

Broadly, the demographic engaged in this research had had poor experiences of mainstream schooling which had had a detrimental impact on confidence, self-esteem and overall perceptions of

education and learning. Interviewees pointed to the need for mainstreaming of restorative approaches in schools and other spaces of education and training to challenge an institutional tendency to suspend or exclude in response to difficult behaviours. This pattern of exclusion increased social isolation and produced a vacuum in the lives of young people into which paramilitary organisations and criminal gangs could enter.

The present research echoed findings elsewhere which illuminate the concerns of young people in relation to the lack of jobs available, job security and low pay. Young people are feeling hopeless and disinclined to engage when faced with a 'low skill, low pay' cycle which appears impossible to escape.

Northern Ireland's post-conflict environment creates additional barriers, particularly in relation to young people being unwilling to go into certain areas for training or work opportunities because they do not feel comfortable or safe.

For some individuals criminal records also preclude their involvement in training or employment. A number of organisations working with individuals affected in this way suggested that a history of offending behaviour could be adequately dealt with through a risk management process.

In the final section, the report sought to make a number of recommendations, developed from the observations of those included in the fieldwork, which aim to respond to the specific needs of the demographic in question by strengthening existing provision and suggesting fresh approaches. These recommendations can be summarised as:

- Needs-based provision
  Greater flexibility and realism in the development of programme outcomes to ensure their relevance and meaning in the lives of young people. This will often require a focus on process rather than product; being uniquely tailored to the personal circumstances of the individual and to what success will look like for them.

- Community planning
  Education, training and employment for 16-24 year olds should be placed within the context of the community infrastructure as a whole in areas impacted by a legacy of paramilitary influence. This will include seeking out opportunities to work with bodies such as Neighbourhood Planning Partnerships to ensure that job creation is matched to sustainability and the capacity of the local community to compete for opportunities where they arise.

- Working with the private sector
  This will include consultation to ensure that skills match demand alongside incentives for businesses of all sizes to create trainee and apprenticeship positions; with appreciation of the challenges and risks posed by a demographic with particular needs and behaviours. Exploring ways to instigate a cultural shift in particular sectors employing high numbers of young and low-skilled employees in order to raise the status and, in turn, the morale of individuals employed in these areas.

- Valuing youth work
  The relationship-based and trust-building approaches of youth work are essential to the personal development of highly-vulnerable individuals. The mainstreaming of youth work[1] approaches in schools and other places of education and learning should be prioritised to recognise this, including restorative approaches to conflict management and challenging behaviours.

- Restorative practice in schools
  Expanding the use of restorative approaches in schools and other places of education and learning as a means to promote better conflict management, coping strategies and therapeutic crisis interventions. This can include building on existing examples of good practice.

- Managing transitions
  Transition points between mainstream school or EOTAS and training or further education and then into employment were recognised as possible crisis points for young people who struggle to cope with a new environment, routine, staff or colleagues and the new tasks expected of them. Attention should therefore be given to scaling-up and building on existing initiatives aimed at the better management of these transitions.

- Clear pathways to employment
  For education and training to appeal to marginalized young people, it had to present a clear pathway to employment. The Department should consider working with private and public sector employers to provide ring-fenced positions for individuals to move into following a period of training, to ensure that they do not simply return immediately to

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[1] Within this report 'youth work' is considered to be non-formal education opportunities offered to a broad spectrum of young people (normally between the ages of 10 and 25), who often need additional support for a diverse collection of needs. This support is most regularly provided by voluntary organisations, with statutory support from the Department of Education and Skills and the Education and Training Boards.

being 'NEET.' Social enterprise opportunities should be further explored as a helpful way to allow individuals to 'learn on the job' and bypass formal education approaches or structures to which their personal learning styles or lifestyles are not well suited.

- Provision of wrap-around support

  Wrap-around support, such as addiction support, counselling and alternative therapies, is necessary to increase the capacity of young people to maintain and progress in training and employment. Possible options for increasing the resource capacity of training providers and youth services might include; a discretionary fund administered by the Department for the Economy and allocated on a case-by-case basis where crisis interventions may be needed; or subsidized training in specialized areas such as supporting a young person experiencing suicidal ideation.

- Longer-term funding

  The adoption of multiyear funding cycles to create conditions for real and sustained change reflecting the non-linear progression of many at risk young people. Longer term funding should be applied alongside a system of collaboration and signposting within and between organisations and services to meet the changing needs of an individual young person over time.

1. Introduction

a. Background

In December 2015, following the Fresh Start Agreement, a three-person panel was appointed by the Northern Ireland Executive to produce a report with 'recommendations for a strategy to disband paramilitary groups.' The resulting report made a number of observations on the continuing influence of these groups over young people. Educational underachievement and unemployment were identified as two of a complex range of factors contributing to the continuing recruitment of young people to armed groups and the maintenance of conditions which make their existence possible (Alderdice, McBurney &McWilliams 2016). In response, the Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organized Crime (2016) committed in Action D1 to:

> *'prioritise steps to significantly and measurably improve the educational and employment prospects of children and young people in deprived communities, focusing particularly on those who are at greatest risk of educational under-attainment.'*

Under this commitment, the Department for the Economy has been tasked with identifying the barriers that inhibit groups of learners from participating in further education provision and explore ways to overcome these barriers, through the 'Social Inclusion' project in *Further Education Means Success (*Northern Ireland Executive 2016). The previous Department for Employment and Learning's strategy for further education named 'social inclusion' as one of its main themes for the future of further education in Northern Ireland (DEL 2016).

In September 2018, the Department for the Economy, as an initial step in the development of a social inclusion framework, produced 'Barriers to participation and progression in education: a review of the evidence.' The report involved a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to participation and progression in education and training for young people and adult learners. The present study builds upon this evidence review as a further contribution towards the development of the social inclusion framework

b. Brief

This paper is the product of the commissioning by the Department for the Economy of research into barriers to participation and progression in education, training and employment for those at risk of becoming involved with paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland.

Three researchers were jointly commissioned to produce a paper on this theme: Neil Jarman, Brendan Sturgeon and Olivia Lucas of the Institute for Conflict Research. This is the result of their work conducted between September and December 2018.

The overall aim of the research was to provide the Department with a deeper insight into the population of interest and the barriers to education and employment which they face. The main objectives to deliver were:

- Identify factors which affect the risk of becoming involved with paramilitary organisations at the individual, group and area level;
- List the main barriers to participation in education and employment which those at increased risk face;
- Establish which types of education, training provision or paths to employment would be of interest to the population of interest and the most suitable means of participation in and delivery of relevant provision;
- Engage with the population of interest to discuss potential solutions to addressing identified barriers;
- Provide the Department with recommendations on suitable policy interventions to address the identified needs of the population of interest.

c. Methodology

Throughout the fieldwork for the present study the term 'paramilitarism' was identified as problematic, particularly in traditionally republican areas, and is not always recognised by or reflective of the lived reality for the young people who form the subjects of this study. For that reason, this report encompasses involvement in or with 'criminal gangs' to refer to circumstances when ideology plays no or a very minor role in the control or influence of young people and to acknowledge that often those wielding this control have only very superficial claims to any political cause.

The present paper is based primarily on a range of semi-structured interviews, less formal conversations and small focus group discussions with key stakeholders and young people in deprived communities, particularly those that might be considered at risk of involvement in paramilitarism or organised crime. This qualitative approach was supplemented by a review of relevant literature. The research drew from and was guided by the review of evidence by Wilson, Donnelly and Stainer (2018) in 'Barriers to participation and progression in education.'

The research aimed to locate the barriers and challenges to participation and progression within the full range of education and training opportunities currently funded in part or whole by the Department for the Economy; including full or part-time education at further education colleges; employment and skills programmes, such as the *Training for Success* programme, delivered by contracted training centres; Essential Skills qualifications; apprenticeship programmes; and a range of community and voluntary sector programmes largely financed through the European Social Fund

(ESF). Many of the projects funded under the current instalment of the ESF focus on those not in employment, education or training and often include mentoring or personal development elements alongside training or signposting to skills programmes. The current fund will run until 2020.

