



Secretary of State Hilary Benn MP/ Tánaiste Simon Harris TD

Via email

28 February 2025

Dear Secretary of State Benn and Tánaiste Harris,

I am writing to you both today regarding recent reports that the UK and Irish governments are considering appointing an “intermediary” to encourage active paramilitary style criminal gangs in Northern Ireland to end their violence and disband.

As Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland I am gravely concerned by this.

These gangs create victims within their communities, acting as an oppressive and cruel millstone weighing down the people who are day in, day out, tortured by them.

Any move to give them legitimacy, or to act as if they are credible organisations worthy of engagement, is an insult to the victims of their crimes.

If such a move is to be made, I would respectfully ask for reassurances that whoever is appointed makes all attempts to carry out their role in a trauma-informed way, giving specific care and attention to not causing further harm to the victims of these gangs.

Furthermore I would ask that if someone is appointed that they be required to engage with this office to fully understand the impact these gangs have on individuals in our society.

Last year the NI Executive launched a strategy to end violence against women and girls. I know that this is something you are both passionate about supporting.

I would point you to Professor Aisling Swaine’s research published last September by the Family Justice Centre in Foyle highlighting how paramilitaries are coercively controlling women today.

We cannot, on one hand, say that we are serious about tackling violence against women and girls, while on the other hand offer legitimacy and credence to those we know are actively harming them.

There is a broad consensus in Northern Ireland that offering legitimacy and credence to these gangs is wrong. The Ending the Harm campaign launched last year that describes the impact paramilitary style gangs have on communities here is supported by 89% of people, according to recent market research.

In my own role I have carried out the first ever victim survey that is open to victims of all crime in NI. In that survey only 7% of respondents said they had confidence that our system could deliver justice.

What impact, what further damage, will be done to that confidence if certain criminal gangs are given special treatment? What victim will believe that if they call for help it will come, if the message is being sent that these organisations are legitimate?

Not long after I took up this role I had a meeting with a woman who was a victim of domestic abuse. Her partner was a member of a paramilitary gang and having been found guilty of an offence was sentenced to time in prison.

Even while he was in prison, he would use his connections to the gang he was a member of to control and harm her. He would call her and ask her why she hadn't put her blinds up in the morning.

The implication of this is chilling. He was telling her that even though he was in prison, he could get to her, he could hurt her.

He was able to do this because he was in a paramilitary gang.

This story indicates the horrendous grasp these organisations have on so many communities here.

Those communities are far from the hallowed halls of power, and the voices of those who live there are rarely heard by those who make decisions.

But that is why it is all the more important that they are heard, by people like you, who have an opportunity to make sure they are not ignored as collateral damage in pursuit of some other goal.

How we move from a society in conflict, to a post-conflict society, to a normal society is the great question facing everyone with an interest in Northern Ireland.

I wish that I was able to provide you with an easy solution to this question, but I do not believe that an easy solution exists.

What I am absolutely certain of though, is that we cannot endeavour towards progress by causing more harm to those currently living under the fear and control of such gangs.

If you would care to meet to discuss this or any other issue, I am more than happy to facilitate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Geraldine Hanna", with a horizontal line underneath.

Geraldine Hanna
Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime