

# The Withdrawal of Funding for UDA Conflict Transformation Initiative

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The decision by Margaret Ritchie, the Social Development Minister, to terminate the £1.2m grant for a conflict transformation initiative aimed to move the UDA away from paramilitarism into community activity raises some important and difficult issues.

The decision was in the context of renewed loyalist violence involving East Antrim groups linked to Johnny Adair, the ousted UDA leader forced to flee to Britain amidst allegations of violence and drug racketeering. Ritchie wanted assurances that the UDA would guarantee that the grant would not sustain violent groups and that the UDA would follow the IRA's example and turn its weapons over to the International Decommissioning Body.

Wanting the UDA to decommission their weapons is the right policy. Giving an ultimatum now may not be. And a loose federal body is not a command structure. Moving the UDA away from paramilitarism is also a right policy but it may not be possible, or only partly possible. What is an appropriate and reasonable timescale to achieve such policies? Or to come to a judgment that they have definitely failed? What is the appropriate balance between carrots and sticks when dealing with paramilitaries? When does a zero tolerance for criminal activity involving paramilitaries become the norm? What does a UDA move into community activity look like, e.g. does it look like a takeover of community organisations and centres? How do loyalist communities become vibrant neighbourhoods? Is paramilitarism a symptom of a much wider malaise?

Margaret Ritchie should probably have given the conflict transformation more time, but there are legitimate issues to be raised.

**David Stevens**