In total 34 interviews were completed with representatives from statutory agencies, youth clubs and groups, restorative justice groups, education and training providers and regional organisations. Three focus groups were conducted with young people with a total of 22 participants. The following organisations participated in the study:

Statutory Agencies

- Department of Justice
- Education Authority
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Youth Justice Agency (Belfast and Western Area)

Youth Clubs and Groups

- Active Communities Network
- Ardoyne Youth Enterprise
- Belfast South Community Resources
- Clann Eireann Youth Club
- Divis Youth Project
- St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre
- Upper Springfield Development Trust
- YMCA Lurgan

Restorative Justice Groups

- Access Youth Engagement
- Community Restorative Justice Ireland
- North Belfast Alternatives
- Resolve NI
- Rosemount Centre

Education and Training Providers

- Impact Training
- Gems NI
- East Belfast Mission

- WomensTec
- Loughshore Educational Resource Centre
- Workforce Training Services
- Rutledge Training (Ballymena)

Regional Organisations

- Extern
- Include Youth
- NIACRO
- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
- Save the Children
- Start360
- Voice of Young People in Care
- Youth Action

The research team would like to thank all those who participated in the study for giving generously of their time. We would like to extend particular thanks to the young people who participated in the focus groups and provided insight to how the complex issues of paramilitarism and organised crime alongside barriers in education, training and employment affect their lives. It is hoped that this report will serve to recognise the many individuals and organisations already doing good work to support these young people as well as identifying some of the steps still to be taken to improve their education and employment outcomes.

2. Young People and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland

While difficult to fully assess the impact of paramilitarism on the lives of young people in Northern Ireland today, it is clear from previous studies (Byrne 2004; NILT 2017; Duncan & Browne 2019) and the present fieldwork that, for a significant minority, paramilitaries continue to be a real and immediate presence. In 2019, Duncan & Browne reported that 14.2% of respondents to the 2017 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in their area and 17.0% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that young people in their area were influenced by paramilitary organisations. These findings reinforced the work by Byrne (2004), which indicated that paramilitary groups continue to have a significant influence on a number of areas throughout Northern Ireland. Byrne found that this influence was often reinforced by the capacity of paramilitary groups to exile young people from areas where these organisations are active. Conway (1997) had previously indicated that entire families have been forced to leave their community because one family member was under threat of punishment or death – this had led to young people often having to abandon their schools, friends and other social networks.

Fieldwork participants described three main pathways through which young people continue to become involved or impacted by paramilitarism and organised crime: radicalisation for the purpose of political violence; recruitment for involvement in criminality; or victimisation through threats or paramilitary style attacks. The three pathways are not mutually exclusive and commonly intersect.

While there is broad support across Northern Ireland for political co-operation and engagement with the state, there remain residual pockets of paramilitary leadership and organisation which are opposed to political settlement and retain paramilitary capacity. For many young people living in areas governed by such leadership, paramilitary organisations retain little credibility or legitimacy. A minority, however, continue to be drawn into activity through appeals to a romanticised view of the past and ideological rhetoric alongside the offer of solidarity and status (Lysaght 2002; Harland 2007; Gallagher & Hamber 2014).

Times of traditionally high community tension, such as the twelfth July celebrations, provide a focal point around which already problematic relationships with authorities and other groups, can be exploited to incite or encourage the involvement of larger numbers of young people. Social media is a primary tool for this (Morrow et al 2016). Morrow et al identified three 'routes' towards radicalisation as political violence: 'pedigree,' that is, young people linked to families who are well known for their political activity in the past; 'specific individuals' who are targeted for their 'kudos' or status with other young people; and 'followers' young people who can be drawn into low-level violence, but who are generally less central to planning or ideology (Morrow et al 2016; 151-152).

At the same time, many participants in the fieldwork stressed that paramilitary organisations in their modern form largely exist for the purpose of organised crime without a genuine claim to political cause. There was considerable frustration from some that the term 'paramilitary' was used to describe these groups, attaching a certain legitimacy and claim to history which was misplaced. In some areas, groups with paramilitary overtones were in constant flux, changing in name and membership, and undermining the capacity of community and youth workers to divert young people from involvement. Young people are often recruited for the purposes of selling drugs or playing a part in larger criminal activity to raise funds for these organisations.

Perhaps the most distressing way in which young people come into contact with paramilitary groups is as the target of threats or paramilitary style attacks. The practice of 'punishment beatings' or 'punishment shootings' began as 'a tactic by both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups to 'deal with' anti-social behaviour in their communities, with paramilitaries stepping into a vacuum where communities didn't trust or have confidence in the police' (Smyth 2017; 6). In the 2016-17 fiscal year there was an increase of over 30% in the number of attacks over the previous year (in 2016/17 there were 28 paramilitary shootings and 66 paramilitary beatings, while in 2015/16 there had been 14 shootings and 58 beatings); with around 47% of attacks (326 incidents) between 2009 and the end of 2016 against young people aged twenty-five or younger (Smyth 2017; 5).

Young people may be targeted for myriad reasons: for involvement in anti-social behaviour, for selling drugs, for owing debts, for refusing to engage in criminality, due to a falling out with a high-ranking member, and so on. In its review of the UK in 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted paramilitary style attacks as a child protection issue (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2016; para 48(b)). The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has been working to mainstream a government and statutory response which fully establishes these attacks as a safeguarding issue without legitimate purpose (NICCY 2017).

3. Factors putting young people at risk

The following section examines the factors put forward during the fieldwork to explain the vulnerability of some young people to the three manifestations of paramilitary control set out in the previous section. These circumstances, in combination, set certain individuals apart from the wider youth population and determine why, for some, paramilitaries exist at a distance while for others they are a prominent feature of their everyday lives.

a. Community context

Fieldwork respondents explained that geographic and community location is the primary risk factor for a young person being impacted by paramilitarism and organised crime. Whether an individual lives in an area or community with an active paramilitary presence will be the ultimate determinant of risk. Throughout the course of the fieldwork for this study, the impact of the granularity of paramilitary influence, politics and community history across Northern Ireland was significant. While the report captures the broad risk factors and pathways by which young people come under the influence of paramilitaries in the broadest sense, local dynamics will determine the distinct ways in which these play out, going beyond traditional loyalist-republican distinctions.

Paramilitary organisations and legacy structures exist today in many forms and with varying motivations– from 'purely cultural and political associations, through party allegiance to criminal gangs and active units seeking political goals' (Morrow et al. 2016; 11)- and accordingly interact with and are seen by communities in very different ways.

In many parts of Northern Ireland, political violence has become part of the 'historic narrative' of community identity (Morrow et al 2016). Despite macro-political efforts to reduce hostility, the tradition of celebrating and justifying the use of violence persists at a community level, alongside the physical and visual memorialisation of violent struggle, community prominence of organisations and individuals with a history of 'involvement' and regular narratives of reaction and resistance (Morrow et al 2016). These factors combine to create a 'permissive environment' in which pathways to radical extremism can emerge (Morrow et al 2016).

Given that paramilitaries are of, rather than separate from, the community, interviewees emphasised the family and peer group ties that young people may have to one or more of these groups. It may be difficult for a young person to dissociate from a paramilitary organisation where historic familial associations exist; particularly when relatives have been imprisoned or injured through their involvement.

A plethora of other conflict-related legacy issues at play within these communities further contribute to an environment in which paramilitary actors can maintain dominance and control. These

include a cultural legacy of suspicion of police and policing, especially in those republican areas where opposition to political compromise remains, and continuing disputes over cultural and political issues that remain unresolved, creating regular public order challenges and focal points for provocation (Morrow et al 2016). Interviewees within the youth work sector suggested that, as an institution, the Police Service of Northern Ireland still does not fully appreciate the importance of relationships with the community, the process through which more positive impressions can be built and the fragility of progress. The organisation was described as sending 'mixed messages' to young people.

The wider normalisation of violence and suspicion of police and policing in many communities further serves to reinforce a public discourse around paramilitary style attacks that has been described as one of a 'societal shrug' underpinned by an assumption by many that the attacks are at some level both justified and necessary (Smyth 2017). The "Ending the Harm" campaign, recently launched by the Department of Justice, has been developed and implemented in an attempt to change community attitudes to the practice.

b. Social and economic marginalization

Studies elsewhere have emphasised the interconnectedness of legacies of political violence with structural inequality and disadvantage in communities (Campbell et al 2017). In relation to overall life outcomes, poverty was thought to be the greatest threat to young people by a number of community and youth workers involved in the fieldwork.

The recent *Building Capacity in Communities in Transition* programme aimed to build capacity in eight communities across Northern Ireland to transition away from a legacy of paramilitarism. The eight areas selected for attention given high levels of paramilitary control also featured some of the most deprived in Northern Ireland. Ardoyne and the New Lodge in North Belfast, for example, are divided into six Super Output Areas (SOA) by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) for statistical purposes. All six SOAs are among the 10% most deprived according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017 (TEO 2018c).

In a study carried out by Morrow et al. in 2016, respondents highlighted a perceived lack of prospects in employment and education as factors leading some young people to "switch off" from society. Paramilitaries enter into this vacuum, offering to "look after" young people in various ways. This could include buying alcohol and drugs, or offering an (illegal) source of income. This correlates with studies elsewhere in the UK on gang involvement which suggest that many young people turn to gangs in order to make money in an environment where they feel there are few other options (Harris et al 2011; Young et al 2007). There were concerns that changes to the welfare system through the

introduction of Universal Credit could exacerbate this issue; forcing young people to seek out alternative sources of income to a greater degree than in the past.

High levels of unemployment further create the conditions which allow sectarian divisions to re-emerge. A youth worker in Derry˜Londonderry described how high unemployment in the city meant that many young people rarely moved outside their immediate neighbourhood which allowed an insular or 'them-and-us' mind-set to grow. Young people were increasingly wary moving around the city, due to real or imagined dangers about what might happen if they were to be recognised in an 'unfriendly' area. The situation was felt to allow more radical political viewpoints to gain traction by attaching blame to the 'other' community for socio-economic adversity.

    c.   Early Experiences of Trauma

Early experiences of trauma were a shared characteristic of many of the young people in the demographic covered by this study. Youth and community workers commonly referred to a 'spectrum of risk' when discussing the prospects of young people from geographic areas affected by continued paramilitarism. It is a small but highly vulnerable cohort existing at the most extreme, having experience of multiple and/or simultaneous traumatic events, but having fallen through the net of social services, who ultimately come into contact with paramilitary organisations, either as targets of paramilitary style attacks or as recruits.

Significant mental health issues, which reduced the resilience of young people and left them more open to influence by these groups, were attributed to these high levels of trauma, referencing the theory of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). It has been shown that individuals exposed to adversities in childhood are at increased and cumulative risk of negative psychological, emotional and health related outcomes in later life (Davidson et al 2012).

Adversities considered under the theory mapped readily onto the real life experiences of young people accessing the youth clubs and NGOs included in the fieldwork: poverty, debt and financial pressures; child abuse and child protection concerns; family and domestic violence; parental illness or disability; parental substance abuse; parental mental ill-health; family separation, bereavement or imprisonment; and parental offending or anti-social behaviour (Davidson et al 2012).

A 2015 review by the Early Intervention Foundation, analysing a number of longitudinal studies based in the USA and UK, linked similar factors to the increased probability of youth gang involvement and youth violence in different national contexts. The review grouped predictors into five domains: individual, peer group, community, school, and family (Early Intervention Foundation 2015). The study found that risk factors have a cumulative effect, that is, the greater the number of risk factors experienced by the individual, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement (Early

Intervention Foundation 2015). Looking specifically at the risk factors for gang involvement, the review identified the following as predictors in the 16-25 age group (Early Intervention Foundation 2015; 30-31):

Figure 1: Risk factors for gang involvement in the 16-25 age category

Domain	Aged 16-25
Individual	• Anti-social beliefs • Lack of guilt and empathy • Involvement in general delinquency • High alcohol/drug use
Family	• Broken home/change in caretaker • Delinquent siblings • Socioeconomic status • Poor parental supervision
School	• Low academic aspiration • Low school attachment • Low parental aspirations for child • Low school achievement
Peer Group	• Delinquent peers • Association with gang-involved peers/relatives
Community	• Availability/use of drugs • Low neighbourhood attachment • Economic attachment

Research elsewhere in the Northern Ireland context has focused on the impact of transgenerational trauma associated with the conflict. Trauma is not only passed on through the interaction of parents and children, but can also be consciously or unconsciously transmitted through their societal environment (McNally 2014). Interviews with children and young people in six communities throughout Northern Ireland, which had endured relatively high levels of poverty combined with conflict-related violence, indicated their socialisation into a family or community understanding and interpretation of the conflict, through single identity communities, schools and social activities as well as stories passed down from older relatives, remembered through murals, commemorations and memorial events (McAlister, Scraton and Haydon 2014).

Youth service and training providers repeatedly expressed frustration at the inadequacy of mental health support services (particularly inpatient or residential services) for young people and felt that

this was in part due to a lack of understanding or awareness by decision makers of the complexity and severity of the circumstances in which some young people are living. In this context, the Action B4 *Communities in Transition* project identified an urgent need for 'provision of end-to-end, integrated services and referral pathways for vulnerable families, adults, children and young people, involving communities and statutory agencies working in closer collaboration'(TEO 2018h).

Interviewees also criticised missed opportunities to intervene early and at the first sign of problems (perhaps around ages 11-12) to disrupt pathways into criminality or paramilitary involvement. Such observations draw attention to the need for continued and expanded early intervention work as under Action B13 with Start360's *EDGES* programme. The E*DGES* service works with young people aged 12-17 and their families to prevent them from entering the care system, entering custody, becoming homeless or leaving education. It was suggested by multiple interviewees that initiatives of this type should operate as part of a cross-governmental resilient youth strategy to grow the capacity of young people to better cope with the consequences of austerity combined with the ongoing legacies of the conflict.

Case Study: Start360 EDGES

The EDGES programme is funded by the Health and Social Care Board to provide earlier intervention services for young people who are on the edge of care, custody and/or education. The programme works with young people aged 12-17. The EDGES Service engages both the young people and their families to prevent them from entering the care system, entering custody, becoming homeless or leaving education. The service is currently available in two locations- Glengormley and Fermanagh. Referral to EDGES must be made by a member of a Local Implementation/Operation Team. Referral criteria include:

- Risk of family breakdown – eg having to leave the home/care/custody/homelessness
- Young people presenting with challenging behaviour and/or multiple issues (for example; mental health issues, drug/alcohol issues, family instability/breakdown/ school exclusion)
- Young people at risk of committing further offences and/or entering custody

Further information is available at: http://start360.org/how-can-we-help-you

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    d.   Substance abuse and addiction

Mental health concerns were often associated with drug and alcohol abuse; as both cause and effect. Many reports were made of young people self-medicating through illegal and prescription drug use. A particular criticism was around the problem of dual diagnosis whereby access to mental health care is restricted for those also using drugs. Drug taking was said to link young people into paramilitaries and criminal gangs in a number of ways:

- Drinking and drug culture, including free supply, used to establish initial association with the organisation

- Drug-debts used as leverage to coerce a young person into criminal acts on behalf of the organisation

- A young person becomes the target of a paramilitary threat or attack as a result of owing a drug debt

- Where a young person begins to sell drugs, becoming tied to the organisation through a system of 'tax' on their sales and may become a target if payments are not forthcoming

- A young person becomes involved in low level crime or anti-social behaviour as a result of the drug or alcohol misuse and subsequently comes to the attention of the organisation, either as a target for attack or recruit for criminal purpose

In some cases, children as young as ten are presenting to youth services in this manner. The stress associated with living under paramilitary influence or threat can exacerbate substance abuse as a coping mechanism. The widespread and destructive role of drug use and addiction as a health and social issue with criminal implications was a common observation across the fieldwork reports for the Action B4 *Communities in Transition* project (TEO 2018a-h).

e. Gender dimension

According to fieldwork participants, the overwhelming majority of those becoming involved with or affected by paramilitary organisations and criminal gangs are male. One youth worker described this as evidence of a 'crisis of masculinity.' Studies elsewhere have demonstrated that the hegemonic ideals of young men are reinforced by the attitudes and behaviours of older men in their communities (Harland, 2011). In some of Northern Ireland's working class communities, paramilitary membership continues to epitomise male identity, being associated to ideals of toughness, rejection of the feminine, and the accepted dominance of men in society (Harland et al 2005; Ashe 2012). This is particularly so in a context of economic and social marginalization, in which paramilitaries and criminal gangs can represent an attractive lifestyle choice to young men, either as a viable source of income or affirmation, belonging and identity.

Young women are impacted differently but less visibly by the highly gendered nature of paramilitarism. Participants to the fieldwork suggested specific research is needed to explore this dimension further; however voiced concerns around the impact of unhealthy domestic relationships and child sexual exploitation in which they felt paramilitarism or paramilitary-linked individuals played a role. One youth worker pointed to a wider societal conservatism which impacts negatively on the mental wellbeing of young people who do not conform to traditional gender identities, particularly those identifying as LGBTQ+.

f. High risk groups

Participants spoke about particular categories of young person at increased risk, namely, looked after or care experienced young people, those experiencing homelessness and those involved in or known to the youth justice system. These three groups are not mutually exclusive and there are clear links between them; for instance, looked after young people are heavily represented within the youth justice system. According to the Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics for 2016/17, the number of young people involved with custodial services that were looked after was decreasing in number (139 young people down from 163 in 2015/16), but rather worryingly the figure for looked after young people in custody increased in percentage terms by 10% between 2015/16 to 2016/17, from 29% to 39% (Voice of Young People in Care 2018). Young people in these categories were seen as 'easy targets' for paramilitary influence and control due to having less well-developed or absent support networks and greater social and economic marginalization.

