



# Inciting a Pogrom?

Social media and the racist disorder in Ballymena and beyond during summer 2025



Report published by CAJ, September 2025. © CAJ,

The material may be reproduced, free of charge, in any format or medium without specific permission, provided the reproduction is not for financial or material gain. The material must be reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. If the material is to be republished or issued to others, acknowledgement must be given to its source, copyright status and date of publication.

CAJ, 1st Floor Community House, Citylink Business Park, 6A Albert Street, Belfast, BT12 4HQ. [www.caj.org.uk](http://www.caj.org.uk)



# Contents

FOREWORD	01
BACKGROUND	02
INTRODUCTION	03
CHAPTER ONE NARRATIVE: SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY	05
CHAPTER TWO ORGANISING: LOCAL INITIATIVES	14
CHAPTER THREE POLITICAL: PARTY RESPONSES	25
CONCLUSION	35
RECOMMENDATIONS	37

---



# CAJ Foreword: Research Context and Organisations Involved

---

## The Organisations Involved

- The Committee on the Administration of Justice ('CAJ') is an independent human rights organisation with cross community membership in Northern Ireland and beyond. CAJ was established in 1981 and is based in Belfast. For many years CAJ has had strands of anti-racism and migrant rights work, with a range of interventions seeking strategic policy change. CAJ currently has a strategic partnership project with the Derry-based North West Migrants Forum (NWMF).
- CAJ alongside the trade union UNISON co-convenes the Equality Coalition, a network of 100+ NGOs and trade unions campaigning and engaging on a range of equality issues in Northern Ireland whilst fostering collective solidarity among members and coordinated interventions.
- Rabble Cooperative is a Belfast based technology cooperative comprised of members with backgrounds in human rights advocacy, trade union organising, policy research, journalism, teaching and facilitation. They support progressive organisations and social movements to realise the power of technology in strategies for social change.

## Background

This report builds on the Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report (May 2025), which examined case studies of far-right activity, from racist housing intimidation in South Belfast (2023) to the racist and Islamophobic violence in Belfast on 3 August 2024. That report analysed social media narratives, political messaging, and responses to these incidents, and was launched in Belfast, Derry, and later at the Irish Council of Civil Liberties and CAJ annual policing conference in Dublin. It also became a point of international media reference at the time of the June 2025 with the Ballymena.<sup>1</sup>

The report was funded by Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, AB Charitable Trust and the Civic Power Fund: Emergency Action Fund. A snapshot exercise which triggered the broader project following the August 2024 violence, was supported by Equality Coalition programme costs provided by the UNISON Campaign Fund.

## Present Report

The present report focuses on the racist violence that began in Ballymena on 9 June 2025 and spread across Northern Ireland. Research by the Rabble Cooperative tracks how online narratives were framed and amplified, both locally and internationally, and how this activity contributed to offline coordination. It also assesses political and party responses, and the extent to which they legitimised or normalised anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse.

The current report was supported by the UNISON Campaign Fund, support from the Legal Education Foundation and a Voice, Influence and Partnerships grant from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We are grateful for this support, and that of our core funders, without which this research would not be possible.

## Intended Outcomes of the Research Report

- Highlight trends in anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments online and their materialisation in offline activities, such as the rise in 'vigilante' groups in Belfast.
- Shape and improve the public policy response to racist violence and intimidation including;
  - The response from Stormont Executive in its hate crime and tackling paramilitarism programmes
  - The need for strengthening of hate crime legislations
  - The need for fulfilment of statutory duties to remove hate expression
  - The need for a more effective and proactive policing response
- Use of the materials in training and capacity building in anti-racism work within Trade Unions and in the equalities NGO sector, with particular focus on identifying and combatting mis-and-disinformation.
- Inform and shape responses within the racial and social justice sectors on how to report and seek effective remedy for online racist agitation as part of broader anti-racism work.
- Engage with mainstream media on mapping of racist violence and combatting disinformation.
- Explore developing trends such as the profitability-model of far-right agitation online and the role of algorithms in promoting and monetising harmful content.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [Al Jazeera](#), 13<sup>th</sup> June 2025 - Why have anti-immigration riots broken out in Northern Ireland? [The New York Times](#), 11<sup>th</sup> June 2025 - Anti-Immigrant Riots Set Northern Irish Town on Edge.



# Background to Racist Violence & Intimidation in Northern Ireland

---

The manifestation of racist violence and intimidation in Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the UK and Ireland, in the context of the involvement of elements of paramilitary groups. The prevalence of racist attacks and the relatively small size of the migrant and broader minority ethnic community mean lived experience of racist intimidation is stark. In 2020, a Judge-led Independent Review of Hate Crimes Law in Northern Ireland found the likelihood of a person being a victim of a reported racist incident was 1 in 31 (the comparative figure for a sectarian incident was 1 in 1,777).<sup>2</sup>

It is well documented that there is a particular problem of the involvement of *elements* of loyalist paramilitarism in racist violence and intimidation, whether sanctioned by leaders of groups or factions or not, or involving persons with paramilitary connections.<sup>3</sup> This often manifests itself in violent racist and sectarian intimidation from housing in areas of control, which can be preceded by related racist materials in public space to deter migrants from living in the area. Reflecting on past approaches to sectarian intimidation, there has been a limited state response to this.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the August 2024 riots in English cities were considered to be the worst racist violence in recent British history, the riots in Northern Ireland were an escalation of a pre-existing pattern of racist violence, intimidation and expulsion with a distinctive paramilitary element. To give some examples, Mohamad Al Alloush's shop, targeted and burned down in the Belfast protests, had been subject to two previous arson attacks. In July 2024 (i.e. before the riots), eight African nurses and their families were violently evicted in Antrim Town. Around the same time 'locals only'-'no foreigners' graffiti was followed by the flags of the UDA paramilitary group being placed in a new development in north Belfast to deter uptake of housing. This phenomenon has not

gone unnoticed at the UN and Council of Europe human rights treaty bodies. In summer 2024, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), expressed concern about:

*...reports of paramilitary groups and affiliated individuals perpetrating acts of racist violence and intimidation to deter persons belonging to ethnic minorities and migrants from taking up housing or establish business in certain areas. It is also concerned about information indicating that victims do not always report these acts for fear of reprisals and that the response by the authorities and the police has been ineffective.*<sup>5</sup>

The Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) made similar observations on the situation up to April 2024 following an earlier monitoring visit to Belfast:

*ECRI is deeply concerned about a significant recent increase in attacks, such as firebombing, against businesses owned by people with a migration background in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as well as about similar attacks against premises used for worship by religious minorities, notably mosques, in both of which there might be a degree of involvement by paramilitary groups, which police have reportedly been reluctant to investigate effectively for fear of upsetting the fragile peace prevailing between different paramilitary groups.*<sup>6</sup>

Into 2025, the UN treaty body on socioeconomic rights (ICESCR) examining the right to housing, urged the authorities to 'prevent and combat intimidation by paramilitary groups against ethnic minorities and migrants in Northern Ireland to ensure their access to adequate housing and to prevent de facto segregation.' It is this specific context that should be considered when reading the case studies and analysis contained within this report.

<sup>2</sup> Independent Review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Executive summary

<sup>3</sup> See Frontline Lessons for the Future Collaborative research on the impact of immigration law and policy in post-Brexit Northern Ireland (CAJ June 2022) section 4.1.3.

<sup>4</sup> See CAJ and North West Migrant Forum, Submission to UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination on the UK, (July 2024) paragraphs 35-45.

<sup>5</sup> UN CERD, Concluding observations on the combined twenty-fourth to twenty-sixth periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, paragraph 21.

<sup>6</sup> ECRI Report on the UK, adopted 3 July 2024.



# Introduction

On Monday 9 June 2025, two teenage boys appeared at Coleraine Magistrates Court charged with alleged serious sexual assault of a teenage girl two days prior in the town of Ballymena. The boys, appearing via video link from a juvenile detention centre in Bangor, Co. Down, addressed the court through a Romanian interpreter. They denied the charges. The PSNI later stated that a third suspect was being brought “back into the jurisdiction” to face charges.<sup>7</sup>

The family of the girl led a peaceful protest on the evening of 9 June 2025 in the town of Ballymena. During the march, crowds left the main protest and began attacking properties in the Clonavon Terrace area – an area with a high concentration of Roma people. Masked men smashed windows of homes and began setting properties alight.<sup>8</sup> As attacks on immigrant homes were being live streamed on social media during the Ballymena riots, conversations between hooded males in the process of attacking homes and burning cars were broadcast:

“Yo! There’s people in that house there.”

“Aye, but who lives in it?”

“If they’re foreigners they’d come out like.”

As a house burns, conversations from people observing the attack outside the house are recorded saying:

“They’re probably P██is, that’s why the fuckin boy is running up the stairs. Put the windows in around them.”

Comments in the live chat add:

“Come on move to the next one am loving this”

One man is recorded leaving a burning house shouting:

“Yo! F██k the foreigners!”

The family of the alleged victim said that they were “mortified” by the ensuing violence and asked for the PSNI Chief Constable to make a plea for it to end.<sup>9</sup> The chairman of the Police Federation stated that the PSNI “prevented a pogrom with consequences too painful to contemplate”<sup>10</sup> during its attempts “to quell hate-filled violence” in Ballymena when houses containing Roma families were systematically attacked. There were 709 people who classified themselves as “Roma” in the 2021 census<sup>11</sup> and “informed sources” estimated that two-thirds of Roma were forced to leave Ballymena as a result of the attacks.<sup>12</sup>

Social media was used to assist in the targeting of homes. The Ballymena Reaction Group Facebook page openly encouraged people to identify their homes, apparently listing homes that rioters should not to attack. Union Jacks were placed outside of homes for the same purposes. “Law-abiding” immigrants who do not “[belong] to migrant communities who have a history of sexual violence against teenage girls” were apparently encouraged to do the same. Posts across social media celebrated the expulsions. These incidents triggered a series of riots, violent disturbances, and attacks on homes lasting at least eight days across multiple towns, as well as in parts of Belfast, Derry, and Newry. The affected areas were mostly those historically considered “loyalist” and often associated with loyalist paramilitary activity.

This report analyses the role social media played in these protests and riots from a number of perspectives:

<sup>7</sup> belfastlive.co.uk (2025). Family of alleged Ballymena sex attack victim ‘mortified’ at violence. [online] Belfast Live. Available at: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/family-alleged-ballymena-sex-attack-31845969>

<sup>8</sup> irishnews.com (2025). Woman in Ballymena says ‘If they’re not local, let them stay there’, after being told attacked homes have people inside. [online] The Irish News. Available at: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/if-theyre-not-local-let-them-stay-there-womans-comments-as-masked-men-attack-homes-in-ballymena-and-attempt-to-set-curtains-alight-AW6YF262DJFE3BHJ3ZQ66NFNHE/>

<sup>9</sup> belfastlive.co.uk (2025). Family of alleged Ballymena sex attack victim ‘mortified’ at violence. [online] Belfast Live. Available at: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/family-alleged-ballymena-sex-attack-31845969>

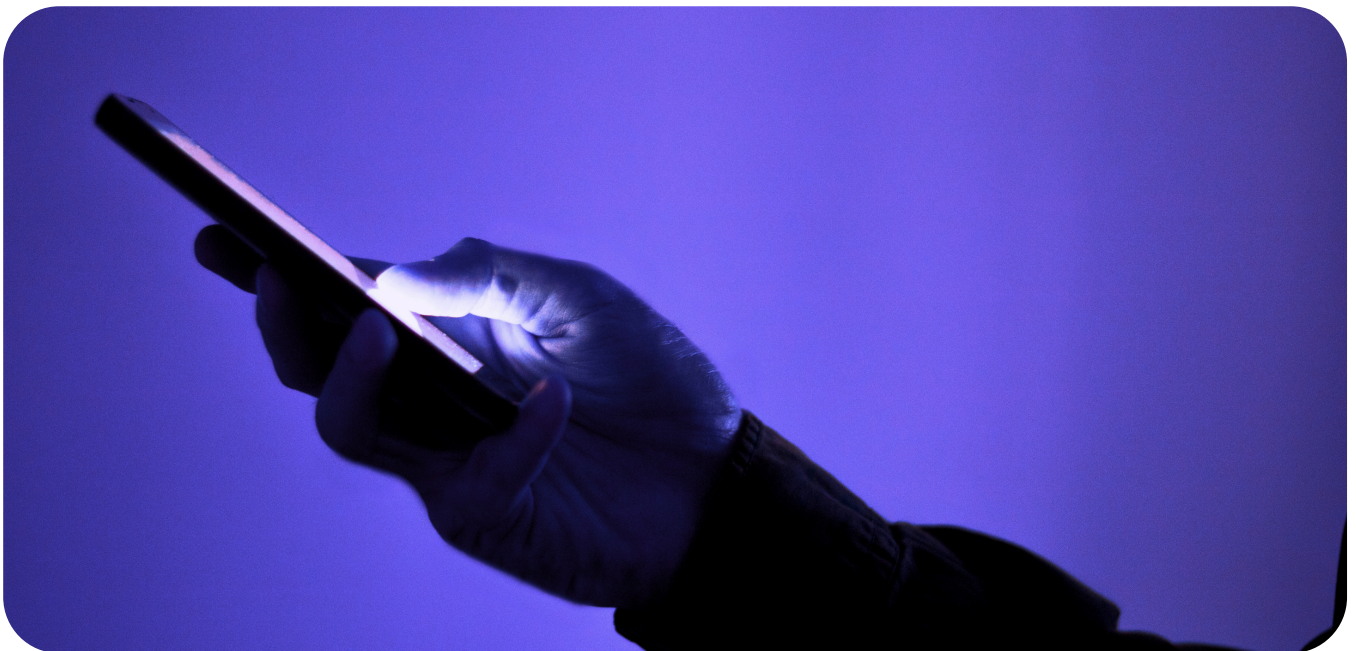
<sup>10</sup> McCambridge, J. (2025). Ballymena disorder would have been a ‘pogrom’ if not for police, Federation says. [online] Belfast Live. Available at: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/ballymena-disorder-would-been-pogrom-31828904>

<sup>11</sup> Madden, A. (2025). Ballymena and immigration fact checker: What’s the real story? [online] Belfasttelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/comment/ballymena-and-immigration-fact-checker-whats-the-real-story/a75982289.html>

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, R. (2025). ‘The place is empty, a lot have left’: Ballymena weighs up impact of anti-migrant riots. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jul/19/ballymena-impact-anti-migrant-riots-northern-ireland>

This report analyses the role social media played in these protests and riots from a number of perspectives:

- **Narratives:** 877 posts across X, TikTok and Instagram relating to the riots and protests<sup>13</sup> were analysed to understand the different reactions to the events of 9-18 June 2025 across these platforms. Further research was carried out by isolating the posts which received most views to get a sense of the popular content on each platform and insights into the accounts behind the content;
- **Organising:** previous research periods were focused on attempts at mass mobilisations and seemingly uncoordinated and unclaimed local attacks and events, the events which started in Ballymena witnessed the birth of local initiatives aimed at sustaining the anti-immigrant movement including loosely connected group and coordinated tactics supported by a coherent communications strategy. The primary platform for profiling these activities tended was Facebook. Local public Facebook groups that promoted anti-immigrant activities and were sympathetic to the riots were examined;
- **Political:** 244 X, Instagram and TikTok posts of political representatives from the areas worst impacted by the riots were analysed using a Large Language Model (LLM) to determine how the different political parties responds to the events. Written and Oral Ministerial Questions in the Assembly were also examined to gain an insight into how the different parties were approaching the issue of immigration in the legislature.



<sup>13</sup> A search of posts using keywords and hashtags were used to identify relevant posts.

# **Narrative: Social Media Activity**



# Narratives: Social Media Activity

## Overview and Methodology

To gauge social media responses to the events of 9–18 June 2025, a sample of 877 posts from X, TikTok, and Instagram was analysed. The study examined dominant sentiments, the reach of posts, and the geographic origins of top accounts. Posts were identified using keyword searches, informed by initial scans of common hashtags and phrases. However, due to inherent limitations and restrictions in how each platform enables public analysis of posts, there is a significant imbalance in the sample data, with X providing the majority of the collected posts.

Text and media content (e.g., videos) from posts were analysed to categorise the posts as follows<sup>15</sup>:

- Sympathises with/Condemns the violence
- Agrees/Disagrees with the protestors' and rioters' concerns, which conflated issues of sexual violence and strained public services with immigration
- Reports on events without offering an opinion on the protests or riots
- Undetermined, i.e., insufficient content to determine the nature of the post

Posts initially marked as “undetermined” or “reports” were manually checked to account for contextual nuance and non-textual content (e.g. videos, images). This analysis should be viewed as indicative of online discourse, highlighting emerging trends rather than offering a definitive account.

