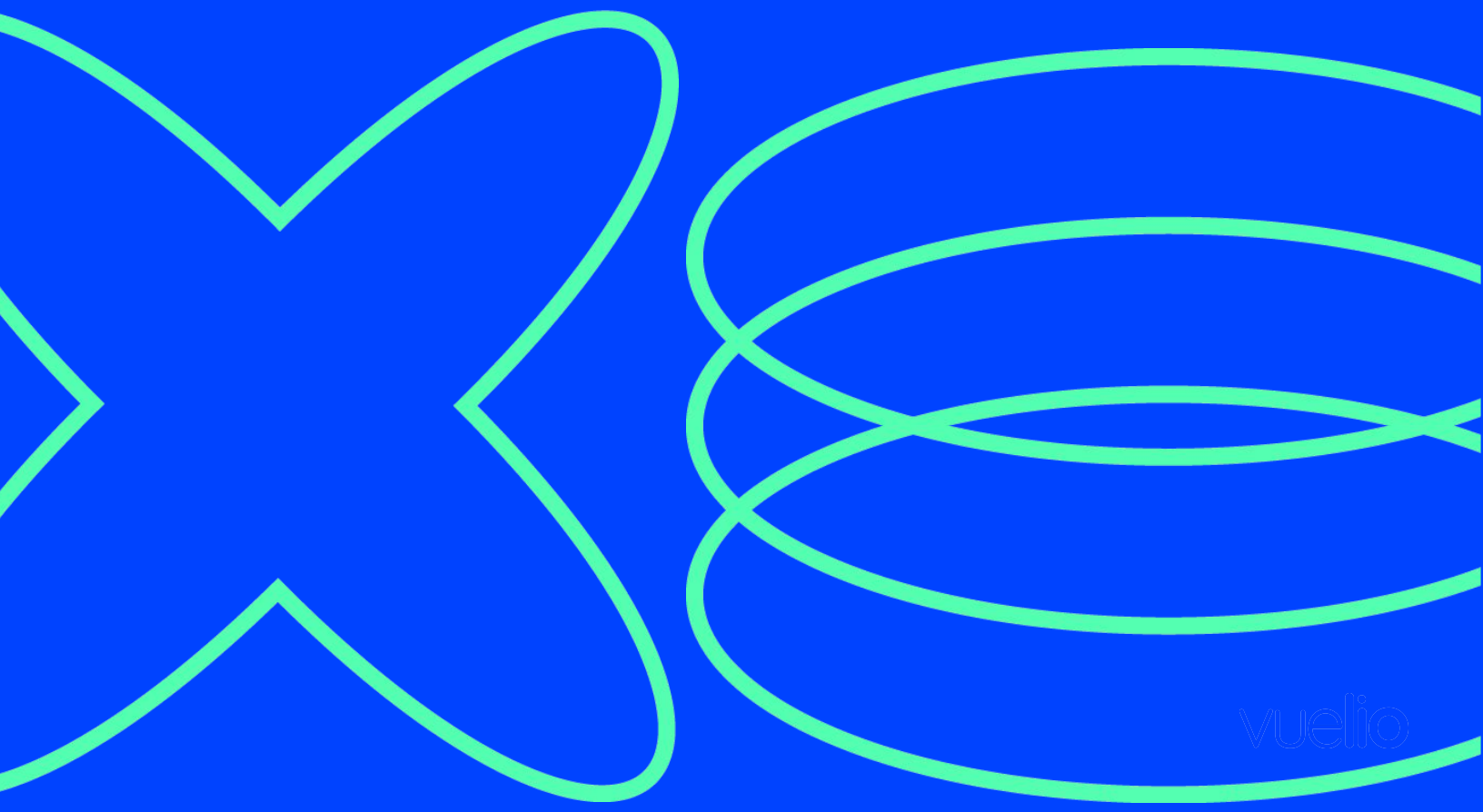


How the Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVSNI) advocated for their communities in Westminster



The Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland advocates for victims and survivors of the decades-long conflict in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles.

Their work includes support for individuals and society in the healing process by ensuring the funded services are fit for purpose, as well as conducting research, and advising governments on prioritising the interests of those affected.

Aiming to address the past while building towards a better and more reconciled future for Northern Ireland, CVSNI's ten-person team faced a huge challenge when UK Parliament proposed the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill in May 2022.

The challenge of navigating a controversial Bill

Widely condemned across Northern Ireland's political spectrum, The Bill's key contentions included provisions for immunity from prosecution for Troubles-related offences, and shutting down civil cases.

The CSVNI team knew stopping the Bill's passage through Parliament would ultimately be an insurmountable task (it was eventually passed into law in September 2023). However, amendments could still be made, and important work would be needed to keep victims and survivors front and centre:

'There was such a vested interest in this Bill because of what it meant for other conflict zones and the rest of the world who would look to the UK as a leader in upholding human rights,' said Alana Fisher, CVSNI's former head of communications and PR.

Educating the public and politicians

A major challenge of the campaign was the key stakeholders' lack of knowledge of the ongoing impact of Northern Ireland's past. Educating the public and politicians became the focus of CVSNI's campaign.

Using Vuelio's Parliamentary Contacts Database and Media Database, CVSNI targeted the media, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and academics, international groups including the United Nations, the ECHR, and the US, as well as those with power in UK Parliament.