Within the demographic of care experienced young people, it is those living in children's homes that were reported as especially at risk as being highly visible within a community context. Practitioners working with this group were critical of how often individuals were moved between different schools and placements, suggesting such disruption further increased vulnerability. For many, turning eighteen represented a 'cliff edge' in support availability; despite young people being far from prepared for independent living at this age.

Case Study: Scottish Corporate Parent Model

In 2015, 24 public bodies and groups of bodies were named as 'corporate parents' with legal duties to deliver on to care experienced young people up to the age of twenty-six. The legislation pertaining to corporate parenting can be found in Part 9 of *The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.*

The Statutory Guidance on Corporate Parenting defines it as:

"An organisation's performance of actions necessary to uphold the rights and safeguard the wellbeing of a looked after child or care leaver, and through which physical, emotional, spiritual, social and educational development is promoted." (Scottish Government 2015a; 7)

The 2014 Act adopts a holistic definition of wellbeing with eight basic requirements designed to help young people to develop and reach their full potential. These are defined as: healthy, safe, included, responsible, achieving, nurtured, active, and respected (section 96). Further information can be found at: http://www.corporateparenting.org.uk/

There was praise for Scotland's corporate parent model under The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 which aims to ensure that a single public body has consistent responsibility for

an individual looked after or care experienced young person up to the age of twenty-six throughout his or her interactions with the state. The corporate parent has a legal obligation to guarantee that the rights and best interests of the young person are recognised and placed at the centre of decision-making. It was suggested that a similar response in Northern Ireland could help to prevent instances of a young people becoming 'lost in the system'; a process through which paramilitaries or others with nefarious intentions could gain increasing influence in a young person's life.

Similarly, those with criminal records or who are otherwise known to the youth or adult criminal justice system can see paramilitary membership as their only option when their offending history becomes an obstacle to other forms of livelihood and paramilitary organisations themselves are keen to utilise their offending behaviours in criminal activity to fund themselves.

4. Barriers to Education, Training and Employment

While it would be unhelpful to assume that all of those young people within the demographic looked at in this study have identical educational experiences, many, as became clear during the fieldwork, are currently not in education, training or employment or at a significant distance from securing employment. There is significant overlap between those factors leaving young people at risk of involvement with paramilitaries and those which are an obstacle to progression in education, training and employment.

a. Poverty and Economic Barriers

As described earlier, any of those areas with continued paramilitary presence also suffer from high levels of social and economic deprivation. Economic and social deprivation impacts on young people's education, training and employment potential in a number of ways.

Research elsewhere has shown a strong link between poverty and less favourable early learning outcomes. For example, on average, children from the poorest 20% of the population are already 17 months behind in their early language development by the age of three (Save the Children 2014). Drivers of this educational achievement gap are many and interlinked but include family income, parental education, parenting styles and home learning environment (Save the Children 2017).

This educational disadvantage persists throughout a child's school career. In 2016/17, 77.4% of pupils not entitled to free school meals achieved at least 5 GCSEs in grades A*-C including English and Maths compared to only 47.5% of pupils who are entitled (NISRA 2017). In response, many of those interviewed considered investment in Early Years Interventions to be of key importance to ending cycles of educational under attainment in some families and communities and highlighted the central role of Family Support Hubs in this regard.

Others highlighted practical barriers to participation which economic disadvantage creates. These have been summarised elsewhere as pertaining to social welfare, childcare and transport (SOLAS, 2017). Social welfare arrangements for 16-17 year olds were seen as a factor in young people turning to criminality, and away from legitimate options, as a source of income. While Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) is not usually available to this age group, Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments were also thought to be insufficient; particularly for young people with little parental support.

Some identified a particular frustration at arrangements under European Social Fund initiatives. While participation in one of these schemes precludes receipt of JSA, no EMA or subsistence payments are available for participation - *"These programmes are supposed to help the most in need but they don't even give them money for food. How does that make sense?"*

A number of interviewees pointed to high numbers of young and single mothers in their communities to which a lack of available and affordable childcare posed a significant obstacle to participation in education, training and employment. Given the disproportionate division of caring duties between men and women, this was accompanied by need for a 'cultural shift' in some industries to make workplaces more 'female and mother friendly'. This included a move towards more flexible working arrangements and in-house or subsidised childcare.

Transport difficulties were a particular problem for young people in rural areas. In some cases, public transport networks to colleges or training placements were inadequate or costs were prohibitive. There was felt to be little government provision designed specifically to cover these practical costs; meaning that youth centres often had to resort to paying out of already stretched funds intended for other purposes. The situation was exacerbated by uneven investment across the region with opportunities often being concentrated in city centres; and more specifically Belfast. This meant that young people in rural areas had to travel further and at times could not pursue opportunities due to the logistical challenges involved.

Interviewees also highlighted problems caused by public transport arrangements in interface areas. Depending on where their nearest bus stop was, this could make young people feel anxious about encountering the 'other' community – particularly if they had been involved in cross-community disorder and/or sectarian interactions on social media.

For others the barriers created by economic disadvantage were even more fundamental. A large number, for example, do not have any type of recognised identification documents often required for enrolment on courses. While many seeking employment do not have bank accounts, which most prospective employers will ask for when organising their contract. Some participants suggested that these basic barriers should be identified and resolved within the formal school system (i.e. pupils should receive basic information on how to set up a bank account and store important documents, such as birth certificates), but others felt that such initiatives rarely engage at-risk young people and suspected that support of this kind was best provided by youth workers.

b. Chaotic Personal Life

Another common theme of fieldwork interviews was the level of chaos in the lives of the affected young people. Interviewees from all sectors noted the complexity of need that young people were presenting with and many suggested that this complexity is continually increasing. Many young people have experienced an unstable home life from an early age and may be the latest generation in a family to suffer from any one of a number of health or social problems; including addiction, involvement in crime, and severe mental health issues.

A recent Vital Issues report for the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland included the complex-needs profile of five hundred young people involved in Include Youth programmes (Wilson 2017). This table is reproduced below and illustrates the challenges faced by young people alongside their education and training. Include Youth is a rights-based charity for young people in or leaving care, from disadvantaged communities and whose rights are not being met to improve their employability and personal development.

Figure 2: the complex-needs profile of young people involved in Include Youth programmes (%)

Unemployed	100
In care / having a care background	75
Essential skill need	69
Economic and social deprivation	67
Experience of mental/emotional health problems	60
Early school leaver	46
Unsettled accommodation	45
Experienced abuse/neglect	44
Alcohol and/or substance abuse	44
Offending background	27
At risk of suicide/self-harm	27
At risk or experienced child sexual abuse	18
Learning/physical disability	17
At risk of involvement in / threats from paramilitaries	14
Young parent	9

Source: IY in Wilson 2017

With this backdrop, many young people have more pressing and immediate concerns and priorities than participation in education or employment. For young people in care or those experiencing homelessness, for example, the primary concern can be finding a stable base from which to build the rest of their lives and navigating interactions with other statutory organisations such as the

Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Additionally, young people often require support with basic skills such as schedule setting, coping strategies and relationship building to enable participation in formal learning.

Youth practitioners reported very low levels of confidence and self-esteem amongst the young people they work with. To respond to this high level of need, interviewees repeatedly recognised the value of intense one-to-one mentorship provision for those who could not cope or were not ready to enter mainstream vocational education and training or Further Education; with this provision including modules on personal development, independent living, positive ways to spend leisure time alongside skills-based learning and employability.

c.   Special Educational Need

Many of those interviewed raised the issue of the volume of young people who are presenting with Special Education Need (SEN), particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Training centres and FE colleges currently encounter a large number of young people with associated needs and finding the resources to offer appropriate support to all who engage with the system is challenging. Of particular concern is this regard, is instances where the late diagnosis of certain individuals may have led to them missing out on additional help for several years of their learning.