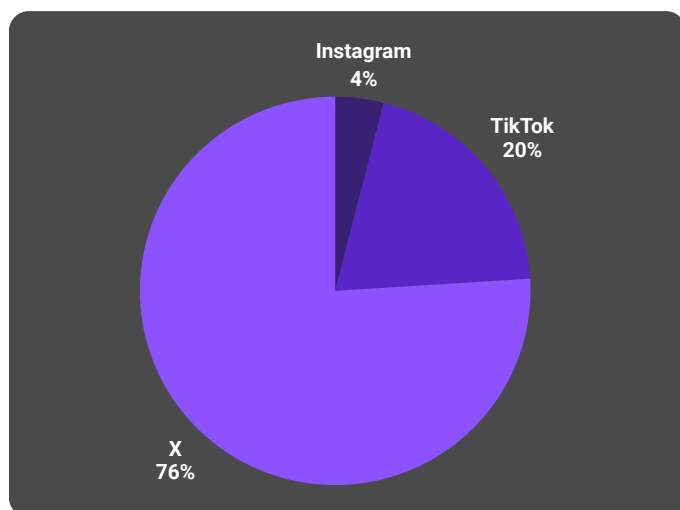


Figure 1.1 Sample data for social media sentiment analysis

<sup>14</sup> Where location was not included in the account's bio, it was determined by a proxy indicator of assessing the account's posting history and designating a location.

<sup>15</sup> DeepSeek-V3Large Language Model (LLM) used to analyse the social media posts that contained text content. Where the content was video based, or involved an image [overlaid with text] a manual assessment was carried out. This occurred in approximately 10% of the posts.

<sup>16</sup> Sentiment analyses for 125 posts (11%) were revised following manual assessment.

## Overall Sentiments

“Reports” was the top sentiment category (31%), indicating a high volume of ostensibly dispassionate commentary on ongoing events. In contrast to the uniform condemnation of violence observed in party-political responses (see chapter 3), 15% of posts expressed sympathy with the anti-immigrant violence, including the expulsion of families and clashes with police. This contrasts with the 14% of posts that explicitly condemned the violence.

Regarding alignment with the protestors' and rioters' articulated concerns, 26% of posts agreed with the sentiment linking immigration to increased violence against women and heightened social problems. This was more than double the 11% of posts that disagreed with this conflation of issues.

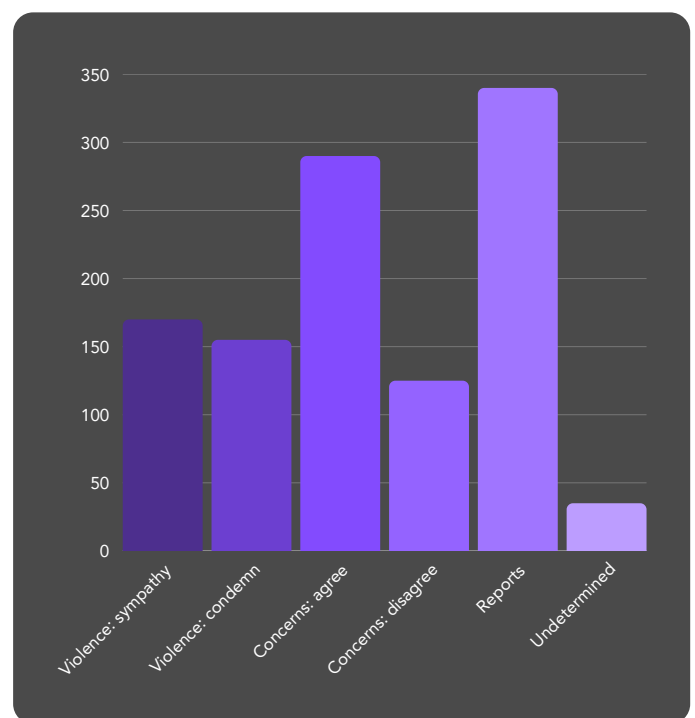


Figure 1.2 Sentiment of posts

## Top Performing

To identify which accounts were most effective in promoting their perspectives to a large audience, the top 5% of posts (44) with the highest number of views were isolated for deeper analysis. This examination focused on the nature of the content that achieved the greatest reach and the messaging these accounts conveyed to their respective audiences.

The 10 highest-performing posts were as follows:

Post	User	Location	Sentiment	Views	Assessment Explanation
guys this can't be real #ballymena #riot #ireland	g59ellie (TikTok)	Ireland (N)	Reports	2.4m	"The expression 'this can't be real' suggests disbelief or shock at the violence, implying disapproval or condemnation of the riots as unacceptable or unjustified."
Ballymena's finest!! Protester on the front line #ballymena #protest #riot	barry_lau (TikTok)	Ireland (N)	Undetermined	2.2m	"The phrase 'Ballymena's finest!!' with exclamation marks and labeling a rioter as a 'protester on the front line' romanticizes or sympathizes with the violent actions, presenting them in a positive light." NB: assessment changed from "Violence: sympathizes" to "Undetermined" following manual check
The news today in Ballymena and in more areas of Northern Ireland if more unrest and violence an disturbances is not a protest and is beyond that #news	lewisbarron (TikTok)	Ireland (N)	Violence: condemns	1.7m	"The post distinguishes the events from legitimate protest by stating 'is not a protest and is beyond that,' implicitly condemning the violence as excessive or unjustified."
Police attempt to disburse disgruntled crowd after third night of rioting in Ballymena. #Ballymena #Larne #drone #northernireland	adifferentviewni (TikTok)	Ireland (N)	Reports	1.6m	"The post neutrally describes police action against rioters without expressing sympathy, condemnation, or opinion on the underlying concerns."
Locals tried to resolve their concerns around child safety by engaging with the democratic process and were ignored or dismissed as 'racist' (this pattern is still evident)... ...This is a microcosm of Britain. The establishment has resolutely refused to listen to people's concerns, hoping that it can just keep shouting 'racist' as it imports huge amounts of men from alien, medieval, misogynist cultures and dumps them on people who haven't asked for them.	LeoKearse (X)	Britain	Violence: sympathizes Concerns: agrees	1.4m	"The post strongly sympathizes with the protestors' concerns about immigration and child safety, justifies the violence as a necessary response to being ignored by authorities, and advocates for similar actions nationwide, clearly endorsing both the concerns and the violent methods."

<p>Now Ballymena has shown that a united community can very effectively remove people. Everyone in Britain can see this<sup>17</sup></p>	<p>RadioGenoa (X)</p>	<p>Europe</p>	<p>Violence: sympathises Concerns: agrees</p>	<p>1.25m</p>	<p>"Referring to 'fake asylum seekers' and stating that 'the patience of Irish people seems to have run out' sympathizes with the violent action and endorses the underlying concerns about immigration."</p>
<p>Migrants in Ballymena let the angry public know they're Filipino, and don't do no sex attacks. The house is left unscathed.</p>	<p>TRobinsonNewEra (X)</p>	<p>Britain</p>	<p>Concerns: agree</p>	<p>1.21m</p>	<p>"The post highlights the indiscriminate nature of the targeting by noting that Filipinos, who are not associated with the alleged crime, had to justify themselves, implicitly criticizing the broad anti-immigrant concerns."</p>
<p>After nights of riots in Ballymena, residents are putting up flags and signs to deter people from targeting their homes.  They say rioters in the Northern Ireland community have largely targeted the homes of foreigners and Romanians, following the alleged sexual assault of a girl. #Ballymena #NorthernIreland #Riots #UK #C4News</p>	<p>IC4news (TikTok)</p>	<p>Britain</p>	<p>Reports</p>	<p>1.1m</p>	<p>"The post reports on residents' actions and the targeting of foreigners without expressing an opinion on the validity of the concerns or the justification of the violence."</p>
<p>The 3rd evening of pogrom in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.  The crowd applauded a house reported to be of a migrant being smashed up until one rock hits a neighbour who had a union flag up and they're suddenly shocked.  #ballymenariots #NorthernIreland</p>	<p>lii_doza (X)</p>	<p>Ireland (S)</p>	<p>Violence: condemns</p>	<p>962k</p>	<p>"Using the term 'pogrom' and highlighting the crowd's hypocrisy when violence affects one of their own implies condemnation of the violent actions and their indiscriminate nature."</p>

<sup>17</sup> Post is truncated. To see full post, visit: <https://www.tiktok.com/@adifferentviewni/video/7514865913867308310>



## Sentiments

Among the top 5% of posts by viewership, content that “Reports” on events remained the largest category (40%). Interestingly, accounts belonging to individuals or organisations who would be considered to be sympathetic to the articulated concerns of the protestors and even the rioters posted in a style more akin to a “Reports” than making partisan statements. For example Steven Yaxley-Lennon’s (aka Tommy Robinson) posts appeared 6 times in the top 5% performing posts, and 4 of them took on reporting-style posts [Fig. 1.3].



Figure 1.3 English far-right activist, Tommy Robinson shared posts on X reporting on the events occurring in Ballymena

Posts agreeing with the concerns articulated by the protestors and rioters constituted 19% of the sample.

This high-exposure cohort revealed a notable shift in sentiment: there was an increase in the proportion of posts expressing sympathy with the rioting itself (17%) and accompanying violence. This was matched by a corresponding drop in posts condemning the violence (12%) and those disagreeing with the protestors' underlying concerns (8%) [Fig. 1.4].

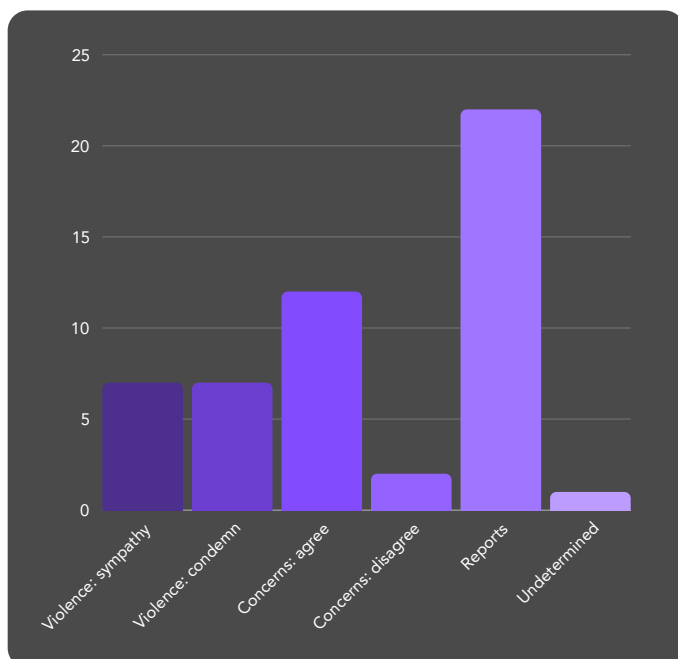


Figure 1.4 Sentiment of top 5% performing posts

## Location

Consistent with findings from previous phases, analysis of the data indicates that accounts based in Northern Ireland which promoted anti-immigrant narratives consistently failed to outperform accounts based outside the jurisdiction [Fig. 1.5]. Their highest-performing content, in terms of reach and engagement, was typically limited to posts that were strictly reporting on events, rather than expressing overtly partisan or inflammatory sentiments.

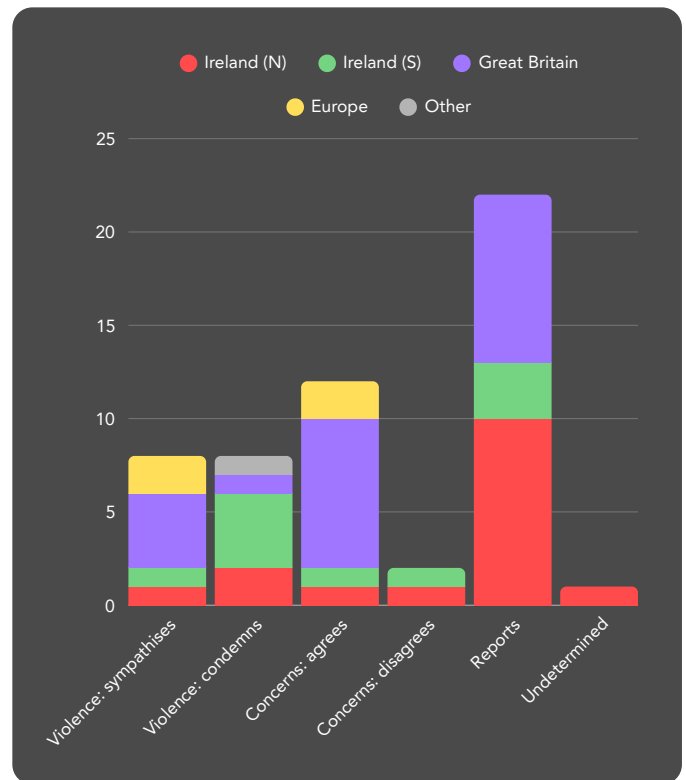


Figure 1.5 Location and sentiment of top 5% performing posts

Among the top 5% of posts by performance, content expressing sympathy with the rioters was most frequently published by accounts based in Britain. Prominent examples included Scottish comedian and broadcaster Leo Kears [Fig. 1.6] and the ActivePatriotUK X account [Fig. 1.7], which describes itself as an “independent journalist” covering immigration and housing.

Northern Ireland-based accounts that sympathised with the violence included the loyalist @Cairnlodge1 X account and user523320845007 [Fig. 1.8], who posted a video with a text overlay declaring:

“FOREIGNER RAPED GRANNY AND CHILD IN Ballymena, #BURN THEM OUT”

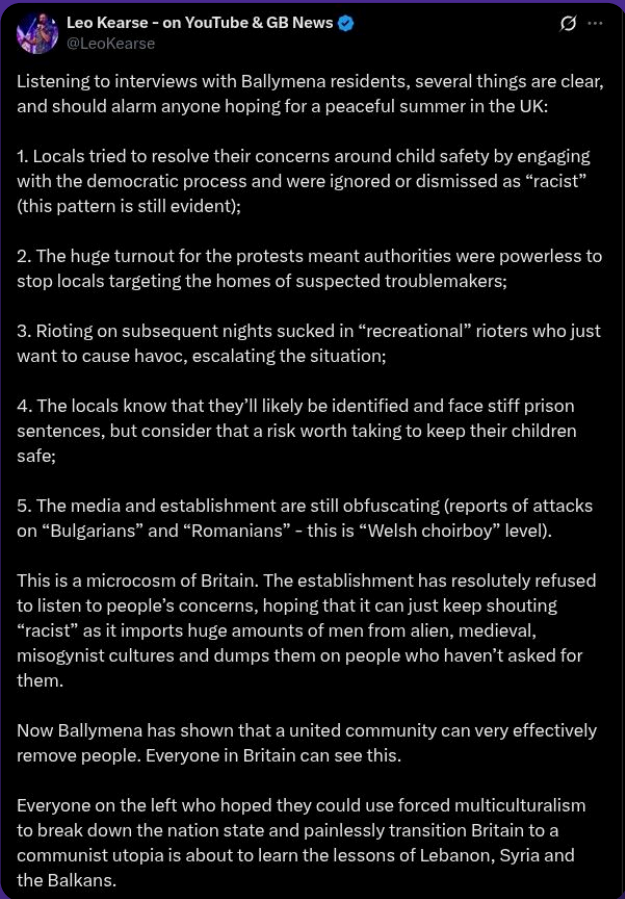


Figure 1.6 Leo Kears, Scottish comedian, commentary on X expressing sympathy with rioters