'We wrote to parliamentarians likely to have vested interest in this issue and developed very specific requests to be considered as amends to the Bill,' explained Alana.

From Northern Ireland to the House of Lords

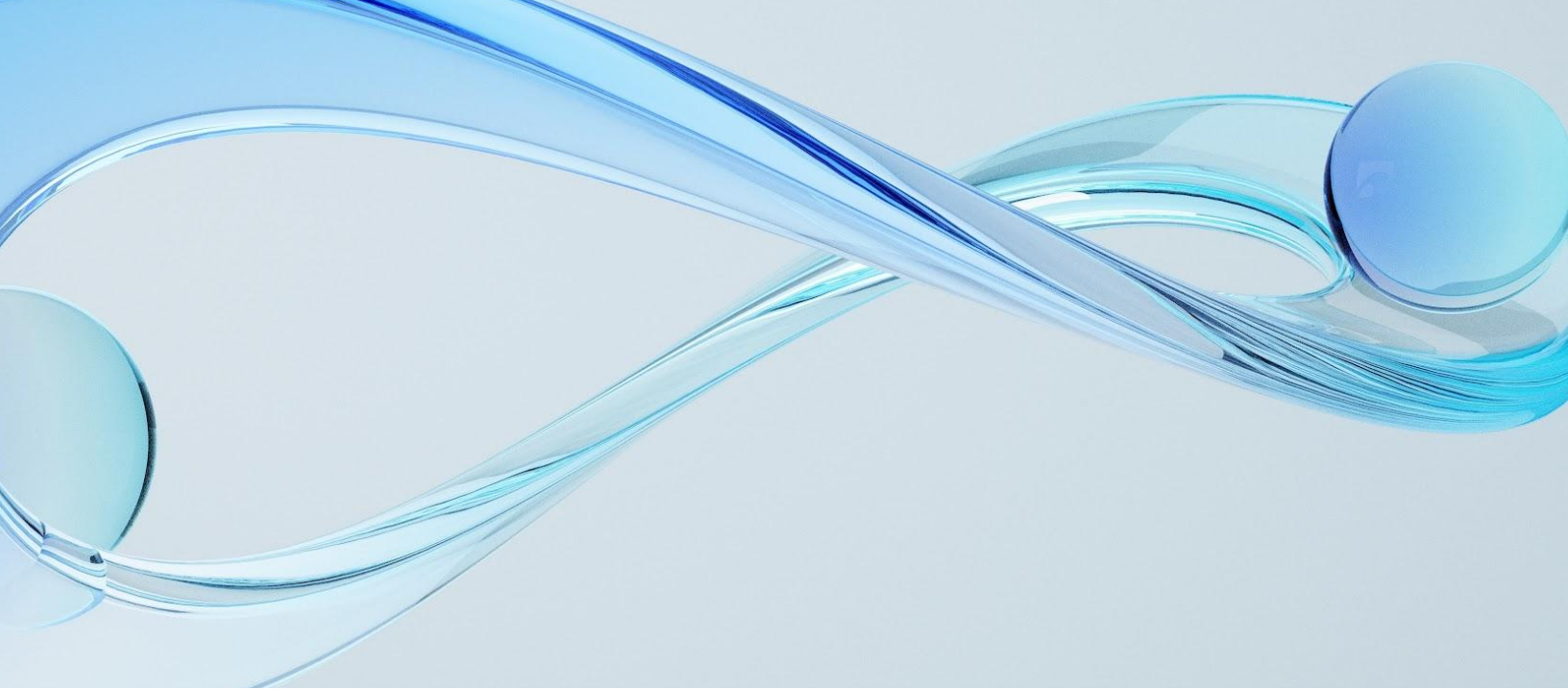
Able to secure a breakfast meeting with House of Lords Peers, the CVSNI brought them together with victims to share what the Bill would mean for them, their families, and wider society.

'Most of the victim sector in Northern Ireland took an approach of no engagement with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), which is Westminster's branch looking after Northern Ireland. The Commission came from a different point of view – we are a statutory organisation, and we have to advocate for all victims. We were vocal in our opposition to the Bill in the media, but alongside this, we adopted a pragmatic approach of learning, in determining the power and influence we could have in the final shape of the Bill.'

'The media and our own comms channels were an important way to highlight our messages – traditional media as well as self-generated.'

Changing perceptions

The Commission's campaign to educate the public on the intricacies of the Bill, as well as Parliamentarians regarding the lived experiences of the people it would impact, was successful:



'We really got to grow knowledge and understanding of the continuing impact of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, not just on victims and survivors, but through the generations,' said Alana. 'That knowledge isn't always there in mainland UK, particularly with generational change.'

'Many members within the House of Lords went on record to say that the original proposal for Bill would be the wrong approach, and at one stage during its passage, the Lords voted to remove the clause around immunity from prosecutions (it was, however, reinstated by the House of Commons).'

'We were able to get our message onto media channels in mainland UK as well as in Northern Ireland and international journalists, like those at the New York Times who were now keeping an eye on this.'

With international coverage of CVSNI's content and outreach, the Commission placed the communities they advocated for in a position to be heard by decision makers across the world.

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