Figure 3: Pupils with special education needs (SEN), by year
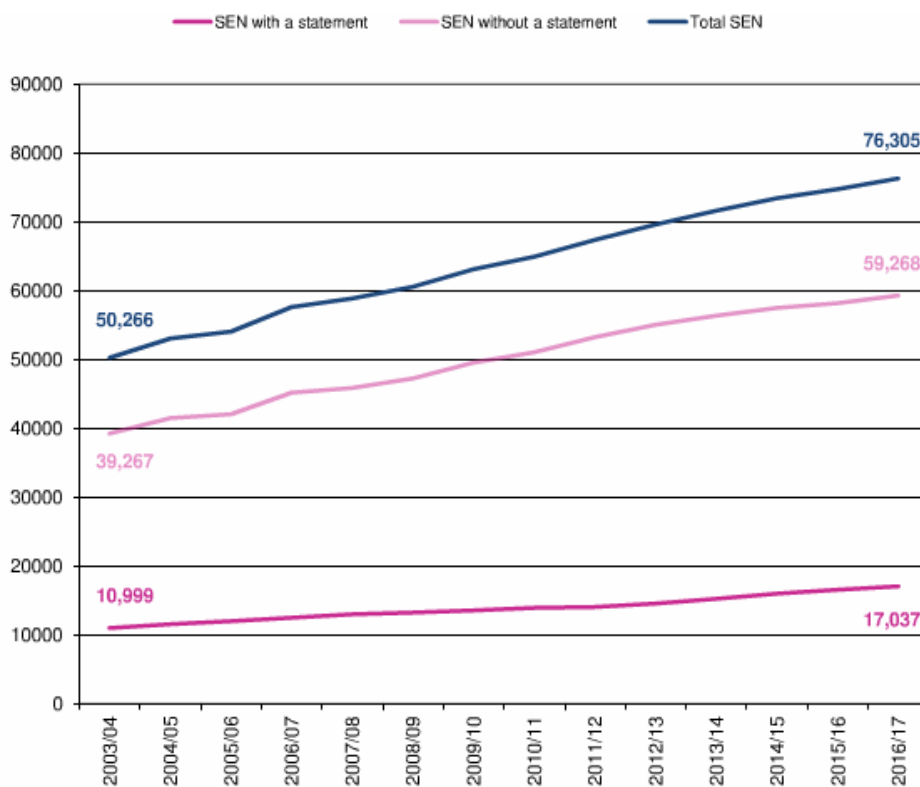
Source: DE in Wilson 2017

An underappreciated issue appears to be speech, language and communication difficulties (SLCN). SLCN can include problems with a range of competencies involved in communication: attention and listening skills; understanding language; using spoken language; articulation and pronunciation of speech, and; social interaction, including expressing emotions and using and decoding non-verbal communication (RCSLT 2017). SLCN are often not co-morbid with another learning difficulty but instead arise as a result of developmental delay: 7.58% or two children in every classroom of thirty have a language disorder that affects the way they understand and express language that is not linked to another condition (Norbury et al 2016).

SLCN have been shown to have a significant impact on educational attainment, particularly literacy skills (Snow 2009). Detection can be difficult however as communication issues can present as and are often interpreted as behavioural problems (Humber & Snow 2001). A representative of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists noted that the majority of resources in this area are currently targeted at Early Years detection and prevention.

While this resource focus is important for early diagnosis, there are concerns that those currently in their teens and early twenties may not have benefited, with consequences for the rest of their adult lives. This is particularly concerning given the high prevalence of previously undetected SLCN identified within the youth justice and prison populations (RCSLT 2017). As the modern employment environment becomes increasingly dependent on strong communication and interpersonal skills, SLCN are increasingly an obstacle to progression in the employment market. It was suggested that greater resourcing should be targeted at young adults to help alleviate the impact of previously missed difficulties.

Young people with SEN are further concerned about how they might be perceived by employers or received in the workplace. One focus group participant relayed the experience of a friend who had been told by an employer while on placement that he would be 'no use to him' as an employee due to his SEN. The experience had discouraged the focus group participant, who also had a learning disability, from even applying for work, assuming that she would be discriminated against in the recruitment process. The young woman further doubted whether she would be able to cope in a work environment without the support she had received while training. Her contribution pointed to the need for attitudinal change in some workplaces towards those with SEN as well as efforts to support those with SEN in the workplace, possibly phasing out over a transition period.

d.   Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Fieldwork participants noted the significant impact of mental health issues in the 16-24 age group. Training centre staff reported high levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and self-harming amongst their intake. These were thought to have developed out of early life experiences of trauma.

Where paramilitaries were a factor in the lives of young people, this had the effect of exacerbating problems further. Several participants in the fieldwork described the psychological strain placed on a young person who comes under paramilitary threat; a situation which may last for years. This can lead to a serious deterioration in mental wellbeing which impedes an individual's capacity to learn or take part in training. Equally, the threat may determine that a young person has to move away from the area in which they have been living, leaving behind vital support networks.

In response, many young people were said to be self-medicating with drugs and alcohol; including prescription drugs. In other cases, drug and alcohol intake, which had begun as recreational, had grown into addiction. Substance abuse made successful learning difficult and had safety implications for those enrolled in vocational courses which used heavy machinery. There was thought to be insufficient resourcing available for community youth provision to implement the truly trauma centred approaches necessary to support young people; including utilising child psychologists where needed. Similarly, while some training centres have already begun to offer 'wrap-around' services such as counselling and alternative therapies to trainees, they felt financially constrained in their capacity to build on this.

It was felt to be especially important that these services are offered within centres as a 'standard' aspect of provision, as there continued to be significant levels of fear and stigma attached to accessing externally signposted services. Young people were fearful that seeking help with their mental health would bring them or their family to the attention of social services. One focus group participant specifically drew attention to a gap in provision to support individuals to reconnect with training and employment opportunities following an extended absence on mental health grounds. There was a need for greater empathy from providers and employers around the impact of such experiences on confidence and self-esteem. It was generally felt that smaller providers and community-based groups were better placed to offer the pastoral care needed by such individuals, with further progress needed by the further education colleges to offer the personalised support required.

e.   Intergenerational Unemployment and Benefit Dependency

Wilson, Donnelly and Stainer's (2018) review of evidence acknowledged mixed conclusions elsewhere on the impact of parental worklessness. Macmillan (2013) found that, although the problem of intergenerational unemployment is overstated, workless spells are associated across generations. Likewise, a report for the Social Mobility Commission by Friedman, Laurison and Macmillan (2017) found very little evidence of generations of families never working, but those who experience a workless household are more likely to experience their own workless spells in adulthood. It appears clear, however, that being exposed to a bad local labour market amplifies the effect of growing up in a workless household (Friedman, Laurison and Macmillan 2017).

Many interviewees for the present study observed that young people are growing up in families and communities where unemployment has become the norm and multiple generations may be reliant on social welfare payments. This can be for a range of reasons, including; ill-health or disability, low educational attainment or lack of opportunity. In many cases, parents or grandparents will have experienced disrupted education due to the conflict or conflict-related trauma which has had a lasting impact on their employability. This is said to have a negative impact on the home learning environment and the aspirations of young people.

Participants suggested that in order to have real impact, any initiative to target the 16-24 age group needed to adopt a whole community approach, appreciating the role of older generations in the participation and progression of younger people. For one youth worker, 'NEETs' provision was not sufficiently flexible to meet individuals at an age and stage when it could be most effective. She felt that such provision should reach both below and above its current age parameters; both to cater for younger teenagers who have disengaged from mainstream school and for older adults who wish to return to education and training but normally find very limited opportunities to do so.

One youth worker identified the need for greater empathy from potential employers and training providers in appreciating the emotional and psychological challenge that employment or training can be, particularly for a young person who has become accustomed to rarely leaving home and who may not have the example of a parent or grandparent to follow. In this way, living on welfare payments can become a 'comfort zone' while being totally unreflective of a young person's aspirations for themselves.

The situation has been made more difficult by the structural transformation of the UK economy which has impacted heavily on the youth labour market, with jobs in the knowledge economy growing while manual jobs decrease (Sturrock 2012). As levels of participation in higher education have increased, youth participation in the labour market has dramatically decreased and youth unemployment has risen over the past thirty years (Farrall, Bottoms & Shapland 2010). Recent studies indicate that young people can no longer rely on stable employment in industries such as construction, agriculture or manufacturing as a route out of crime in the transition to adulthood (Farrall, Bottoms & Shapland 2010).

f.   Past Educational Experiences

Almost without exception, the individuals in the cohort encompassed by this study were described as having had poor experiences of mainstream school. Many had been faced with exclusion or been early school refusers or otherwise had poor interactions with staff and other pupils. The situation was

thought to be largely a result of their personal learning needs and styles being incompatible with the school environment. Strict timetables, long hours, a focus on academic outcomes and few opportunities for experiential or practical based learning were all targets of criticism. These early experiences can have a lasting detrimental impact on the confidence, self-esteem and aspirations of individuals who have left school feeling incapable.