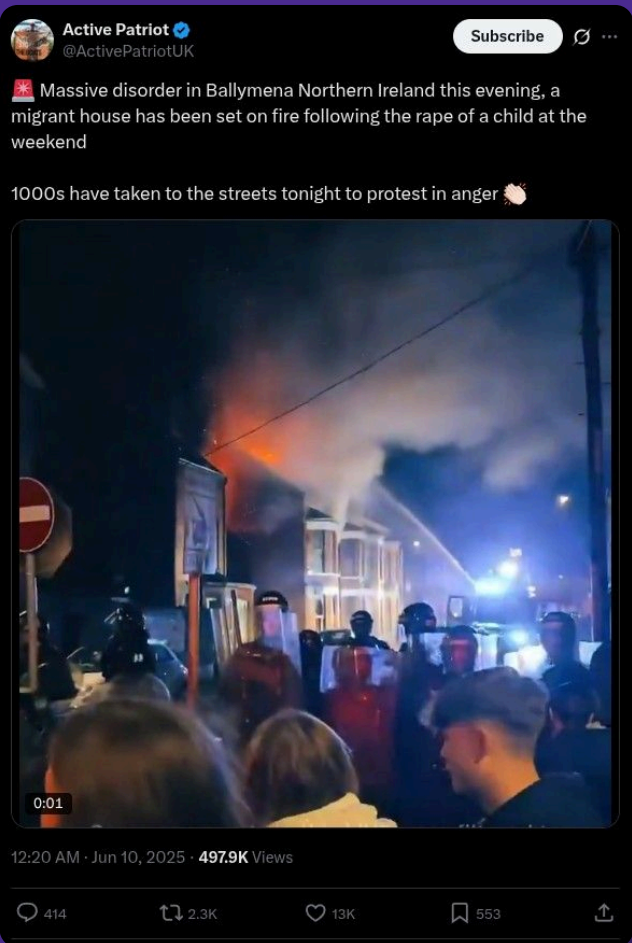
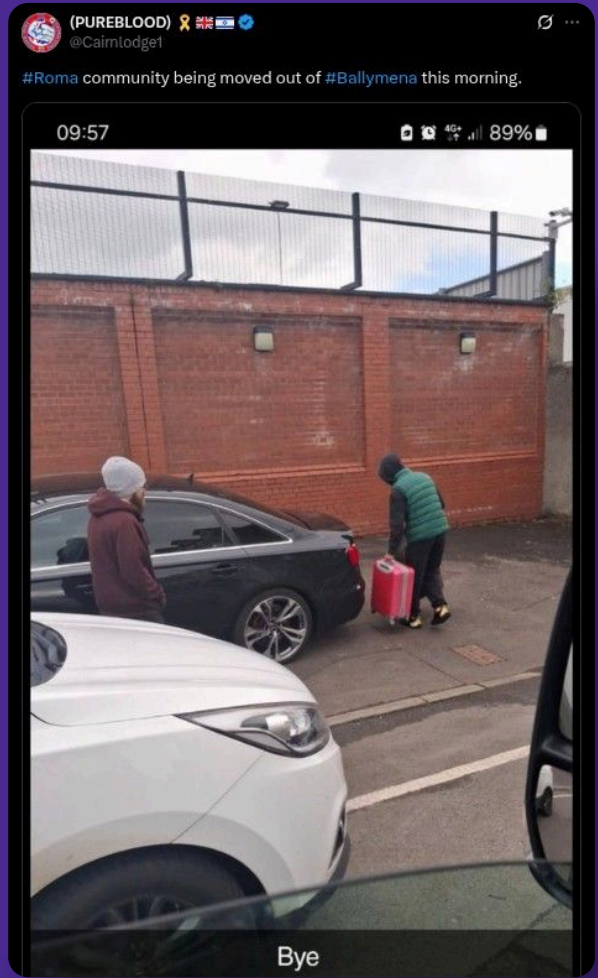


Figure 1.7 Social media commentary from ActivePatriotUK on X expressing sympathy with rioters

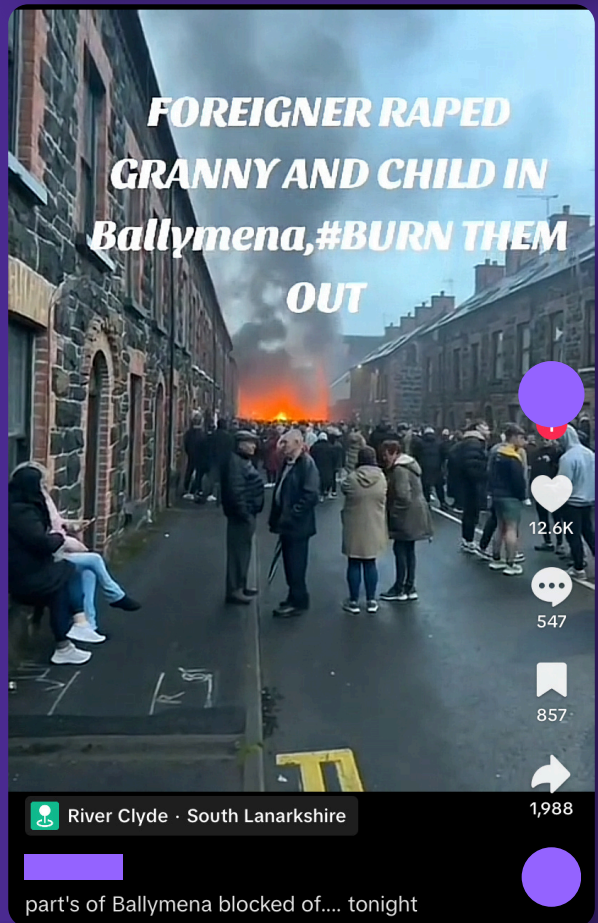


Figure 1.8 Social media users based in Northern Ireland sharing content from the Ballymena riots



X accounts that had promoted the August 2024 anti-immigrant riots, such as [@TheLiberal\\_ie](#) [Fig. 1.9] from Ireland and the European account [@RadioGenoa](#) also posted in sympathy with the June 2025 violence. For example:

*"For third night in a row, Irish people set fire to homes of fake asylum seekers in Ballymena. Protests spread to Coleraine, Larne, Newtownabbey and other towns in Northern Ireland. Corrupt politicians are to blame for this who have flooded our cities with criminal invaders."*



Figure 1.9 Irish based accounts on X promoting the anti-immigrant riots

Similarly, posts from British-based accounts proved the most impactful in terms of reach when agreeing with the concerns of the rioters and protestors. This category included well-known figures such as [Katie Hopkins](#) and Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson).

### Coordinated Narratives?

During the August 2024 protests and riots, a coordinated narrative emerged across a broad range of social media accounts. This messaging presented the fledgling anti-immigrant and Islamophobic movement as transcending historic sectarian divisions, uniting Catholics and Protestants against a common enemy. While employed by some small local accounts in the build-up to the riots, this narrative went viral when promoted by accounts based in Ireland (S), Britain, and Europe. These posts used similar terminology and media in a manner designed to boost their analytics, successfully garnering millions of views and engagements.

The June 2025 protests and riots saw a marked decline in references to religious identity. Of the 878 posts analysed, only 16 mentioned "Catholic" or "Protestant" when attributing causes or commenting on the disturbances. Nine of these posts either sympathised with the violence or expressed agreement with the protestors' and rioters' concerns. Importantly, unlike the earlier phase, there was no indication that this narrative was being circulated in a coordinated manner to boost visibility.

From the Ireland (N) region, only a single post referred to Catholic-Protestant unity within the protests. The narrative appeared more frequently among Ireland (S) accounts, particularly from the [Síol na hÉireann](#) political party, which employed both the framing and riot footage as part of recruitment efforts (see table below).

The X account for London-based journalist David Atherton promoted (1.12) the "unity" narrative, receiving 632k views [Fig. 1.10].



Figure 1.10 David Atherton promoting the 'unity' narrative

Account	Content	Location	Views
NiallMcConnell5 (X)	Ballymena! Family member of child who was raped by Roma gypsies speaks out! Catholics & Protestants United! Join Síol na hÉireann NOW!	Ireland (S)	114k
NiallMcConnell5 (X)	Ballymena! Tensions are high after two Roma gypsies raped local young girl! Protestant & Catholics MUST UNTIE against the invasion of our island! Join Síol na hÉireann below!	Ireland (S)	47k
NiallMcConnell5 (X)	Ballymena! Angry locals speak out against the rape of a young girl by roma gypsies! Catholics & Protestants MUST UNTIE against the invasion of our Island! Join Síol na hÉireann below!	Ireland (S)	33k



David Atherton, who has a history of posting support for far-right and anti-immigrant causes<sup>18</sup>, and was also prominent in the October 2024 events at Girls' Model School in north Belfast by amplifying disinformation about the young girls who were ultimately forced to leave the school for their own safety.

The other seven posts referencing "Catholic" or "Protestant" largely originated from accounts aligned with Irish nationalism and republicanism. These posts condemned the violence and/or disagreed with the concerns of the protestors and rioters by drawing parallels between the experience of immigrants and that of the Catholic community in Ballymena:

Account	Content	Location	Views
AnStreachait_ (X)	Remember folks, collusion is no illusion. Confirmed on Nolan this morning that the RUC/PSNI allowed the SEA-UDA to operate with impunity last night in Ballymena. It was only last year that the same UDA gang were intimidating Irish Catholics from their homes in Antrim. It was the case then too that no action was taken by the supposed "police" service.	Ireland (N)	28k
tim_brannigan (X)	The media has shown loyalists claiming Ballymena was a great wee place until the 'foreigners' came along. It's always been a town where hatred for Catholics was worn as a badge of pride. Blacks and Asians are a similarly easy, but more readily identifiable, target.	Ireland (N)	29k
JoeBrolly1993 (X)	In loyal Ulster, Immigrants are the new Catholics. When JimAllister was the DUP chief whip, he outlined his 'legitimate concerns' to Ballymena locals, who went on to force a Catholic couple & their six children out of the estate, smashing up their homes & car. <a href="https://t.co/EHng1EcJOf">https://t.co/EHng1EcJOf</a>	Ireland (N)	63k
MaryLouMcDonald (X)	What is happening in Ballymena is reminiscent of a time when violent loyalism burned catholics out of their homes. We are not going back to those times ever again. It is crucial now that order is restored and the attacks stop.	Ireland (S)	97k

<sup>18</sup> Committee on the Administration of Justice. (2025). Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report - Committee on the Administration of Justice. p.23 [online]

## Insights

### **Prevalence of anti-immigrant accounts**

Posts that were either sympathetic with the rioters or agreed with their concern constituted the largest proportion from the sample data (41%). Posts that seemingly “report” events constituted the largest proportion when examining the top 5% performing posts (40%). However when examining the accounts behind these “report” posts, 66% of them were from accounts that would be considered “anti-immigrant”; while the original post may adopt a “reportage” tone in its reflection on events, ensuing comments (and the posting history of the account) leave no question about the audience the post is directed towards – or the reactions it was seeking to invoke. Effectively this mean anti-immigrant narratives were much more successful at reaching bigger audiences.

### **Limited narrative ‘co-option’**

Unlike the August 2024, there did not appear to be coordinated attempts to place a narrative framing on the violence tailored towards audiences outside of the jurisdiction. In particular the “nationalists and unionists united” or “Catholics and Protestants united” narrative did not appear to be used in any effective fashion to try and evidence the exceptional unpopularity of Islam and immigration in the “west”. As opposed to the August 2024 riots, there did not appear to be replicated wording/phrases or media adopted widely by external accounts across accounts and platforms to amplify a coherent anti-immigrant narrative.

### **Involvement of British accounts**

Posts from British accounts promoting anti-immigrant narratives outperformed southern and northern Irish accounts. This is perhaps unsurprising given the marginalisation of any “nationalists and unionists united” narratives which surrounded the August 2024 riots and which were used successfully by southern Irish accounts to reach their audiences, but also by the increasing influence of topical British-based anti-immigrant themes and tactics adopted by the protestors and fledgling movement.

# Organising: Local Initiatives



# Narratives: Social Media Activity

## Overview and Methodology

The Ballymena protests and riots, along with their aftermath, saw a series of initiatives aimed at sustaining and expanding a more visible, community-based anti-immigrant movement. These initiatives were primarily organised by groups that relied on Facebook as their main platform for communicating with followers and promoting involvement in activities.

For this analysis, we adopted a targeted approach by identifying accounts that actively promoted anti-immigrant activities between June and August 2025. These accounts were then assessed based on the activities they instigated or participated in.

## Evolving Tactics

Between August 2024 and February 2025, various attempts were made to organise mass mobilisations in city centres. These aimed to demonstrate the strength of the anti-immigrant base, secure media exposure for their issues, and potentially attract new supporters to the fledgling movement. The mobilisations were promoted by local social media accounts - primarily community-based Facebook groups - which shared both promotional material and streams of alleged incidents involving immigrants engaged in predatory or anti-social behaviour.

Despite these efforts, the tactic failed to build momentum through visible displays of support. Anti-immigration protests were consistently dwarfed by counter-protesters advocating for refugee and asylum rights, whose diverse participation reflected broader community support and a rejection of racism and xenophobia.

However, this failure did not render anti-immigration activism ineffective. All the protests, particularly those of August 2024, received widespread coverage in both traditional and social media – heavily influenced by a narrative developed through social media accounts based outside the jurisdiction [Fig. 2.1]. This included the false claim<sup>19</sup> that anti-Islam and anti-immigrant sentiments were uniting nationalists and unionists in a historically unprecedented fashion<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 2.1 Twitter coverage of the August 2024 protests

## Overall Sentiments

Additionally, violence against immigrant families has become a persistent feature of our weekly media and social media landscape<sup>21</sup>, creating increasingly hostile environments where immigrants cannot live safely – effectively establishing de facto "no-go" areas.

The Ballymena protests and riots appear to have provided a springboard for establishing a more stronger, confident and visible anti-immigrant presence in local communities. While the mobilisations between August 2024 and February 2025 were not organised under any particular group's auspices, the June 2025 protests saw the emergence of a small network of social media accounts – predominantly community-based Facebook groups – that took responsibility for organising protests and promoting anti-immigrant narratives.

These accounts have generally, though not exclusively, adopted the "Concerned Residents/Parents" label<sup>22</sup>. Their activities are openly focused on making local communities hostile for immigrants, with particular emphasis on localised issues and targets.

<sup>19</sup> Committee on the Administration of Justice. (2025). Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report - Committee on the Administration of Justice. pps.10-17 [online] Available at: <https://caj.org.uk/publications/reports/mapping-far-right-activity-online-in-northern-ireland-project-report/>

<sup>20</sup> Simpson, M. (2024). Belfast violence brings together unlikely protest alliance. [online] BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgkyjg3pxpo>

<sup>21</sup> www.nlb.ie. (2024). Policy Brief | Racism in Belfast: A Timeline and Media Resource. [online] Available at: <https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/7/07-2024-racism-in-belfast-a-timeline-and-media-resource>.

<sup>22</sup> Facebook groups include Concerned Parents Newtownabbey, North Down Concerned Residents, Greater Shankill Concerned Residents, Lower North Belfast Concerned Residents, Lower Shankill Residents Group, Ainsworth Drive, Loyalist Glengormley

## Targeting Housing

The targeting of houses accommodating immigrant residents was a defining feature of the June 2025 riots. Homes of immigrants were the first target of the rioters in Ballymena on 9 June. That same night in Cullybackey, Co. Antrim there was an arson attack [Fig. 2.1] on a Filipino family's car. These attacks were followed two days later by another arson attack [Fig. 2.2] on an immigrant-owned vehicle in Ballysillan, North Belfast. On 13 June, two homes housing immigrants in Portadown were attacked. The Loyalist Market Hill Facebook group sought to justify [Fig. 2.3] this violence, claiming locals were weary of landlords "cashing in on housing migrants at the expense of our children's safety."

The intimidation campaign escalated further on 15 June when a Ballymena letting agent's office was vandalised [Fig. 2.4] with "Locals Only!" graffiti. The following day, a South Belfast property was defaced with slogans demanding the expulsion of Romanian residents<sup>23</sup>. By late June, momentum was sustained through organised picketing, such as the Ainsworth Drive Facebook group's protest [Fig. 2.5] outside a Woodvale estate agent on 23 June. Demonstrators accused the agency of facilitating "mass uncontrolled, unvetted immigration." That same day, a protest on Shore Road, North Belfast targeted a home allegedly housing "four adult fighting-age males and one young female" – framed as concern for the woman's welfare.

On 3 July, a protest [Fig. 2.6] in the Graymount area of North Belfast was organised in response to baseless claims of "five abductions" and warnings about "27 foreigners moved into three houses," with the area allegedly being "tarnished with Muslims." The following week, on 14 July, a Housing Executive van in Bearnagh Drive, West Belfast, was sprayed [Fig. 2.7] with the slogan "RAA House the IRISH NOT-WOGS Traitors" – a reference to the far-right group Republicans Against Antifa (RAA).

The campaign intensified on 8 August when an eviction in East Belfast was live-streamed, showing a "foreign man" being escorted from a property by the PSNI. The individual had previously faced harassment from vigilantes who falsely accused him of "following children" and warned him to avoid public spaces at night, threatening that "next time it mightn't be as pleasant."

Meanwhile, the Ainsworth Drive Facebook group escalated its efforts by distributing placards warning landlords against housing immigrants. The design mirrored those previously removed by the PSNI in Rathcoole during September 2024.



Petrol bombing the house of a random Filipino family in Ballymena because 2 Romanians are in court over sexual assault.

That's not legitimate concerns. It's racism, pure and simple.