Several youth and community workers felt there was a culture of managing individual young people out of the mainstream school system by stealth, for example through repeated suspensions. This scenario could arise following a pattern of challenging behaviour or a paramilitary threat being made. This was seen as a potential crisis point for the young person as detachment from the school environment increased social isolation and risk-taking behaviour, including offending (McAra & McVie 2012; Smith, Dyer & Connelly 2014; Howard & Rabie 2013). It was felt that every effort should be made to meet such circumstances with increased support to create a more favourable solution and maintain the young person's connection with school or better facilitate their transition into EOTAS or vocational training.

One possible approach is to mainstream the use of restorative practice[2] in schools and FE colleges to promote better conflict management, coping strategies and therapeutic crisis interventions. The work of North Belfast Alternatives in the Belfast Boys Model secondary school is one example of success in this regard. Alternatives' work in the school produced a number of positive outcomes including a considerable reduction in the number of suspensions and exclusions.

A number of youth practitioners criticised the reluctance of some schools to 'release' pupils from their records when a young person reached the legal age to leave because of financial incentives for maintaining enrolment[3]. This meant that in some cases a young person who no longer attended school in any meaningful way was at the same time precluded from looking for training elsewhere. For a young person turning sixteen in December, this meant six months of potential training were lost. A hiatus of months, during which an individual had little to occupy or motivate them, was a high risk period in which involvement in criminality and subsequently paramilitarism could fill the gap. Some suggested that a closer working relationship between the Department for the Economy and Department of Education was needed to overcome such systemic 'blind spots.'

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[2] Within this report 'restorative practice' is considered to be an approach to resolving conflict and preventing harm that brings together the victim and offender. Victims are offered the opportunity to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, while those responsible are offered the opportunity to acknowledge this impact and consider ways they can responsibility for their actions (which may involve receiving structured support moving forward).

[3] Under current law, pupils must remain on the school roll until the June after their 16th birthday.

g. Low Aspiration and Hopelessness

Young people often have low aspirations for the future owing to a sense of hopelessness and demoralisation about the quality of work available to them. In a study completed for the British Council earlier in 2018, 90% of survey respondents in Northern Ireland were worried by a 'lack of jobs' to a 'great extent' or to 'some extent,' 85% about 'job security' and 89% about 'low pay' (British Council 2018). These concerns were repeated in the fieldwork for the present study with particular concerns about short term and zero hour contracts and the perceived low status of available work with little opportunity for career progression. These were significant disincentives for young people to fully engage in education and training, believing that their employment outlook was poor in any case – *'the young person needs to see a pathway from their current situation to a 'normal' life; they must see a point to any course.'*

For young people in work, inconsistent rota patterns, unsociable working hours and last minute shift changes characterised their working lives; particularly in call centres, hospitality and the service industry. These circumstances not only made their personal lives more difficult but also made engaging in additional training almost impossible, meaning that a 'low skill, low pay' cycle was hard to escape. Interviewees recognised a need for a cultural shift in sectors which employ high numbers of low skilled 16-24 year olds to better recognise the rights and quality of life issues of their young employees. This was thought to be an essential step in raising the status of such sectors in societal estimations and, in turn, the morale of young people.

h. Legacy Issues

The legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland creates barriers to participation in education and employment in a number of ways. The 'chill factor' has been identified elsewhere in that some individuals will not take up opportunities in certain areas, within a reasonable distance of their home, because of religious or political reasons or because they would not feel comfortable or safe in a particular area (Oxford Economics, 2014 in Wilson, Donnelly and Stainer 2018). A distrust of statutory organisations and government provision is also endemic in many parts of Northern Ireland. As a result there can be suspicion or reluctance from young people at times to take up opportunities provided by state entities.

Equally, in certain areas, the legacy of the conflict has resulted in poor infrastructure; either in terms of transport routes, opportunities for private enterprise or places of learning, training and education. This specific issue was stressed in the *Communities in Transition* fieldwork report for Carrickfergus and Larne which recommended 'a review of the lack of training/education facilities/classes' in the target areas (TEO 2018e; 14). One community worker in the Ardoyne area

described similar circumstances as having a subsequent damaging impact on the expectations of the area's young people in regard to their likelihood of continuing in education or training beyond school.

i.   Juvenile Criminal Records

A common theme was the detrimental impact of juvenile criminal records on the education and employment prospects of young people. Disclosure requirements often precluded enrolment or hiring. The disclosure arrangements for Northern Ireland are complex and have been met with criticism by various NGOs representing the interests of young people. The Children's Law Centre has argued that:

> *Information relating to cautions, informed warnings and diversionary youth conferences should only be disclosed in exceptional circumstances where the offence is sufficiently serious, is relevant and where there are concerns for public safety if the disposal were not to be disclosed. Information about old and minor convictions should only be disclosed where there is a proven risk of harm due to the potential negative impact on the training and employment prospects of young people of disclosure.* (Children's Law Centre 2014; para 6.5)

Many interviewees felt that juvenile convictions could be adequately dealt with within a risk management framework. Others questioned why childhood convictions, often for minor offences, were carried into adulthood, limiting a young person's opportunity to change their personal circumstances through education, training and employment.

One participant further explained that the time delay between a young person being charged and then convicted, often up to two years, can be an obstacle to personal transformation. Where an initial charge is a catalyst for change, sentencing can bring to an end training or employment secured in the interim period. It was suggested that efforts need to be made to close this gap.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The factors which make young people vulnerable to involvement or impact by paramilitarism or organised crime overlap and intersect with the barriers that make participation and progression in education, training and employment more difficult. Training and employment provides one potential means to 'disrupt the pipeline' (Smyth 2018; 3) by which young people become the victims, recruits or both of these organisations. The final section of the report makes a number of recommendations, developed from the observations of those included in the fieldwork, which aim to respond to the specific needs of the demographic in question by strengthening existing provision and suggesting fresh approaches.

a. Needs-based provision

Many of those young people who are at risk of paramilitary involvement are at a significant distance from participation in mainstream vocational training or further education. Many do not have the confidence or social skills to prosper in group-based environments and, given negative past experiences, are unlikely to be attracted to any formal education programmes. Others are living with a combination of mental health, substance abuse and housing problems which make involvement in heavily scheduled provision very difficult. There is a need for greater realism about the level of need faced and therefore greater flexibility in government-funded provision. For instance, predefined programme outcomes need to be individual-led and focus more on process than product in order to have relevance and meaning to young people; for some, desisting from drug use will constitute success even where employment is not secured.

It was additionally felt that steps should be taken to limit the number of moves that young people have to make between institutions in order to progress through or complete their education. This has an impact on the current design of ESF-funded schemes which are currently limited to providing level one qualifications. Instead, young people should be enabled to complete higher levels within their existing setting, rather than having to move to another provider with the many challenges that might entail.

It has been suggested that the *Learning Dreams* model as developed by Dr Jerome (Jerry) Stein of the University of Minnesota could be helpfully implemented in this context (Smyth 2018). The original model sought to address the educational underachievement of children, by re-engaging their parents in their own learning through uncovering a learning 'dream.' The 'dream' can be, for example, something the parent was passionate about when they were younger or always wanted to try. The model can be applied to young people as a means to build a joy for learning rather than addressing perceived learning deficits. A practitioner can work with the young person to co-design their own bespoke learning project, perhaps identified through exposure to a range of stimulating activities. Through this process the practitioner can help the young person to name potential obstacles to their learning, triggers which may lead to them disengaging from learning as well as their own personal learning style (Smyth 2018). The model is already being trialled in two Belfast youth clubs: *Holy Trinity Youth Centre* in Turf Lodge and *St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre* in Divis.

Case Study: Learning Dreams

Learning Dreams is a project based in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota that for 20 years has helped build a culture of learning for those cut off from educational success. The model was originally developed by Dr Jerome (Jerry) Stein to address the educational underachievement of children, by reengaging their parents in their own learning. The project helps people to uncover a learning 'dream' and aims to connect them to community resources to build a path towards achieving that dream. The 'dream' might be something they were passionate about when they were younger or always had an urge to try. Youth groups, libraries, public schools, and others partner with *Learning Dreams* staff to find exciting ways to engage their communities in learning. In this way the model helps to build a community of learners and a culture of learning for everyone.

More information is available at: http://learningdreams.org/

Approaches of intensive one-to-one mentoring used in alternative education and employability programmes, as under many ESF initiatives, were repeatedly praised. Flexibility in the content and design of a scheme is essential, to respond to the particular needs of the individual and to give them a sense of ownership over their learning, something which may have been missing from past experiences. There was some concern however, that contact hours under these schemes tend to be very limited, at the same time that enrolment in one often precludes involvement in others. This was felt to be problematic in leaving a vulnerable young person with a significant amount of unoccupied time during which risk-taking behaviours became a substantial temptation. Similar criticisms were directed at EOTAS provision, which in some cases can be as little as two hours per day.

Given doubts over the future of the ESF in the context of Britain's exit from the European Union, it is important that the financial sustainability of initiatives currently supported by the fund is guaranteed and the value of this provision, while resource heavy, is recognised.

As raised earlier in the report, the current decision not to provide EMA or subsistence payments for participation in ESF initiatives should be reviewed in order to better facilitate participation by the most economically disadvantaged.

In a similar manner, greater consideration should be given to the practical barriers to participation in training and subsequent employment perhaps with a dedicated fund to assist with the purchase of ancillary items; such as CSR cards, driving lessons, transport costs, and safety clothing.

There is a need to recognise the very specific and acute needs of looked after and care experienced young people in relation to educational outcomes. There is a stark disparity between the number of children and young people in care gaining five or more GCSEs at A*- C compared to the general population. The majority (84%) of the general population is gaining five or more GCSEs at A*- C compared to less than a third (29%) of children and young people in care (VOYPIC 2018). There was a preference among interviewees for adoption of Scotland's model of provision whereby all looked after young people are guaranteed support until twenty-one, with a phasing out process thereafter to age twenty-six (The Scottish Government 2015b; para131). This system recognises the necessity of a consistent and stable base from which a young person can pursue other priorities such as education, training and employment.

For some, the level of proficiency in literacy and numeracy required for successful completion of the *Training for Success* course was a considerable disincentive to enrolment. At the same time, several focus group participants felt the standard expected was too low and that their time spent on this element of the course could be better utilised. This pointed to a significant disparity in the abilities of individuals completing the same level of *Training for Success* and indicated the possible value of adding an additional foundation level class for any young person struggling with the numeracy and literacy content or the need to explore options for removing this requirement altogether for some individuals. In any case, it is imperative that adequate courses are available through FE colleges or training centres to match the capabilities of all school leavers.

A number of participants described the particular challenges faced by young people trying to return to education or training in the early twenties. At this stage young people faced a drop in the number of programmes and initiatives for which they remained eligible alongside growing shame or embarrassment about a lack of essential skills. In response, interviewees wanted to see more age specific essential skills provision; particularly for those in the nineteen and over category.

b. Community planning

A number of interviewees highlighted the role of community planning in addressing the barriers to participation and progression for young people in education, training and employment, referencing the corrosive effects of poverty on choice and aspiration. There was an appetite for clearer strategic thinking around how to add lasting value in communities which had already seen significant investment from European Peace Funds and other funding streams but to little visible benefit. In this way, options for collaborative working with structures such as Neighbourhood Planning Partnerships should be explored to build on existing local infrastructure and identify opportunities for job creation.

Participants pointed, for example, to missed opportunities to link training opportunities to major government infrastructure projects; such as the West Belfast Transport Hub. A local community organisation in the Falls area had lost funding to provide HGV driver training, not long before plans for the Hub were announced. This pointed to a need not only to focus on job creation, but on the sustainability of jobs and the capacity of local communities to compete for them. It was felt that residents rarely benefited from infrastructure projects in their area with employment opportunities being taken up by people from outside the locality, though it should be noted that the inclusion of social investment clauses in on-going and future government contracts may mediate this issue.

In light of the need for community oriented approaches, community workers indicated that care should be taken when contracting regional organisations to deliver training or employability schemes in local contexts. It was felt that these organisations often lacked the community-level knowledge needed to target provision in a way which would have greatest impact; leading to situations in which the same few individuals were being enrolled on consecutive schemes without any tangible progress in terms of employment or more advanced training options. There is need to ensure that regional organisations engage the in-depth local knowledge of community-level organisations in a way which is not merely perfunctory while enriching the capacity of local groups to grow the social capital and networks of an individual young person. Again the relevance of the *Learning Dreams* model noted above can be referenced here, as a secondary objective of the initiative was to create other 'nodes' of learning in a neighbourhood, beyond local schools. These could include a library, the youth club, a community centre or the local shop (Smyth 2018).

c. Working with the private sector

There was an identified need for employers, statutory bodies and the voluntary and community sector to work more closely together to ensure skills matched demand in the local economy. This included a need for improved government incentives for smaller employers to create apprenticeship and trainee positions and opportunities.

There was some concern, particularly in rural areas, that the skills taught in training centres were not matched to or outstripped demand. For instance, one focus group participant questioned the likelihood of his securing a job as a barber, given the volume of other similarly qualified peers looking for work in his town. It was suggested that training centres should consider increasing the range of courses on offer or offering certain popular courses on a rotational basis in consultation with local businesses.

A youth worker, working rurally, reported that young people were struggling to secure apprenticeships due to the cost of insurance for potential employers. Alongside incentives for employers, interviewees wanted to see more supported options for young people to work on a self-employed basis to provide an alternative and attractive option for those who may not excel in a traditional workplace.

There was also a need for government to work with employers in certain sectors (particularly hospitality and service industries) to instigate cultural change around the treatment of young employees. It was important that young people felt valued and respected in order to raise the status of jobs available to them and, in turn, to raise morale and motivation levels. This is perhaps particularly important in relation to the treatment of young people with SEN.

d. Valuing youth work

The essential role of relationships and building trust with affected young people was repeatedly emphasised by participants. For many, a youth worker will be the first and only adult in their lives who they can rely on. The relationship based approach of youth work was therefore thought to be key to supporting the progression of these young people.

One interviewee, however, described a 'cognitive dissonance' between youth workers and teachers and training centre staff. This disconnect was thought to be in part due to Northern Ireland's post-conflict environment where youth work has been co-opted by some individuals and organisations with little formal training but with influence in communities through historic or ongoing links to paramilitary groups. There is a need for investment in building understanding between these disciplines to foster effective partnership working and good practice sharing, and to move convincingly away from silo working.

This is most clear in reference to outreach youth work. It was explained by a number of interviewees that the most vulnerable young people are unlikely to initiate contact with a youth centre or training provider. Instead, detached youth workers play a vital role in 'going where and when the young people are' and encouraging the initial connection with youth or other services.

While being mindful not to dilute the vital and very particular role of youth work, interviewees discussed the need for better coordination between education and training providers and youth organisations. Value could be added by mainstreaming the training of teachers and staff in training centres and FE colleges in youth work approaches. Participants indicated that training of this kind could theoretically enable teachers and staff to offer a more holistic experience to at-risk young people, by increasing their capacity to identify and engage with young people who are exhibiting problematic/concerning behaviour. Interviewees noted that training of this kind would ensure that those involved in the education system recognise the need to treat each pupil as an individual, each of whom have different needs and require unique support.

In the present context the Education Authority youth workers employed under the START initiative in support of Action A4 of the Executive Action Plan may be a useful resource in bringing forward the action points suggested in this chapter. The START youth workers are employed in each of the target areas of the Action B4 *Communities in Transition* project.

e.   Restorative practice in schools

Increased use of restorative approaches in schools and other places of education and training could play a vital role in reducing the rate at which young people are excluded or self-exclude as a result of mismanaged conflicts or challenging behaviours. Expansion should build on existing examples of good practice, such as that of North Belfast Alternatives in the Belfast Boys' Model Secondary School and, in line with the conclusions of the Action B4 *Communities in Transition* fieldwork reports, foster the continued development of community-based restorative justice through encouraging full accreditation, professional development and integration with other justice services (TEO 2018a-h).

f.   Managing transitions

Participants regularly explained that transition points can be high risk times for vulnerable young people. It was felt that increased support is needed for some individuals when moving from mainstream secondary education or EOTAS into training schemes or FE colleges and again when moving into employment. Some already vulnerable young people can struggle to cope with a new environment, routine, staff or colleagues and the new tasks expected of them.

Extern's *Moving Forward, Moving On* programme was praised as one model which is already attempting to provide this added support. The initiative works specifically with young people leaving EOTAS into training and employment to improve the rate at which they maintain placements. The scheme, in part, involves weekly or fortnightly support clinics within the relevant training centres. Participants stressed the importance of consistent relationships, advising that steps should be taken to

ensure that the most vulnerable young people are assigned a mentor to maintain contact through the various stages of education and training, and extending into employment, to offer stability and to

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Case Study: Extern Moving Forward, Moving On Programme

Since 2013 Extern has been providing transitional mentoring support involving 'wraparound' support services to young people who face a variety of complex and interconnected issues.