10:02 PM · Jun 10, 2025 · 1.1M Views

**Figure 2.1** Filipino family's car burnt out in first night of rioting in Ballymena



Late last night I visited a Ballysillan resident whose car had been attacked and set on fire last night. The work van of a near neighbour was also set on fire. Both are foreign nationals. They and their wives have been living and working in Northern Ireland for many years, including in the care sector. I spoke to PSNI officers who stated they have increased their presence in response to these attacks. I visited the homes again this morning, speaking also to other local residents who made clear that they are disgusted by these attacks which are not wanted and that they get on well with these neighbours.

I appeal for an end to all such criminal attacks, which are damaging for the entire local community, though most-so for those targeted. It is entirely wrong for anyone to carry out such violent hate-crime against local families. This is a distraction from addressing the needs and concerns of local people.

I commend those residents who have made clear that such attacks are not wanted and I firmly believe they speak for the vast majority of local residents.



79 29 comments 9 shares

**Figure 2.2** Filipino family's car burnt out in first night of rioting in Ballymena

<sup>23</sup> irishnews.com (2025). House targeted with anti-migrant graffiti in south Belfast. [online] The Irish News. Available at: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/house-targeted-with-anti-migrant-graffiti-in-south-belfast-UZMJ5OKQA5AHVCE5NIMIRTAWWW/>





Figure 2.3 Facebook posts attempting to justify the riots

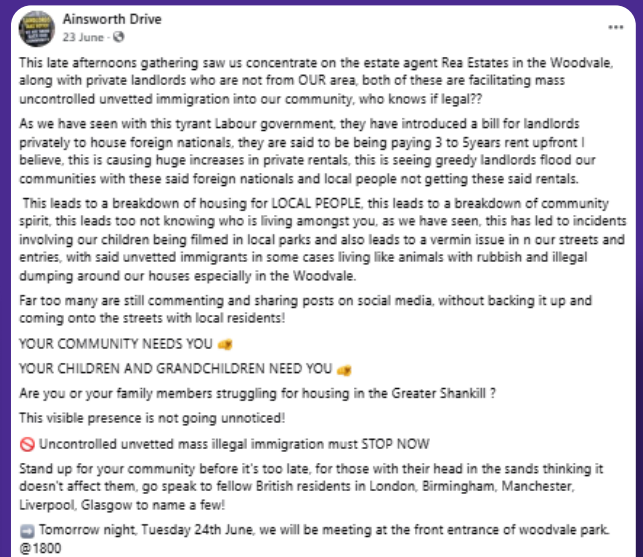


Figure 2.5 Protestors in Woodvale accusing a letting agent of facilitating "mass uncontrolled, unvetted immigration".

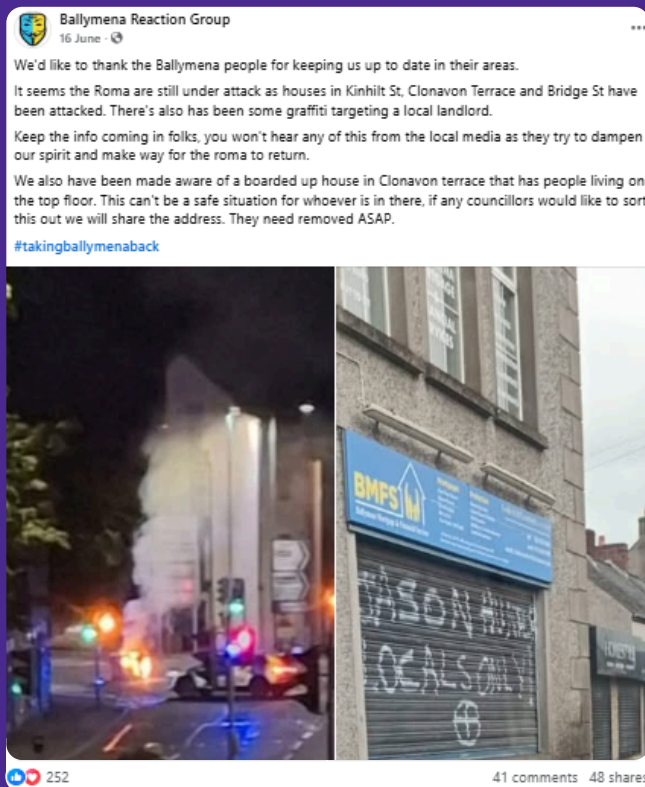


Figure 2.4 Ballymena letting agents offices vandalised with "Locals Only!" graffiti

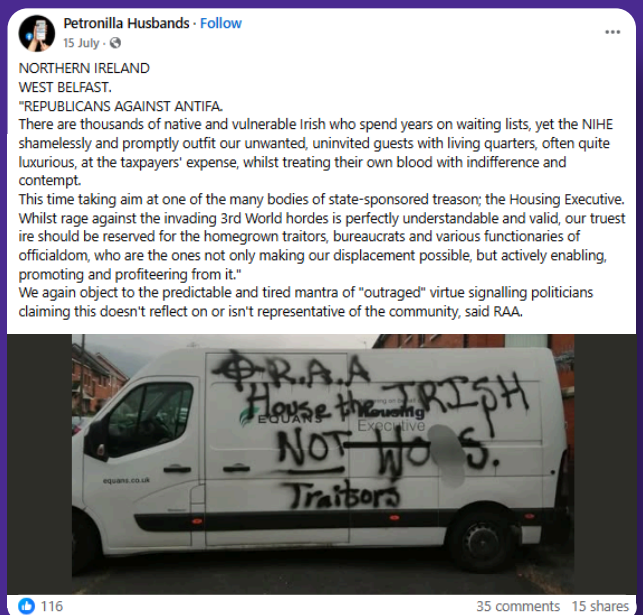


Figure 2.7 Republicans Against Antifa (RAA) graffiti on a Housing Executive van in Bearnagh Drive, West Belfast



Figure 2.6 Commentary on a protest in the Graymount area of North Belfast, sparked by unfounded claims of abductions and the arrival of "foreigners" in a local house.

## Targeting Hotels

The failure of successive governments to address rising housing demand, including the privatisation of asylum accommodation provision which has reduced private rental stock, has led the UK Home Office to implement a policy of accommodating asylum seekers in hotels. This approach has created highly visible targets for anti-immigration activists across Britain and Ireland.


In Northern Ireland, sustained protests began at the Marine Court Hotel in Bangor, Co. Down in March 2023, with demonstrations continuing weekly [Fig. 2.8] throughout summer 2025. The protests gained notable attention when Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson), co-founder of the English Defence League, attended in October 2023. During the August 2024 riots, protesters also targeted hotels in Belfast city centre.<sup>24</sup>

The campaign expanded on 19 June 2025 when 'Concerned Parents Newtownabbey' organised protests at the Chimney Corner Hotel in Newtownabbey. The group had floated (2.15) the idea days earlier to test public support. Protesters cited unverified claims of predatory behaviour by residents, with momentum building after Epping Council in England demanded the UK government "immediately" end housing asylum seekers in The Bell Hotel.<sup>25</sup>

On 9 August, The Great Province-Wide Protest N.I. organised a demonstration outside Belfast's Ten Square Hotel (owned by the same company as Chimney Corner). Promoted as a rally supporting their moderator Steven Baker, the event drew significant counter-protests. Baker later posted:

*"The next time I take my protest crew back into the city centre, they finally know who I am and what I'm about... Again thank you to all those that came in my hour of need."*

These protests slot into a UK-wide trend where lists of asylum accommodation centres are posted on social media and websites<sup>26</sup> and these centres become rallying points for anti-immigrant protestors [Fig. 2.9].

 **Jamie Bryson** ✓  
@JamieBrysonLLB

Impromptu and somewhat dramatic moment as a call goes up from the crowd to march to the Marine Court hotel which houses illegal immigrants.

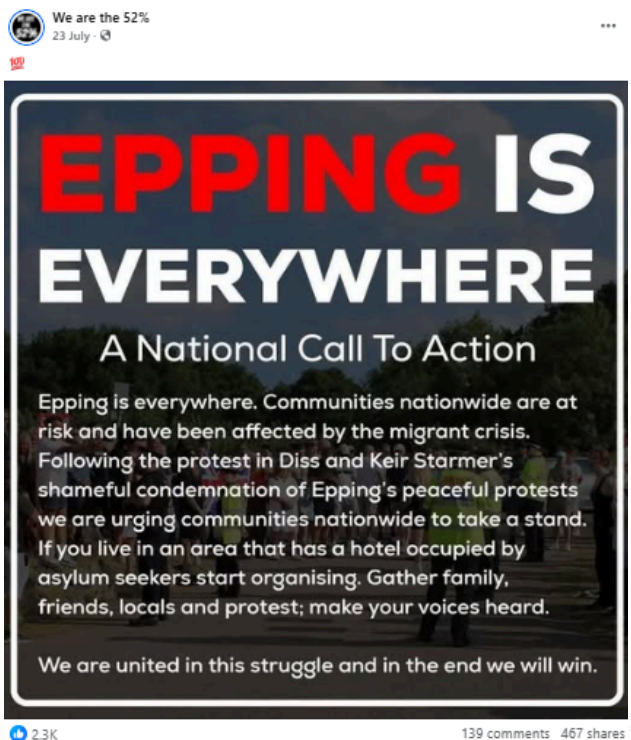
I've never seen anything like this in Bangor. These are decent ordinary who have brought the town to a standstill.



12:44 PM · Aug 3, 2024 · 67K Views

77 454 1.4K 26

**Figure 2.8** Anti-immigration protestors marching on Marine Court Hotel, Bangor



**Figure 2.9** 'Epping is Everywhere' social media graphic urging communities to address a "migrant crisis"

<sup>24</sup> Rice, J. (2024). Anti-immigration protest in Belfast city centre ends after BBC offices locked down. [online] BelfastTelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/anti-immigration-protest-in-belfast-city-centre-ends-after-bbc-offices-locked-down/a1256182684.html>

<sup>25</sup> Sky News. (2025). Epping council demands government 'immediately' close asylum hotel – as Home Office works to 'restore order'. [online] Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/epping-council-demands-government-immediately-close-asylum-hotel-as-home-office-works-to-restore-order-13401550>

<sup>26</sup> <https://howfarfrommydoorstep.co.uk/>



## Targetting Businesses

Attacks targeting businesses owned by immigrant families have been a persistent feature of racist activism. During the August 2024 riots in Belfast, multiple immigrant-owned businesses were destroyed in arson attacks<sup>27</sup>, including a restaurant in Newtownabbey that same month<sup>28</sup>. These tactics re-emerged during and following the June 2025 riots.

On 12 June, the Loyalist Edgarstown Bonfire Facebook page issued a statement warning of:

*"a vast influx of unvetted, criminal pseudo-asylum seekers, with no intent of contributing or following the everyday values aligned with our society. Inflicting criminality, violence and sexual crime, with a warped perception of how women and children are treated... many who are here illegally, working cash in hand in places like car washes and nail salons or sharing insurance policies and driving licences to work illegally for food delivery companies."*

This rhetoric escalated four days later when Concerned Parents Newtownabbey promoted a boycott campaign against Just Eat and Deliveroo [Fig. 2.10], alleging these companies employed immigrants without proper work authorisation. The campaign was amplified by groups like Loyalists United - The LDL and some southern-based accounts. These claims received credibility when UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated he would share addresses of asylum hostels with food delivery employers to prevent hiring of residents<sup>29</sup>.

The Ainsworth Drive Facebook account coordinated regular protests outside a McDonald's in Woodvale, west Belfast, warning:

*"[Using] these food delivery companies is aiding the mass uncontrolled illegal immigration, I urge you to think twice before using them."*

In early August, East Belfast Nightwatch First Division - a newly formed vigilante group - filmed themselves harassing a Deliveroo driver, accusing them of "dodgy" behaviour.

On 9 August, two months after the Ballymena riots began, the Ballymena Reaction Group Facebook page documented a protest against a car wash by members of the Roma community, where access was blocked while police observed. [Fig. 2.11]



Figure 2.10 English far-right activist, Tommy Robinson shared posts on X reporting on the events occurring in Ballymena

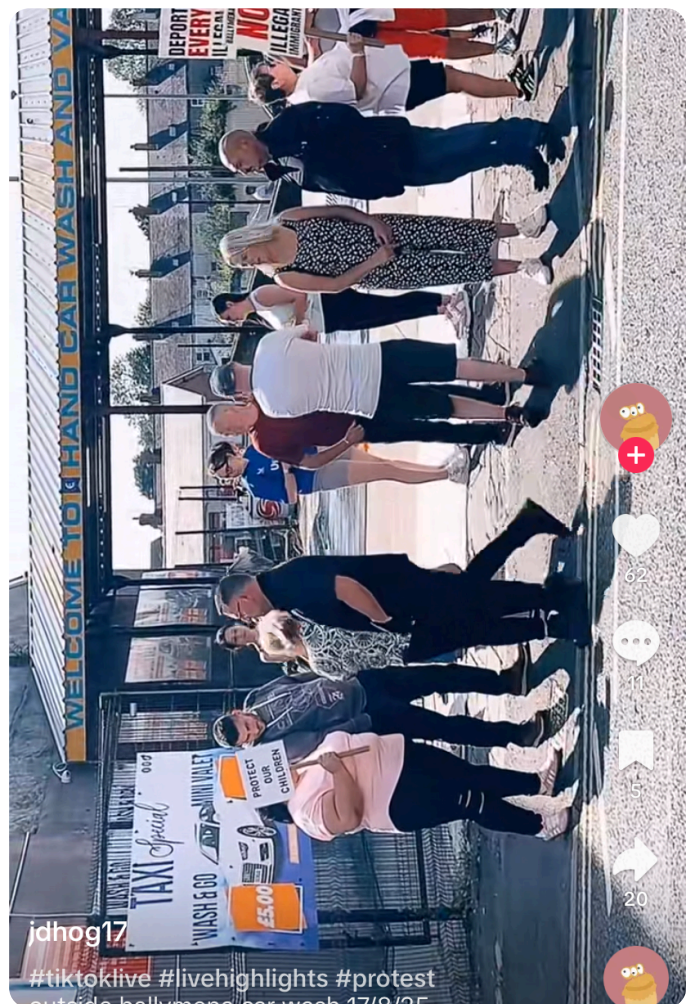


Figure 2.11 TikTok video of a protest outside a carwash

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, R. (2024). Belfast: 'My life is threatened - there is no hope here'. BBC News. [online] 5 Aug. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2edd7gmjy2o>.

<sup>28</sup> Black, R. (2024). Racially-motivated arson attack on restaurant condemned as 'deplorable'. [online] The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/rebecca-black-muslim-facebook-inquiries-police-b2599606.html>

<sup>29</sup> Jacobin.com. (2025). Working With Delivery Platforms to Harass Migrants. [online] Available at: <https://jacobin.com/2025/07/starmer-uk-delivery-platforms-migrants>



## Targeting Places of Worship

The August 2024 anti-immigrant protests were initially advertised as a march on the Belfast Islamic Centre to demand their withdrawal from the city. Ten months later, on 20 June, a man was arrested for throwing a pipe bomb into the Islamic Centre while people were inside. Loyalists United – The LDL reacted by posting [Fig. 2.12]:

*"Well how about they stop preaching their vile hate filled anti British anti western anti protestant/christian sentiment then?? If you want to preach Islam then we have directions to the perfect place.....Pakistan!!"*

In the Shankill area of west Belfast on 20 July, a protest was held outside the Church of the Firstborn following an alleged incident involving "a foreign national taking images on his phone of local children out in the street playing innocently as children do". The PSNI responded to reports of a man "acting suspiciously" but later stated "no offences were detected."<sup>30</sup> Some immigrants attend Christian services at this church. Graffiti was sprayed on the building reading: "Ala out! God only! Pedos out!".

The intimidation continued on 10 August when the Shankill Community Fellowship was vandalised with graffiti warning: "Asylum seekers will be shot. Leave our kids alone! C-18 S-C-COY". 'C-18' stands for 'Combat-18', while 'S-C-COY' refers to the loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Defence Association's Shankill C Company.

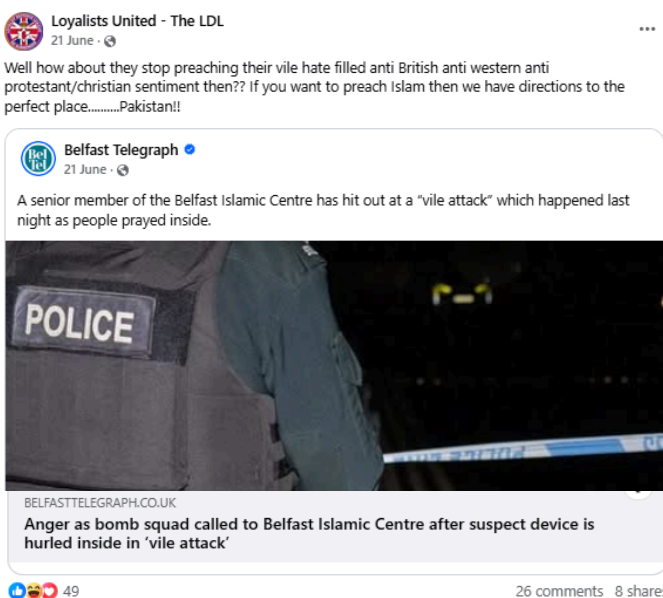


Figure 2.12 Facebook post reacting to a pipe bomb being thrown into the Belfast Islamic Centre during evening prayer

## Targeting Schools

In November 2024, protests erupted at Girls' Model School following unfounded rumours of Muslim gangs intimidating white students. These included widespread social media disinformation about knives being concealed in hijabs and other unsubstantiated claims. The situation escalated to attempted attacks on the girls' homes, forcing them to relocate after school management stated they could not guarantee their safety. British-based accounts played a significant role in shaping and amplifying this misinformation.<sup>31</sup>

On 5 August 2025, Concerned Parents of Newtownabbey reposted a "Terrorist Attack Alert" originating from the @ActivePatriotUK X account. The post linked hotel protests to alleged threats against children, stating:

*"ISIS Soldiers are in HOTELS and HMOs ready for a NATIONWIDE ATTACK. UK infant and primary schools are the target. They're going to BEHEAD our KIDS"*

On 5 August 2025, Concerned Parents of Newtownabbey reposted a "Terrorist Attack Alert" originating from the @ActivePatriotUK X account. The post linked hotel protests to alleged threats against children [Fig. 2.13].

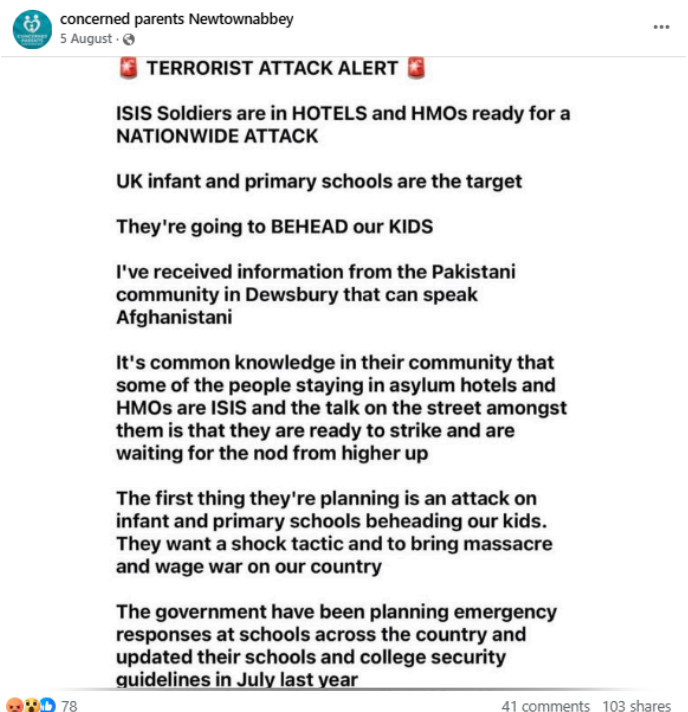


Figure 2.13 Facebook post stating ISIS soldiers in hotels & HMOs will target primary schools and behead UK children

<sup>30</sup> Leebody, C. (2025). Police investigation launched after graffiti sprayed on west Belfast church following 'large protest'. [online] BelfastTelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/police-investigation-launched-after-graffiti-sprayed-on-west-belfast-church-following-large-protest/a2141866077.html>

<sup>31</sup> Committee on the Administration of Justice. (2025). Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report - Committee on the Administration of Justice. p.33

The posts claimed the information came from "the Pakistani community in Dewsbury that can speak Afghanistani". The Express amplified these claims with the headline:

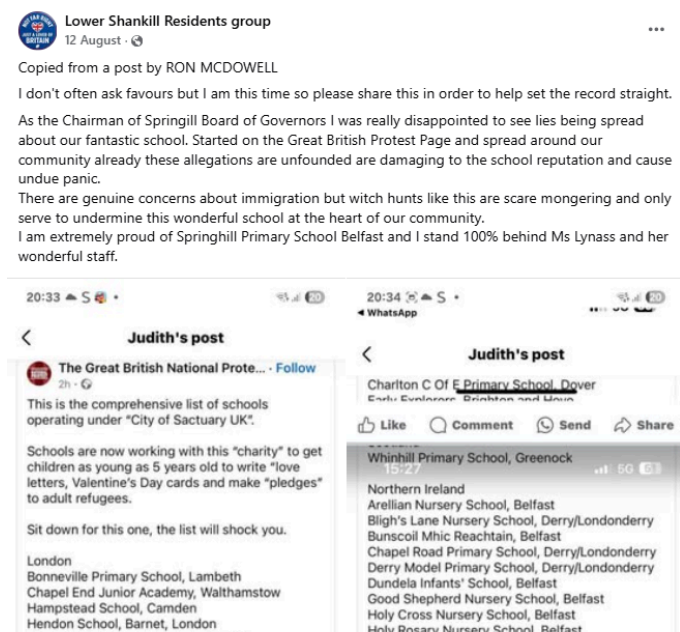
*"ISIS jihadists behead Christians and burn churches as terrorists plot 'European attacks'".<sup>32</sup>*

On 11 August, the England-based Great British National Protest announced plans to publish a list of Schools of Sanctuary participants, alleging:

*"1,200 schools are currently teaching children as young as 5 year old to write love letters, Valentine's Day cards and make pledges to migrants in the UK."*

The following day, Lower Shankill Residents Group shared a [statement](#) by Belfast City Councillor Ron McDowell (TUV), a school governor [Fig. 2.14]:

*"I'm really disappointed to see lies being spread... these allegations are unfounded are damaging to the school reputation and cause undue panic."*



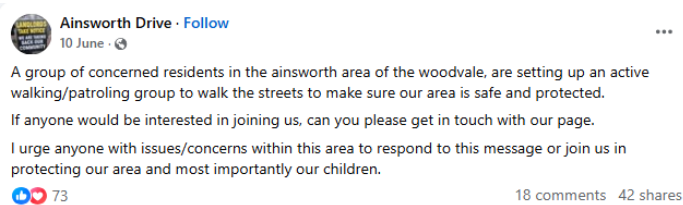
**Figure 2.14** TUV Cllr. response to accusations that NI primary schools were having pupils write "valentine's cards" to "adult refugees"

Emerging divisions became apparent on 13 August when Steven Baker, moderator of The Great Province-Wide Protest N.I. Facebook group, shared:

*"time to take all of our children out of school they are in serious danger. If this is what your own authorities are willing to do to our children, imagine what a jihadi will do".*

### Vigilante Patrols

The formation of "community patrols" and vigilante groups represents a new tactic adopted by anti-immigrant networks following the Ballymena protests. On 10 June 2025, immediately after the first night of rioting, the Ainsworth Drive Facebook group announced [Fig. 2.15] plans to establish "an active walking/patrolling group to walk the streets to make sure our area is safe and protected".



**Figure 2.15** Facebook post advertising a "patrolling group"

This initiative appears to have developed into the [Greater Shankill Concerned Residents](#) group.

The intended targets of these groups are explicit in their social media communications. The Loyalist Glengormley page instructs followers to monitor:

*"Strange and suspicious behaviour in glengormley and surrounding areas like certain houses that could be used as a front for something else, business like kebab shops, barber shops & nail bars, migrants who are clearly out of place like in parks etc. Let people know as well as myself. These will be investigated in full. Houses and cars are being burnt out and im not ashamed to say i have no sympathy for these immagrants one bit."*

Violent incidents have accompanied these patrols. On 22 July, social media circulated a video apparently showing East Belfast vigilantes assaulting a migrant who afterwards required hospital treatment [Fig. 2.15]. The accompanying post stated:

*"no documentation, no sleeping on the streets... we will find them all"*

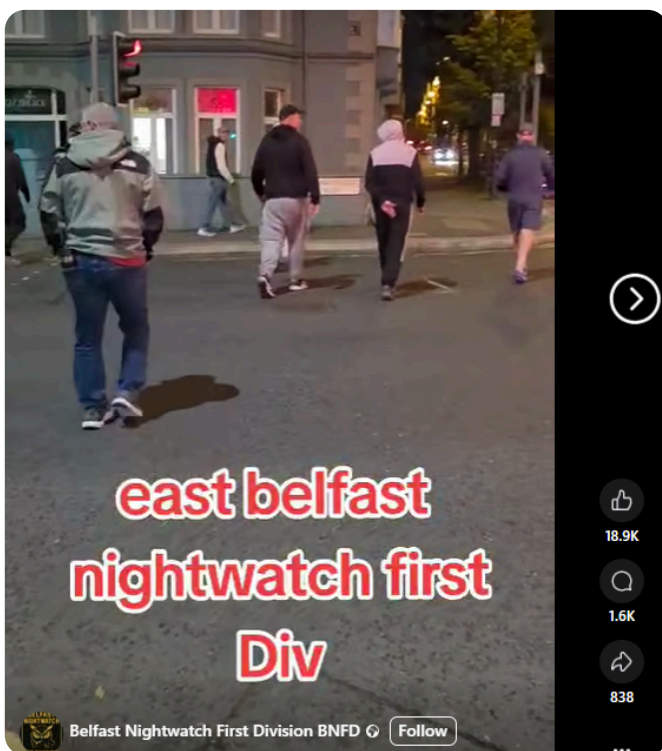


**Figure 2.15** Social media video of East Belfast vigilantes assaulting a migrant who later required hospital treatment

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, C. (2025). ISIS jihadists behead Christians and burn churches as terrorists plot 'European attacks'. [online] Express.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/2092595/isis-jihadists-behead-christians-burn>

The East Belfast Nightwatch First Division regularly posts videos harassing non-white people during patrols [Fig. 2.16]. Prominent member Neil Pinkerton<sup>33</sup> has been "known to the police for his alleged involvement in animal cruelty" for over a decade<sup>34</sup>. Following media coverage (2.39), BBC's Nolan Show exposed the group and reported the PSNI describing them as investigating "racist thugs". On 18 August 2025 a 37-year-old man was arrested over alleged vigilante behaviour in east Belfast. The PSNI said:

*"They are confronting and intimidating innocent members of the public, largely on the basis of the colour of their skin. Those involved have neither the legal nor the moral authority to do this."*

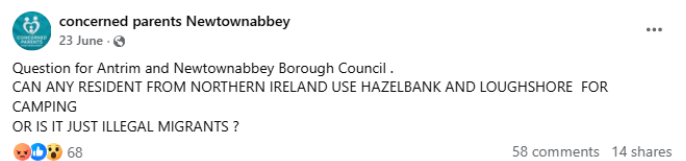


**Figure 2.16** Social media video of East Belfast vigilantes assaulting a migrant who later required hospital treatment

Prior to the PSNI response a network of refugee rights activists, working under the title Accountability Project, methodically documented the activities of these vigilante groups – often before many of the posts had been removed from the various social

media platforms. This evidence was compiled into a dossier<sup>35</sup> and submitted to the PSNI, Policing Board members and politicians. Such monitoring can be seen as an evolution of the counter-protest tactics used during the August 2024 and subsequent anti-immigrant mobilisations in city centres.

The vigilante groups justify their existence by framing immigrant presence as inherently threatening, particularly to women and children. This narrative found political expression in Belfast City Councillor Dean McCullough's (DUP) 24 June motion 'Safeguarding Belfast Playparks', which proposed banning "loitering by adults with no lawful purpose". McCullough claimed this addressed "the disturbing rise in reports of indecent, threatening, and predatory behaviour in public playparks".<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 2.17** Social media post discussing reports of homeless immigrants

Public parks have long been flashpoints for racial attacks. In June 2023, a woman and children suffered racist abuse in Newtownabbey's Hazelbank Park<sup>37</sup>. By June 2025, Concerned Parents of Newtownabbey Facebook group reported sightings of homeless immigrants in the same park, prompting comments [Fig. 2.17] like:

*"I'm sick sore and fucking tired sitting here doing fk all about it, are going to wait until one of these dirty bastards rape our kids"*

and

*"WISH I WAS 20 YEARS YOUNGER, ID BE IN JAIL OVER THESE RATS"*

This focus has spawned numerous social media posts photographing non-white park visitors with captions questioning their presence:

*"Rathcoole park. 2 in park 3 at bus stop, head scarfs in black with no kids no need to be there."*

<sup>33</sup> Red Rose Database (2025). NEIL PINKERTON'S BRUTAL ANIMAL CRUELTY IN BELFAST SPARKS OUTRAGE AND CONTROVERSY | Red Rose UK News Article. [online] Madebyredrose.co.uk. Available at: <https://madebyredrose.co.uk/public/abuser/neil-pinkerton>

<sup>34</sup> Morris, A. (2025). Belfast vigilantes who confront 'migrants' on camera led by alleged animal abuser. [online] BelfastTelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-vigilantes-who-confront-migrants-on-camera-led-by-alleged-animal-abuser/a1437035966.html>

<sup>35</sup> The dossier was viewed by this report's authors.

<sup>36</sup> Kenwood, M. (2025). 'Predatory behaviour': Belfast councillor calls for ban on adults 'loitering' in children's play parks. [online] BelfastTelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/predatory-behaviour-belfast-councillor-calls-for-ban-on-adults-loitering-in-childrens-play-parks/a67961533.html>

<sup>37</sup> News, I. (2023). Police investigate report of race-motivated hate at Hazelbank Park in Newtownabbey. [online] ITV News. Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-06-08/police-investigate-report-of-race-motivated-hate-in-newtownabbey>



Despite their online prominence, these groups appear to struggle with community engagement. Ainsworth Drive lamented on 24 June:

"Severe lack of boots on the ground from the greater Shankill community..."

followed the next day by:

"'Deserted, Well I can stand alone!' This phrase is how it feels for the same faces out every night for one measly hour, what is one hour to anyone?"

and on 26 June:

"Well it's apparent that the majority of the Greater Shankill see that there is nothing wrong with mass uncontrolled unvetted illegal immigration in this area."

Similarly, Loyalist Glengormley complained on 13 August [Fig. 2.18]:

"Numbers have been slacking, fair play to the hardcore thats been there every day and night. Pull the finger out and step up."

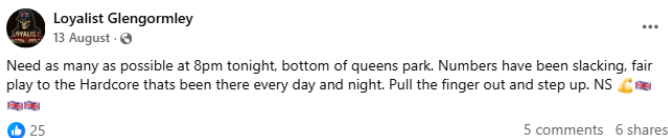


Figure 2.18 Facebook post lamenting low turnout at local anti-immigrant protests

### Green and Orange United?

The spread of anti-immigrant protests and riots from June 2025 across specific cities, towns, and areas - along with the political and cultural alignment of supportive social media accounts, the emergence of "Concerned Residents" groups, and anti-immigrant messaging [Fig. 2.19] around July bonfires - confirms that this activism is finding fertile ground in some loyalist communities. This pattern follows previous mobilisations and riots between August 2024 and February 2025, and mirrors political responses that largely split along traditional fault-lines.

The prominent personalities emerging within the anti-immigrant movement, both online and at protests, as well as the predominant locations of the protests and groups, demonstrate clear affinities with Ulster Loyalism and British nationalism.<sup>38</sup> When questioned about loyalist paramilitary involvement in attacks on

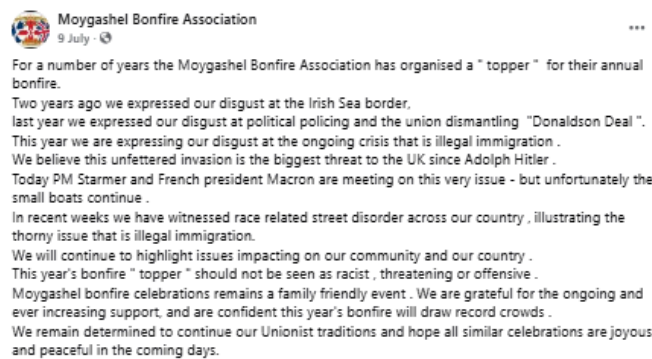


Figure 2.19 Facebook post showcasing anti-immigrant messaging at a 11<sup>th</sup> July bonfire in Moygashel

police during the Portadown riots, the PSNI Chief Constable stated that while individuals associated with loyalist paramilitaries were observed near the violence:

"We're still very much in the throes of trying to identify who was involved last night in the disorder... But we absolutely did see in Portadown last night, people who were directing young people and directing others back and forwards to try and get around police lines, find weak points, throw weaponry, etc."