There are three key elements involved in the Transitional Mentoring Support:

1) Emotional Support

Mentors build up a relationship with each young person based on trust and respect, enabling them to turn to the mentor when they need to be listened to without judgement.

2) Informed Advice & Guidance

Mentors provide advice not only in relation to education, training & employment, but also on a range of other support services, including: housing, addiction & counselling.

3) Hand-holding

For those young people who are vulnerable and/or lack the confidence to avail of different services and need more than just advice, mentors go with them to access adult services and help them fill in relevant forms.

Further information can be found at http://extern.org/what-we-do/moving-forward-moving-on-mfmo

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advocate in the young person's interests.

The volume of 'NEETs' provision on offer can be a source of confusion and stress for young people. One youth worker described how individuals often end up enrolling on the '*first thing that comes along*' rather than making a considered decision about the best option for them. It was felt that young people could be offered improved advice and guidance at an earlier stage in schools or youth centres, to enable them to make informed choices about their future working lives. This could include hearing from and learning about the experiences of others who have progressed in education and training outside of mainstream school.

A positive model for supporting the transition of young people from school into training is a pilot scheme currently underway and funded by the International Fund for Ireland involving a partnership between St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre and Workforce Training Services; the *Workforce Employability Programme*. The programme allows access to the training centre for 14 – 16 year olds one night per week with the aim of encouraging the young people to think early about pathways to employment and areas of work which might interest them.

g. Clear pathways to employment

The types of work which appealed to young people in the present demographic tended to be practical: childcare; hair and beauty; construction; painting and decorating; and so on. For education and training to appeal to marginalized young people, it had to present a clear pathway to employment. In a labour market where even graduates are unemployed, this presents a significant challenge. One issue discussed was the difficulty of securing good quality placements for those individuals with problem behaviours or a history of youth justice involvement. The problem was even more pronounced in rural areas. Yet such placements were essential for young people to gain the experience needed to successfully enter the workforce. It was felt that government incentives would be essential to opening up these opportunities for young people.

Beyond work placements and into employment, this will include working with private and public sector employers to provide ring-fenced positions for individuals to move into following a period of training to ensure that they do not simply return immediately to being 'NEET,' the importance of which has been recognised elsewhere (Wilson 2017).

It was additionally felt that there was a need to review the value of some training and employability initiatives on offer and/or to be clearer about the aims and objectives of certain qualifications. While recognising the need for short term courses, such as OCNs, which provide a route back into education and training, are cumulative alongside similar qualifications, or can be a first step to enrolment in longer term courses, there was concern that the expectations of young people are not always appropriately managed in relation to 'taster'-type schemes. Young people can expect to be 'work-ready' after a period of training which was not designed with this aim, and as such, express frustration when a qualification, in isolation, is of only limited practical use.

Several interviewees felt that young people's future work options were limited by the highly gendered nature of government training schemes, with demarcated paths for young women into childcare or beauty therapy and young men into 'traditional' trades. This was further thought to be unhelpful to all young people by perpetuating gender stereotypes which heavily influence power dynamics within communities. The *WomensTec* in North Belfast was established to offer courses in the traditional trade skills exclusively for women. The centre has experienced challenges with encouraging uptake of their courses in the 16-24 age category. One reason for this is thought to be that such training for women is not explored or encouraged in mainstream institutions.

Social enterprise opportunities should be further explored as a helpful way to allow individuals to 'learn on the job' and bypass formal education approaches or structures to which their personal learning styles or lifestyles are not well suited. Social enterprises can additionally create sustainable employment for those who may have difficulties finding mainstream employment. There are models

in the UK and USA which could provide useful case studies for application in the Northern Ireland context; for example, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU)'s *#BackingSecondChances* initiative is a police-led scheme specifically designed to provide opportunities to those with a history of offending; either through their catering social enterprise, Street & Arrow, working at major events such as the Glasgow Commonwealth Games or Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo or for private sector employers who opt into the scheme and receive specialised support from SVRU staff.

Case Study: Scottish Violence Reduction Unit

In January 2005, the Strathclyde Police Force established the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) with the remit of targeting all forms of violent behaviour, in particular knife crime and weapon carrying among young men in and around Glasgow. The newly formed VRU became the only police force in the world to adopt a public health approach to violence. In April 2006 the unit's remit was extended nationwide creating a Scottish centre of expertise on tackling violent crime.

In tackling gang crime the unit imported a successful anti-gang violence initiative spearheaded in Boston in the 1990s. The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence programme broke up Glasgow's long established gangs by offering members an alternative to the violent lives they were living.

This approach includes the *#BackingSecondChances* initiative which offers people the chance to leave their offences in the past and work with the SVRU: including, helping out behind the scenes of major events like Glasgow's Commonwealth Games and the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo; working as part of the SVRU team or within the unit's social enterprise, *Street & Arrow.*

Further information can be found at http://actiononviolence.org/

A further example is Homeboy Industries based in Los Angeles which has been operating successfully since 2001. The independent not-for-profit provides employment opportunities alongside support services. Its businesses include a bakery, silkscreen printing and embroidery, merchandise, a café and food products (Sturrock 2012). Sturrock (2012) has identified a number of features central to the success of initiatives like these which include: provision of case management and support services in the same location as the enterprise; employment services which aim to transition individuals into mainstream employment; clear progression routes which provide tangible rewards to those who continue with the project; and recognition/provision of opportunities for the entrepreneurial skills development of those who take part.

h.   Provision of wrap-around support

Throughout the fieldwork, participants stressed the necessity of wrap-around support, such as addiction support, counselling and alternative therapies, to increase the capacity of young people to

maintain and progress in training and employment. Training centre staff and youth workers spoke about the significant additional time spent attempting to fill a void in state provision around mental health care and substance abuse. Practitioners noted the additional considerations to be made when working with a young person who may have severe mental health or substance abuse issues, for example, check-ins at high risk points such as Friday and Saturday nights, relocating the young person or introducing them to a new friendship circle. They spoke about being faced regularly with situations of young people in considerable distress or crisis and being underprepared or untrained to deal with it.

One way in which additional funding support might be delivered is through the creation of a discretionary fund for centres delivering government training schemes, administered by the Department for the Economy and allocated on a case-by-case basis where crisis interventions may be needed. This could successfully operate alongside a system of subsidized training in specialized areas such as supporting a young person experiencing suicidal ideation.

It was clear that, where possible, creative approaches should be taken to ensure that a vulnerable young person must only have to navigate one 'point of contact' for services. Interviewees stressed that young people struggle to travel to new places and to attend pre-scheduled appointments for health and other support services. As such, where possible, it was felt that statutory providers and/or charities providing a range of advice and therapeutic services should endeavour to go to the young person in a place with which they are already familiar and attending regularly; often youth centres or other places of education or training. This recommendation connects with proposals in the *Communities in Transition* fieldwork reports which highlighted the need for better inter-statutory coordination, including between Health Trusts, Support Hubs, social services, the PSNI and others working with vulnerable youth (TEO 2018e).

The West Belfast report drew attention to the Integrated Services for Children & Young People (ISCYP) initiative as a potential model for a community-based response to substance misuse issues. The ISCYP operated from four bases in neighbourhood partnership areas (Falls, Shankill, Upper Springfield and Andersonstown) across West Belfast between 2009 and 2012, providing a range of support services and programmes in partnership with various referral agencies (education, health and social care, youth justice, community, voluntary and statutory including self and/or parents). The report recommended the re-establishment and expansion of this initiative (TEO 2018h).

i.   Longer-term funding

Throughout the fieldwork, participants raised the limitations of short-term funding cycles. There was thought to be an institutional preference for 'new' or 'pilot' schemes rather than building upon or sustaining initiatives with proven results. The Social Inclusion Framework should allow for multiyear funding cycles to create conditions for real and sustained change. Longer term funding should be

applied alongside a system of collaboration and signposting within and between organisations and services to meet the changing needs of an individual young person over time. It was repeatedly emphasised that young people may leave and return from training or employment numerous times, and funding needs to reflect this non-linear progression.

Funding decisions should be guided by the presence of pre-existing relationships, that is, funding should be focused where young people are already seeking help and support. In many cases this will be local youth clubs which act as trusted intermediaries between young people and their families, statutory bodies and in some cases paramilitaries themselves.

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