The Belfast Telegraph reported sources denying paramilitary involvement in east Belfast vigilante activity<sup>39</sup> however on 18 August it was reported that an Ulster Defense Association gang had set fire to

<sup>38</sup> Toner, J. (2025). Immigration protesters shoulder to shoulder with loyalist killer. [online] Belfasttelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/immigration-protesters-shoulder-to-shoulder-with-loyalist-killer/a99199491.html>

<sup>39</sup> Morris, A. (2025). Belfast vigilantes who confront 'migrants' on camera led by alleged animal abuser. [online] BelfastTelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-vigilantes-who-confront-migrants-on-camera-led-by-alleged-animal-abuser/a1437035966.html>

two cars and spray painted “move out or be burnt out” on the home of an immigrant family<sup>40</sup>. The gang were “were threatening to force every immigrant out of the Ratchoole estate” in north Belfast and drawing up a hit list.

While anti-immigrant sentiment and isolated attacks have occurred in republican areas, these have failed to gain significant political traction or spawn organised local anti-immigrant groups. In July 2025, a Housing Executive van in West Belfast was vandalised with racist graffiti - an act universally condemned<sup>41</sup> by local political representatives. Belfast Communities Against Fascism claimed [Fig. 2.7] that the individual responsible – who they allege was a lead member of Republicans Against Antifa (RAA) and southern-based political grouping Clann Éireann – was “apprehended” and given “a stern talking to. We wish him a speedy recovery.”

On 23 June, a “Newry Says No!” march [Fig. 2.20] featuring young men carrying tricolours emerged partly in response to Newry’s progression towards City of Sanctuary status. On 6 July, this was countered by a “Newry Says No to Racism” rally and a member of the republican 1916 Societies, was placed under investigation for attending the “Newry Says No!” rally.

Facebook pages ‘Newry Says No’, ‘Time to Rise’, ‘Avant Garde Promotions’ and ‘Melissa Ciummei’ are providing a social media presence for these anti-immigrant voices and seem to be trying to establish a community presence by organising initiatives opposed to the Council’s City of Sanctuary initiatives.

As during the August 2024 riots, some high-profile southern Irish social media accounts supported the anti-immigrant movement in the north. Síol na hÉireann, self-described as “Ireland’s only Christian Nationalist Movement”, produced a recruitment video incorporating footage of rioters burning immigrant homes in Ballymena. However Loyalists United – the LDL made their position (2.54) on anti-immigrant cross community alliances clear:

*“Irish nationalism nor republicanism WILL NEVER be our friends... We will never surrender our British heritage by getting into bed with nationalism”*

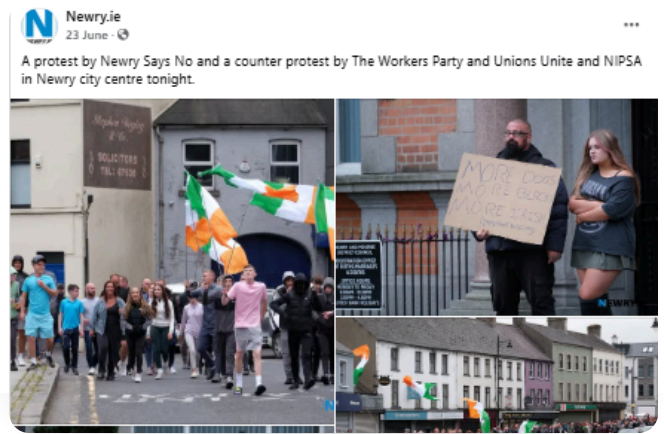


Figure 2.20 Counter-protest to ‘Newry Says No!’ march; ‘Newry Says No to Racism’

## Insights

### Changing role of social media

Social media has evolved from being almost exclusively used as an amplification tool for anti-immigrant narratives into an organising and communication tool for community based activism. This has accompanied the growth of more transparent anti-immigrant organising tactics with identifiable groups and individuals coordinating.

### Political and Cultural Contexts Matter

The location of the activities, the social media account profiles and posting history of the groups organising activities makes it evident that anti-immigrant narratives are resonating within elements of the loyalist community to a greater extent than other communities. Legacy and social media coverage of these anti-immigrant activities demonstrate that these groups do not command the allegiance of a majority of people in these communities, but the trend is undeniable. To date these anti-immigrant narratives failed to find organisational support in republican communities, but there are repeated attempts to find and exploit populist in-roads.

<sup>40</sup> Reporter, S.L. (2025). UDA thugs draw up immigrant expulsion hit-list in NI estate. [online] Belfasttelegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/uda-thugs-draw-up-immigrant-expulsion-hit-list-in-ni-estate/a824389646.html>

<sup>41</sup> Graffiti painted onto NIHE van being treated as racist hate crime. (2025). BBC News. [online] 15 Jul. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c784kpykne4o>.



# Political: Party Responses

# Narratives: Social Media Activity

## Overview and Methodology

The protests and violent attacks on immigrants, their homes, and their properties elicited varied responses from political representatives on social media. In previous phases of this project, the incorporation of anti-immigrant messaging and narratives into the political mainstream was monitored through social media posts, party-political press releases/statements, and Assembly Ministerial Questions.

During this phase, the social media accounts<sup>40</sup> of 58 councillors, 40 MLAs, and 8 MPs from key locations affected by protests and violence<sup>41</sup> were monitored between 8–18 June 2025. A total of 240 posts relating to the protests and riots were identified. The text and media content (e.g., videos) were analysed using the same methodology employed with the public posts in the “Narrative: Social media activity” chapter.

Research of this nature is inherently partial and indicative: social media is not the sole platform politicians use to make statements, nor is it necessarily their primary one.

Additionally, capturing a set of statements cannot reflect the entirety of a political party’s policy position. Nevertheless, a significant sample provides insights into the positions adopted by political parties, particularly among representatives closest to the protests and violence. Similarly, monitoring Assembly Ministerial Questions without assessing party-political policies, aggregating legislative statements, or examining governmental or council-level activity, cannot be considered exhaustive.

However, disaggregating social media responses and Assembly contributions from representatives of different parties helps identify emerging fault lines in responses to anti-immigrant activism. While no party condoned violence, clear differences emerged in how parties positioned themselves regarding the protestors’ and rioters’ articulated concerns about immigration.

## Sinn Féin Social Media Responses

Sinn Féin’s response to the protests and riots included strong condemnation of the violence and rejection of protestors’ concerns about immigration. Representatives from affected areas emphasised racism as the root cause of the violence, criticised the scapegoating of immigrants for broader societal problems, and called for unity against hate crimes, urging support for victims.

They encouraged local communities to cooperate with police investigations following attacks on immigrant families [Fig. 3.2]. In Newry, Sinn Féin councillors advanced the town’s designation as a “Council of Sanctuary” during the riots, citing the need for stronger legislative protections on racial equality, hate crimes, and violence against women and girls.

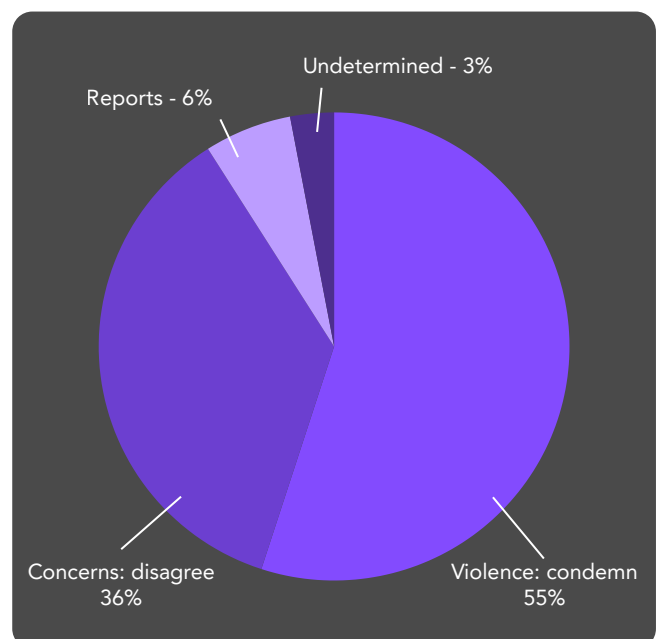


Figure 3.1 Sinn Féin social media responses to protests & riots

<sup>40</sup> The accounts were identified across TikTok, Facebook, X and Instagram. Some of the accounts were dormant or inactive.

<sup>41</sup> Ballymena, Lurgan, Portadown, Larne, Carrickfergus, Derry, Coleraine, Lisburn, Antrim, Newry, Belfast

### DUP Social Media Responses

DUP representatives uniformly condemned the violence on social media while urging “honest action to address illegal immigration”, drawing a distinction between “legitimate concerns” and the unrest itself. Many posts echoed protestors’ grievances, conflating immigration with violence against women and girls and pressures on public services. References to “illegal” and “undocumented” immigration also appeared at MLA [Fig. 3.4] and MP [Fig. 3.5] levels. MLA Phillip Brett [Fig. 3.6] accused those rejecting such links of “sneering” at working-class communities.

On 11 June 2025, Communities Minister Gordon Lyons MLA (DUP) posted<sup>42</sup> that families expelled from Ballymena and housed in Larne Leisure Centre had been relocated [Fig. 3.7]. While this information was already public, Lyons said police had requested its dissemination. He added: “[as] a local MLA for the area, neither I nor my DUP Council colleagues were made aware or consulted on this decision until late this afternoon.”

Later that day, Larne Leisure Centre was attacked and set alight, and the Stormont Assembly’s Standards Commissioner opened an investigation into Lyons following several complaints [Fig. 3.8].<sup>43</sup>

On 23 July 2025, DUP Alderman Rueben Glover reflected constituent sentiment at Mid East Antrim

Council, stating: “they don’t want any more foreigners in their area.”

Valerie Watts, the Chief Executive of the Mid East Antrim Council “I’m sorry, councillor Glover, you and I will have to have a difference of opinion on that matter. I will not associate myself with any racist comments.”<sup>44</sup>

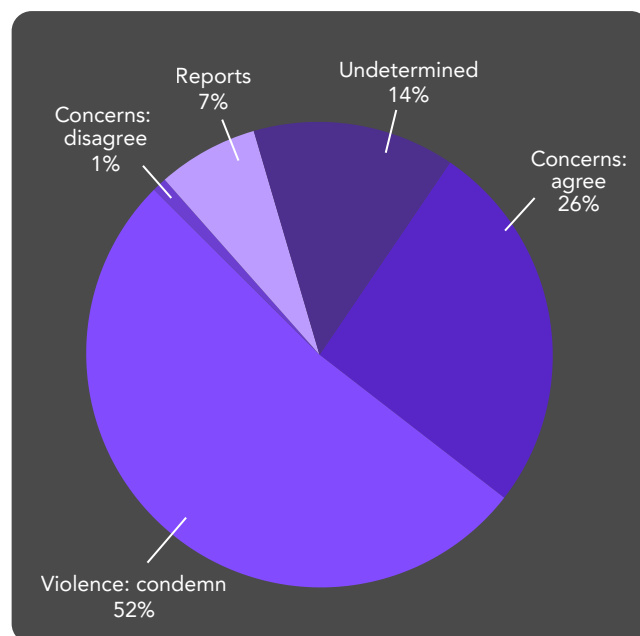


Figure 3.3 DUP social media responses to protests and riots

### Alliance Social Media Responses

Alliance representatives consistently condemned the violence and rejected causal links between immigration and violence against women and girls. Refusing to contextualise the protests, they accused those drawing such connections of hypocrisy, posting [Fig. 3.9]:



Eóin Tennyson MLA  
@EoinTennyson



If there was a riot after each of the over 4,000 sexual offences recorded by the PSNI last year, Northern Ireland would be in embers.

I’ve never feared attack because of the alleged crimes of other white men. Our ethnic minority community shouldn’t either. This racism must stop.

Figure 3.9 Alliance MLA, Eóin Tennyson, response to the riots

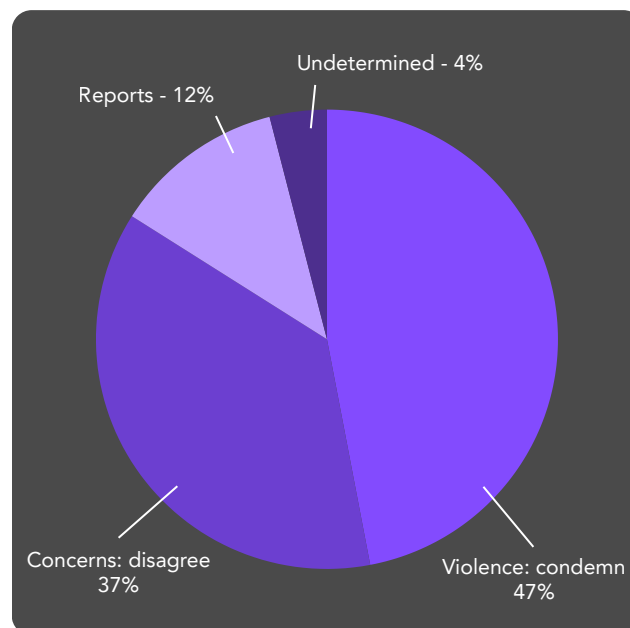


Figure 3.10 Alliance social media responses to protests and riots

<sup>42</sup> The post has been removed.

<sup>43</sup> irishnews.com (2025). Standards Commissioner launches probe into Gordon Lyons’ leisure centre comments during racist disorder. [online] The Irish News. Available at: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/standards-commissioner-launches-probe-into-lyons-leisure-centre-comments-during-racist-disorder-GWJJOAWPSP5A4TFTH2V6AJNL5FQ/> [Accessed 2 Sep. 2025].

<sup>44</sup> Public-i.tv. (2025). Mid and East Antrim Council Meeting - Monday 21 July 2025, 6:30pm - Mid and East Antrim Council Webcasts see 00.13.11]

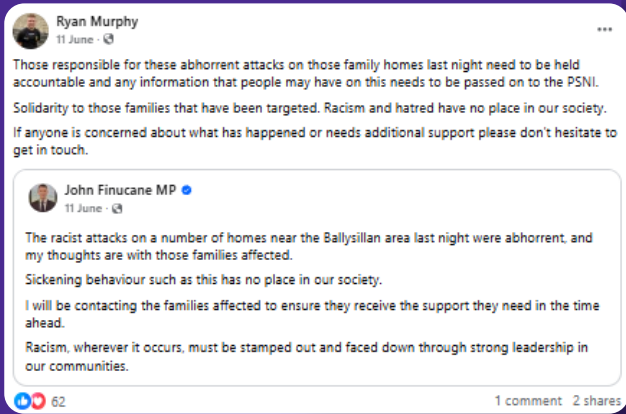


Figure 3.2 Sinn Féin Cllr & MP's condemning the violence

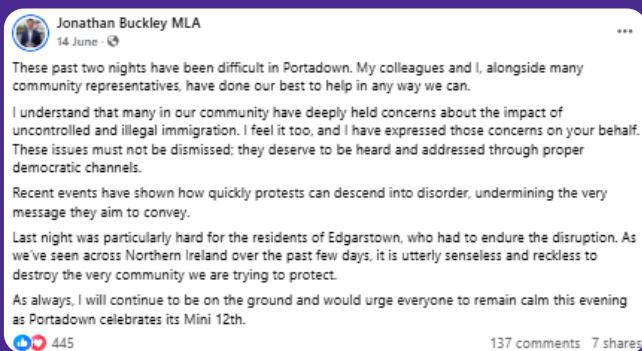


Figure 3.4 DUP MLA discussing "illegal" immigration as a causation of the rioting

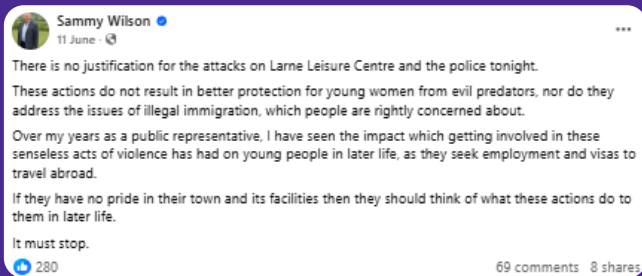


Figure 3.5 DUP MP discussing "illegal" immigration as a causation of the rioting



Figure 3.8 Larne Leisure Centre on fire following messaging that displaced families were being sheltered here during the rioting

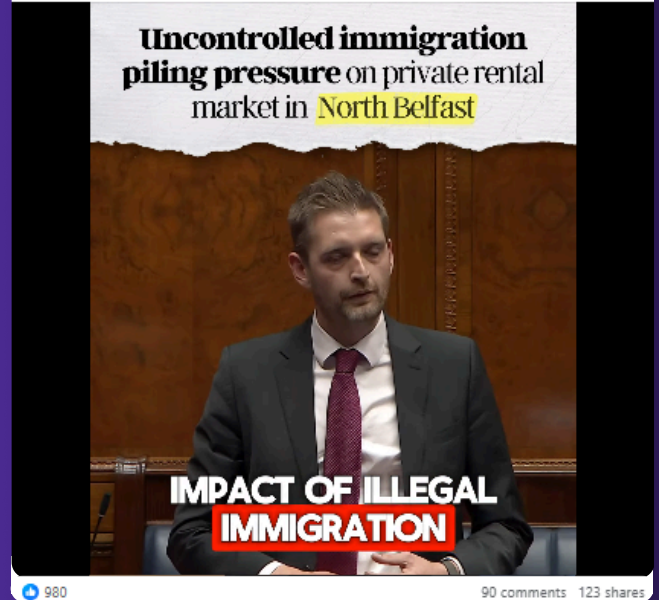


Figure 3.6 DUP MLA accusing those dismissing links between immigration & socio-economic as "sneering" at working class communities

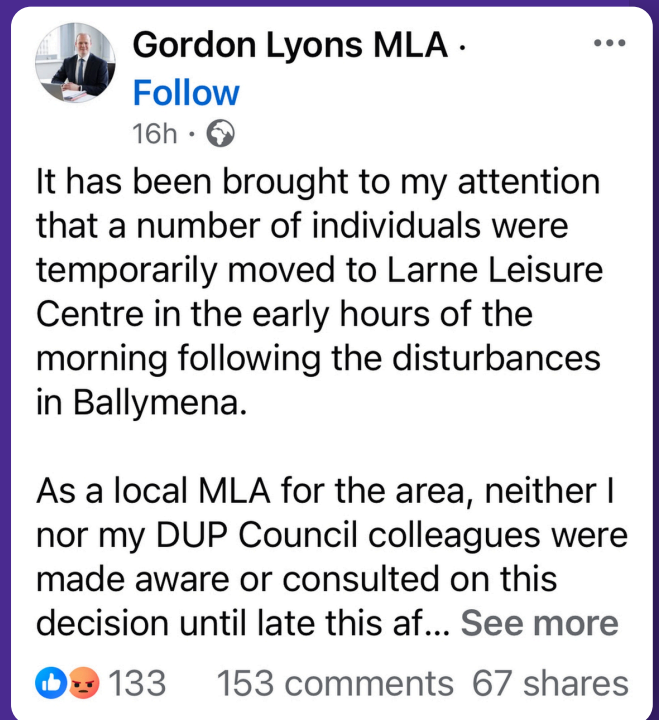


Figure 3.7 Communities Minister, DUP MLA Gordon Lyons, expressing dissatisfaction that displaced families were being housed in Larne Leisure Centre

### SDLP Social Media Responses

Alongside Sinn Féin and Alliance, the SDLP condemned the violence and dismissed claims linking immigration to sexual violence as "racism pure and simple... [an] organised wrecking spree." Party leader Colum Eastwood acknowledged legitimate grievances in working-class communities regarding housing and employment but condemned scapegoating immigrants for systemic policy failures:

*"Those problems are a failure of the political class, not of our neighbours. The people burnt out of Ballymena didn't decide to cut the number of new-build social housing units; they haven't underpaid nurses for years."*

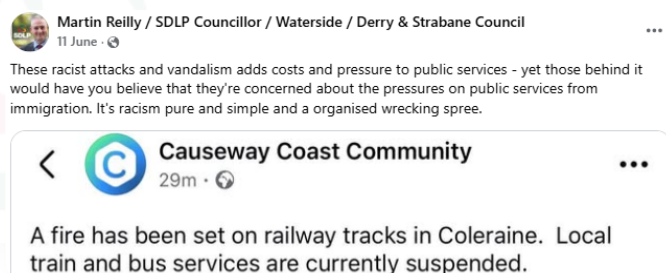


Figure 3.12 Alliance MLA, Eóin Tennyson, response to the riots

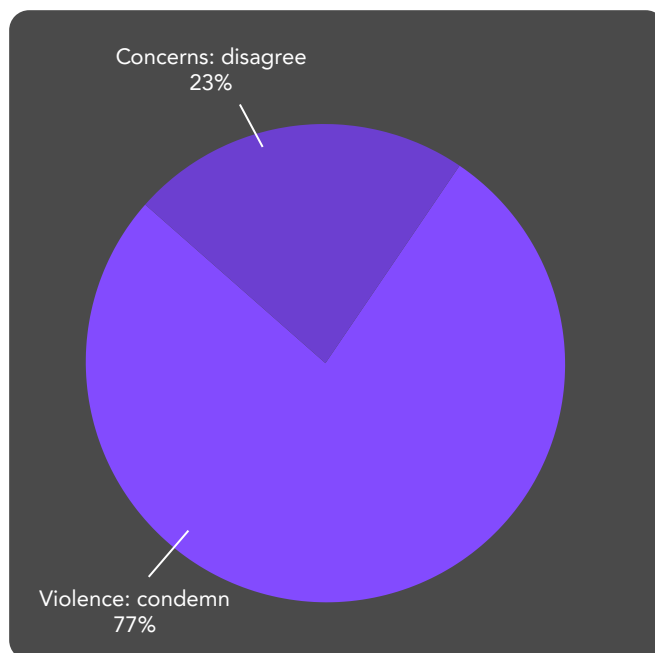


Figure 3.11 SDLP social media responses to protests and riots

### UUP Social Media Responses

Like all parties, the UUP condemned the violence, though its representatives expressed divergent views on the riots' context. Former leader Doug Beattie MLA described the Portadown violence as having "nothing to do with immigration or safeguarding women and girls. It has been nothing more than petulant thuggery aimed at the police and endangering others." MLA Colin Crawford acknowledged "real concerns, particularly around unmanaged immigration, housing, and community safety, that are not being adequately heard or addressed," but stressed:

*"We must never allow one group to be stigmatised or scapegoated for the actions of individuals. Blanket condemnation of foreign nationals is not only wrong—it is harmful, unjust, and undermines the very community cohesion we all want to build."*

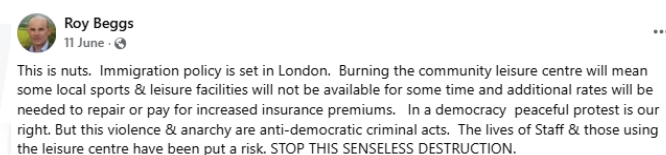


Figure 3.14 UUP representative condemning the riots

Another UUP representative condemned the "violence & anarchy," noting immigration policy is set in London, not locally [Fig. 3.14].

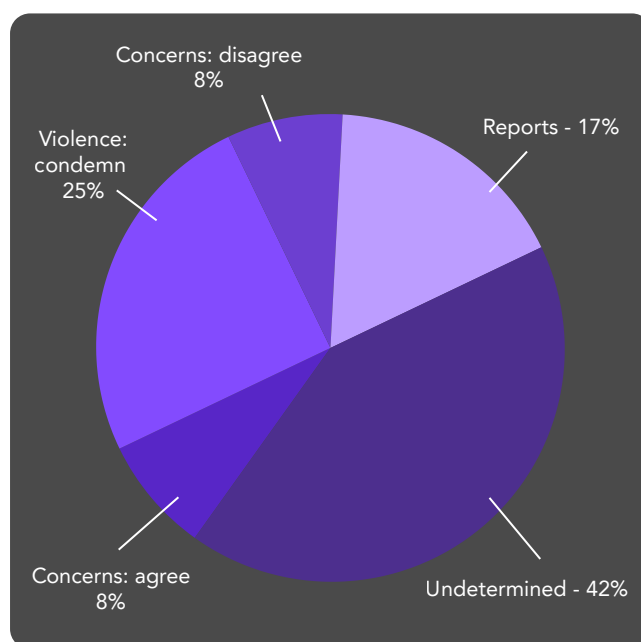


Figure 3.13 UUP social media responses to protests and riots



### TUV Social Media Responses

TUV posts strongly aligned with protestors' concerns, linking immigration to violence against women and girls and socio-economic deprivation. Representatives framed the riots as a consequence of political failure and "gaslighting" on immigration [Fig. 3.16]. Party leader Jim Allister MP criticised the BBC for dismissing "valid immigration concerns," while Gaston MLA urged politicians to "listen to their working-class communities."



Figure 3.16 TUV MLA, Timothy Gaston, response to riots

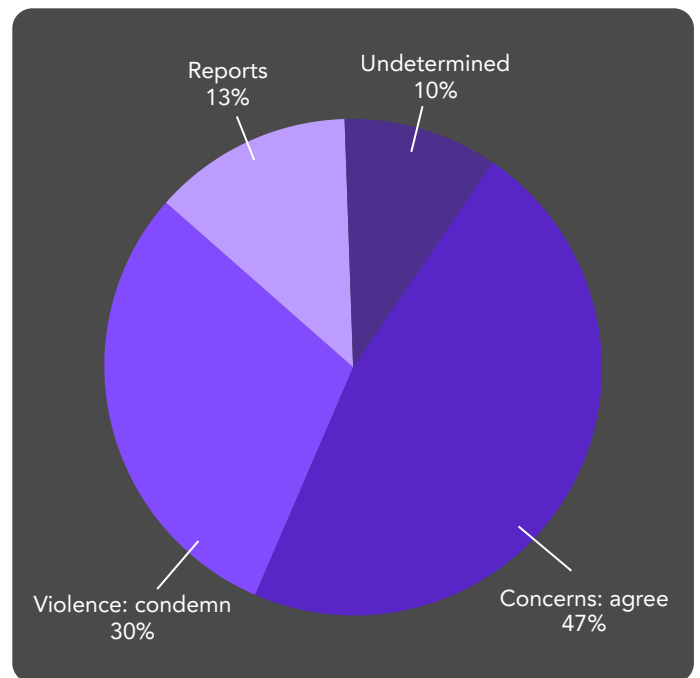


Figure 3.15 TUV social media responses to protests and riots

### Addressing the Impact of Illegal Immigration in Northern Ireland

Policy divisions on immigration were starkly illustrated in a DUP-sponsored Assembly motion<sup>45</sup> tabled on 13 May 2025, titled "Addressing the Impact of Illegal Immigration in Northern Ireland." The original motion criticised the UK government's "continuing failure to meaningfully address illegal immigration," citing rising asylum accommodation costs and strains on public services, and reiterating a perceived link between "illegal immigration" and housing demand.

After amendments, the final motion was altered to subvert its original intent to read:




*"That this Assembly notes the Prime Minister's plans to reduce legal migration to the UK; acknowledges that immigration can deliver many benefits including contributing to economic growth and addressing skills shortages; regrets the continued divisive rhetoric around immigration in UK politics, including from the UK Government; agrees*

*that insufficient investment places greater pressure on the delivery of key public services; recognises that immigration policy should focus on integration and addressing the drivers of displacement; expresses concern that Northern Ireland remains without a refugee integration strategy; and calls on the First and deputy First Minister to publish a refugee integration strategy by September 2025."*

The motion passed 43–27, supported by Sinn Féin, SDLP, Alliance, and PBP, and opposed by the DUP, UUP, and TUV.

<sup>45</sup> [niassembly.gov.uk. \(2025\). The Northern Ireland Assembly. \[online\] Available at: https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?ses=0&doc=439238](https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?ses=0&doc=439238)

## Political Party Response | Assembly Questions





Political Party	Ministerial Questions Overview	Assembly Question Topic	Asked By (MLA)	Question Ref
	<p>During the monitoring period, Sinn Féin submitted one immigration-related question: a request for an update on the planned Refugee Integration Strategy. This strategy, the responsibility of the Executive Office, outlines actions to support people seeking protection so they are treated fairly, avoid injustice, and can live as valued members of the community with opportunities to reach their potential.<sup>45</sup> In the previous period, Sinn Féin had also submitted a policy question on plans for a post-2025 Racial Equality Strategy.</p>	Update on draft Refugee Integration Strategy	Carál Ní Chuilín	AOO 1788/22-27
	<p>Between October 2024 and February 2025, DUP MLAs submitted four Ministerial Questions on immigration, all focused on difficulties faced by the agri-food and fishing sectors in accessing migrant labour and on Stormont Departments' engagement with the UK Home Office.<sup>46</sup> From March to August 2025, they submitted five more: three scrutinising legal aid spending for asylum seekers, and two addressing illegal immigration and the rising costs of asylum provision imposed by the UK government. This shift toward budget-focused scrutiny mirrored the TUV's earlier approach, indicating a broader realignment of DUP priorities on immigration policy.</p>	<p>Department of Justice's expenditure on legal aid for immigration bail applications</p> <p>Increased cost in asylum accommodation by UK Government</p> <p>Legal aid for asylum cases</p> <p>Levels of illegal immigration in NI</p> <p>Legal advice to asylum seekers</p>	<p>Stephen Dunne</p> <p>Tom Buchanan</p> <p>Cheryl Brownlee</p>	<p>AQW 27259/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27116/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27258/22-27</p> <p>AOO 2190/22-27</p> <p>AOW 28361/22-27</p> <p>AOW 29003/22-27</p>
	<p>Alliance Party MLAs submitted twelve Ministerial Questions addressing the needs of immigrant and refugee constituents, including queries on the Refugee Integration Strategy, Modern Slavery Strategy, and the Executive's response to the UK government's White Paper on Immigration. They also sought clarification on ministerial statements about asylum seekers' legal entitlements, which appeared to suggest that "illegal immigrants" were entitled to housing from the UK Home Office.<sup>47</sup></p> <p>On 9 June 2025, the day riots began in Ballymena, Danny Donnelly MLA asked the Deputy First Minister (Emma Little-Pengelly, DUP) for evidence that "illegal immigration" impacts "the provision of public services in schools, hospitals, and housing," given that those without status have no recourse to public funds. The Deputy First Minister replied that it was "basic and logical... Because, of course, they go onto a list and are allocated a place."<sup>48</sup></p>	<p>Lack of solicitors qualified to practice immigration law</p> <p>Executive Office's response to the White Paper on Immigration</p> <p>Implementation of Modern Slavery Strategy</p> <p>Timetable for draft Refugee Integration Strategy</p> <p>Support for victims of human trafficking</p> <p>Clarifying Ministerial statement about Mears PLC and illegal immigrants and the legal obligation to protect refugees and asylum seekers</p> <p>Valuing and welcoming skilled migrant workers</p> <p>Update on draft Refugee Integration Strategy</p> <p>Number of asylum seekers aged 16-24 in further education</p> <p>Long-term economic impact of failing to provide sufficient language education, training and qualifications for young asylum seekers</p> <p>Inclusion of asylum seekers aged 16-24 in Skills Strategy</p> <p>Access to education and skills development for asylum seekers aged 16-24</p>	<p>Paula Bradshaw</p> <p>Kellie Armstrong</p> <p>Sian Mulholland</p> <p>Stewart Dickson</p> <p>Kate Nicholl</p>	<p>AQW 26493/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27434/22-27</p> <p>AQW 26494/22-27</p> <p>AQW 26496/22-27</p> <p>AQW 26495/22-27</p> <p>AQW 28433/22-27</p> <p>AOO 2275/22-27</p> <p>AOO 1885/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27976/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27977/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27978/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27979/22-27</p>

<sup>45</sup> The Executive Office. (2025). Refugee Integration Strategy. [online] Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/refugee-integration-strategy>

<sup>46</sup> Committee on the Administration of Justice. (2025). Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report - Committee on the Administration of Justice. p.33 [online] Available at: <https://caj.org.uk/publications/reports/mapping-far-right-activity-online-in-northern-ireland-project-report/>

<sup>47</sup> niassembly.gov.uk. (2025). The Northern Ireland Assembly. [online] Available at: <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/writesearchresults.aspx?cf=0&qfv=1&ref=AOW%2028433/22-27>

<sup>48</sup> niassembly.gov.uk. (2025). The Northern Ireland Assembly. [online] Available at: <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&veDate=2025/06/09&docID=441928>

	<p>SDLP MLAs submitted ten questions covering legal advice for asylum seekers, cross-border cooperation to combat people smuggling, and the impact of the UK government's White Paper on Immigration, including its projected effect on the mushroom industry. The SDLP was the only party to query Executive engagement with social media platforms to combat hate speech, disinformation, and protect vulnerable communities. This may reflect the experience of former Derry Mayor Lillian Seenoi-Barr (SDLP), who faced sustained racist and misogynistic online harassment during her term, leading to one conviction.</p>	<p>Current provision of immigration training to legal professionals</p> <p>Provision of legal and immigration advice to those detained at Larne House Immigration Detention Centre</p> <p>Representations to the US Government regarding undocumented Irish</p> <p>Executive Office and Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs input into UK Government on the Immigration White Paper in relation to the mushroom sector</p> <p>Executive Office's engagement with UK Government on Restoring Control over the Immigration System White Paper</p> <p>Support for NI students in USA impacted by changes to immigration policy there</p> <p>Child criminal exploitation in NI</p> <p>Cross-border cooperation in vulnerable migrants and people smuggling</p> <p>Safety of migrant communities, tackling online disinformation and hate speech</p> <p>Engagement with social media platforms where people at risk of attack are being identified</p>	<p>Justin McNulty</p> <p>Patsy McGlone</p> <p>Colin McGrath</p> <p>Matthew O'Toole</p> <p>Daniel McCrossan</p> <p>Cara Hunter</p> <p>Gerry Carroll</p>	<p>AQW 26314/22-27</p> <p>AQW 24468/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27819/22-27</p> <p>AQW 26761/22-27 AQW 26762/22-27 AQW 26841/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27416/22-27</p> <p>AQW 29297/22-27</p> <p>AQW 28638/22-27</p> <p>AQW 25336/22-27</p> <p>AQW 28576/22-27 AQW 28690/22-27</p> <p>AQW 28693/22-27</p>
	<p>People Before Profit focused their immigration-related questions on the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, pressing the Executive Office on its agreed position regarding Ukrainian refugees, the sustainability of legal aid for asylum and immigration work, and its engagement with the UK Home Office. They queried immigration raids in Belfast, raised concerns about the role of private contractor Mears in providing accommodation, and asked whether the Executive had made representations to the British Government on individual asylum cases.</p>	<p>Agreed Executive Office position on Ukrainian refugees</p> <p>Immigration raids in Belfast 2022-23</p> <p>Details of meetings between Executive Office and UK Home Office</p> <p>Sustainability of asylum and immigration legal work in context of legal aid freezes</p> <p>Engagement between Executive Office and UK Home Office regarding Mears accommodation provider</p> <p>Representations by Executive Office to British Government on particular asylum applications</p>	<p>Diana Armstrong</p> <p>Steve Aiken</p> <p>Doug Beattie</p> <p>Timothy Gaston</p>	<p>AQW 26055/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27235/22-27</p> <p>AQW 28560/22-27</p> <p>AQW 25168/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27306/22-27</p> <p>AQW 27974/22-27</p>
	<p>The UUP's Ministerial Questions focused on the projected impact of UK immigration policy on Northern Ireland's economy and support provisions for Ukrainian refugees.</p>	<p>Impact of the UK Governments Immigration White Paper on the NI economy</p> <p>Details of support provision for Ukrainian refugees</p> <p>Engagement with UK Home Office on Section 127 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994</p>	<p>Timothy Gaston</p>	<p>AQW 26983/22-27</p> <p>AOO 1730/22-27</p> <p>AQW 23997/22-27</p>
	<p>As in the previous phase, TUV Ministerial Questions focused on resources for asylum seekers. Timothy Gaston MLA sought data on asylum seeker distribution by council and constituency boundaries, as well as the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers receiving healthcare.</p>	<p>Number of asylum seekers in hostels by council area</p> <p>Number of unaccompanied asylum seekers in health service</p> <p>Number of asylum seekers in hostels by constituency</p>	<p>Timothy Gaston</p>	<p>AQW 29013/22-27</p> <p>AQW 24236/22-27</p> <p>AOO 2106/22-27</p>

## Insights

### **Political Fault Lines**

The positions adopted by the various political parties are generally dividing along conventional northern Irish political lines: “unionism” is reflecting the increasingly hostile political consensus around immigration found in England while “nationalism” and “others” advocate for immigration and race relations policies which uphold due process for international protection applicants and provide protections for minorities. But the extent to which these party political positions are reflective of the sentiments within their traditional constituencies has not been tested.

### **Political Leadership**

Both the social media posts and the Assembly questions demonstrate attempts by political unionism to give political leadership and voice to the concerns around immigration policy expressed during the Ballymena inspired protests and riots. Alongside this there is a strong anti-political agenda – and accompanying direct action tactics, often incorporating violence and intimidation – which is predicated on the assumption that the political process has both failed and is incapable of taking the necessary action on immigration. It is likely that this tension will increase as attempts are made to both incorporate dissent within existing political and civic structures on the one hand, and garner political support for more extreme action on the other.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

# Conclusion

---

This report follows on from the *Mapping Far Right Activity in Northern Ireland Project Report*, launched in May 2025, and covers the disorder which initiated in Ballymena in June 2025. Both reports capture moments of escalation in racist violence and intimidation that have long been part of a broader pattern in Northern Ireland, with the added dangers of the involvement of elements of loyalist paramilitary groups.

The gravity of the events in Ballymena are perhaps best summed up by the concerns of the Police Federation that PSNI action in responding to the racist disorder 'saved lives' and 'prevented a pogrom'. The gravity of the intimidation and violence that took place was and remains terrifying for victims and their communities. Numerous migrant homes were targeted and violently attacked leading to a significant exodus of families from Ballymena. The international media recorded both these events and the desperate displays of Union Flags and other messages householders put up to try and prevent their properties being attacked.

The initial incidents were followed by other violent disturbances, attacks on homes and anti-migrant protests for at least a week in localities including Cullybackey, Belfast, Coleraine, Lisburn, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, Larne, Antrim, Portadown, Lurgan, Newry, Derry and Bangor. Internally displaced persons being supported by Mid and East Antrim Council in Larne Leisure centre were also displaced again following a racist arson attack on the facility. The events have also been followed by the emergence of 'vigilante' patrols of 'concerned communities' and the targeting of asylum accommodation hotels.

## The Role of Social Media

A pattern emerging from the present analysis (from that captured in the previous report) is a shift from social media being almost exclusively used as an amplification tool for anti-migrant narratives, 'into an organising and communication tool for community based activism.' This has been accompanied by a growth in more identifiable groups and individuals coordinating activity. As can be seen from this report the use of social media has included:

- To assist in the targeting of homes, and to celebrate expulsions.
- To spread disinformation and misinformation and in particular the demonising of whole migrant communities as sexual predators and a threat to women.
- To encourage people to identify their homes (including those not to be attacked).
- As a platform to express sympathy with the anti-

immigrant violence, including the expulsion of families and clashes with police

- As a platform for accounts outside the jurisdiction to amplify sympathy with the rioters.
- As part of UK-wide tactic to identify and target migrant accommodation including hotels (as well as a platform for targeting businesses, places of worship, schools.)
- As a platform for vigilante patrols to post videos of racial harassment and for related incitement.

A further pattern identified related to social media accounts with a posting history of anti-migrant sentiment adopting a more seemingly neutral 'reportage' of events, presumably to reach bigger audiences. Perhaps foreseeably this left it to those posting inflammatory comments on such pieces to frame reactions.

## Social Media and Shifting Patterns of Organising

This report documents a series of initiatives largely using Facebook, to promote 'a more visible, community-based anti-immigrant movement.'

This is distinct from the patterns observed flowing from the August 2024 disturbances, where there were attempts to organise (social media promoted) anti-migrant mass mobilisations in city centres. Such tactics however failed at mass mobilisation and were largely dwarfed by cross-community counter-protests. This analysis notes that by contrast:

*The Ballymena protests and riots appear to have provided a springboard for establishing a more stronger, confident and visible anti-immigrant presence in local communities.*

This has been observed through small networks of social media accounts (mostly on Facebook), often adopting a 'Concerned Residents/Parents' framing, with a focus on localised issues and targets. This has also been followed by the emergence of vigilante groups.

It is evident from this analysis, both in posting histories, identity markers and geographical location that these community-based efforts are focused and have predominantly found fertile ground in particular loyalist communities. As concluded in this report 'Legacy and social media coverage of these anti-immigrant activities demonstrate that these groups do not command the allegiance of a majority of people in these communities, but the trend is undeniable.' The context of such localised activity and the involvement of elements of paramilitarism, creates a climate of intimidation that changes the

context of anti-racist activity and makes it unlikely for counter-protest activity to occur, as it would not be safe to do so.

That said there are also clear efforts by Irish far right actors to gain 'foothold' in nationalist communities. This to date has largely been successfully repelled by a combination of rapid community response, unambiguous political leadership, and countering mobilisations. The threat nevertheless continues. This was evident in a recent 'Locals First Initiative' protest in the City of Newry, protestors against the Council's city of sanctuary. This included tricolour waving protestors who had reportedly previously taken part in an "Ireland is for the Irish" march in the city. The protest was also addressed by a DUP councillor and counter-protested by trade unions and others.

This current report also documents a significant decline in the narrative-framing from the previous summer (by both Irish and British far right actors) of seeking to present anti-migrant protest in Northern Ireland as a 'coming together' of Protestants and Catholics. Parallels were drawn on social media between previous anti-Catholic pogroms, housing intimidation and the current racist violence.

Some of the incidents examined in this report have raised questions as to the extent of the involvement of elements of paramilitary organisations. There is also broader far right activity where there is no indication of such involvement. Paramilitary involvement has, for example, been raised in the recent context of racist and sectarian intimidation from housing in north Belfast where the PSNI confirmed their understanding that "individual members and local groups linked to paramilitary groups, specifically the UDA in that area, have been involved in those incidents" but that the attacks had not been sanctioned by the senior leadership of the UDA.

It should be stressed (that notwithstanding the risk of racist and sectarian intimidation on an even greater scale) it makes little immediate difference to victims of specific incidents if a paramilitary-involved attack or act of intimidation was or was not sanctioned by leadership. The impact is the same, intimidation carries real and imminent danger if undertaken by members of an armed group. Equally the fear of witnesses not to report to the police and hence difficulties in securing convictions remain the case if perpetrators are linked to armed groups. Incidents not 'sanctioned by the leadership' but carried out by members or local branches of a paramilitary group are clearly still attributable to that group, as is the use

of the groups flags for the purposes of racist or sectarian intimidation. The involvement of members of armed groups in attacks would also constitute an 'act of violence or of preparation for violence' which can lead to the Secretary of State considering a paramilitary ceasefire has been breached under the terms of s3 of the Sentences Act (NI) 1998.

### **Social Media and Political Leadership**

In relation to local political parties this report observes a general pattern is emerging whereby unionist parties, primarily the DUP and TUV, are increasingly reflecting 'the increasingly hostile political consensus around immigration found in England'. By contrast 'nationalist' and 'other' parties are not. Whilst condemnation of violence is universal, the pattern has been observed of the DUP and TUV in particular giving further voice and concurring with the concerns on immigration policy expressed during the Ballymena protests and elsewhere. The report also notes that it is untested as to the extent to which these party political positions are reflective of their constituencies. It also notes that there is also a 'strong anti-political agenda' within the protests as well as continued attacks on parties which stand up to racism, and how that ultimately impacts remains to be seen.

# Recommendations

---

The conclusions section in the *Mapping Far Right Activity in Northern Ireland Project Report* drew attention to relevant criminal law, and positive legal and human rights obligations on public authorities as well as the provisions of the MLA Code of Conduct.

A series of recommendations flowed from this for public authorities and elected representatives. We consider these recommendations hold in the current context of the patterns of greater localised organisation identified in this report. They are reproduced within the recommendations of this report.

In relation to the emergence of vigilantism and the criminal law, it is worth noting the application offence of intimidation extends beyond intimidation from housing. The offence of 'intimidation' under s1 of the Protection of the Person and Property Act (Northern Ireland) 1969, also covers circumstances whereby a person is unlawfully caused – 'by force, threats or menaces, or in any way whatsoever' to 'leave employment' or 'to do or refrain from doing any act' (which would include, for example, sitting in a public park).

The issues of political leadership against racism set out in the recommendations remain imperative to prevent the legitimisation of far-right narratives. This includes deconstructing the racist stereotyping of whole communities as predators or criminals, or the scapegoating for long term issues of inequality and housing provision.

Such interventions will need to go beyond welcoming statements and expressed commitments to diversity. They will need to actively deconstruct scapegoating and stereotyping and to call out and act on the actual material causes of inequality and unmet housing need (and the failure to take action against them – such as through the long overdue Stormont Anti-Poverty Strategy). This report itself alludes to the problems created by the privatisation of asylum accommodation, which lands into a deregulated housing market with limited public provision of housing. A focus on the impact of Government policies is imperative rather than the scapegoating of many of those caught up in them.

**The following recommendations are drawn from the preceding report in this project, *Mapping Far Right Activity Online Project Report***

## **Recommended Actions for Public Authorities and Elected Representatives**

Relevant public authorities need to ensure they are operationalising their 'good relations' and ECHR duties to take positive action to combat racist expression within their functions, this includes:

- The strategic role of the Executive Office in providing the overarching framework for Stormont to discharge good relation duties to tackle racism, including its online manifestations. A revised Racial Equality Strategy should cover this area and overarching anti-racist campaigns tackling prejudice and taking on specific stereotypes. This should also encompass a proactive centralised monitoring and further investigation of racist activity online.
- Local Councils have specific duties through s75 and Race Relations Order statutory duties and the Community Planning functions. We would recommend monitoring and reporting on racist incidents in and effecting Council districts along with anti-racist campaigns tackling prejudice and taking on specific stereotypes.
- Public authorities in the education sector, including the Education Authority and Department, have a specific role in tackling online racist discourse impacting on schools, as well as broader duties to tackle linked issues such as racist bullying in schools.
- Public authorities dealing with housing including the Housing Executive, have specific duties regarding combatting false narratives around housing online.

Tackling racist expression online will be complimentary to broader duties to tackle the issue of physical racist expression in public space by relevant public authorities.



### **Criminal Law and Regulation of Social Media Providers**

There are also significant examples of posts in the case studies which reach the high threshold of a criminal offence and hence are not protected free expression. This includes posts which make threats of violence, including murder and the racist and misogynist targeting of those in public life. It also includes posts which constitute intimidation from housing or that directly arouse fear or stir up hatred.

Whilst the regulation of social media providers is a Westminster matter relevant the criminal law is devolved to the NI Assembly. There were specific recommendations in the 2020 Independent Hate Crimes Review led by Judge Marrinan, to strengthen incitement to hatred ('stirring up' etc) offences and for an aggravated offences hate crimes model that should be taken forward by the Department of Justice.

In the interim, the existing criminal offences, in particular 'intimidation', 'stirring up hatred' or 'arousing fear', should continue to be utilised in relation to online discourse reaching this threshold. The PSNI and PPS should harness this framework to ensure effective remedies for offences which reach the criminal threshold.

### **Elected Representatives**

Elected representatives should ensure they are at all times acting compatibly with the provisions of Codes of Conduct relating to tackling prejudice, promoting understanding and respect and diversity. Elected representatives provide unqualified and proactive leadership against racist discourse and incidents, challenging and calling out racial stereotyping and demonisation.

Both the role of elected representatives and public authorities provided for in the recommendations can involve proactively tackling recurring stereotypes. This includes where whole migrant or Muslim communities are being linked to criminality, knives, or labelled as being a threat to children. Such discourse can involve blaming a whole community for the alleged actions of an individual (who may or may not be from that community). It can also involve incidents which may have been misrepresented or fabricated to stir up fear and hatred. There is also a pattern of posts replicating variations on the far-right 'great replacement theory' and false stories of migrants receiving 'freebies' which can be met with factual rebuttals.


Some actors may seek to present anyone challenging far right tropes as attacking 'free speech', despite 'free speech' referring to government censorship rather than others disagreeing and challenging racist discourse, and the most serious material in question (which incites violence or racial hatred) falling outside the scope of protected free speech.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the harms of the identified racist discourse on social media are unfolding in a context where racist attacks and paramilitary-linked intimidation are already widespread in Northern Ireland, prompting the UN anti-racism committee to call for robust action.<sup>46</sup> Our recommendations should be considered with this context in mind.

<sup>46</sup> <https://nwmf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CERD-final-report.pdf>







Equality Coalition c/o CAJ,  
1st Floor, Community House,  
Citylink Business Park,  
6A Albert Street, Belfast,  
BT12 4HQ

Tel: 028 9031 6000

Email: [equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk](mailto:equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk)

Website: [www.equalitycoalition.net](http://www.equalitycoalition.net)