



Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland Project Report

Case studies on the role of social media in
anti-immigration protests and racist incidents

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CAJ Foreword: Background to the research 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.
- The 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.

The Origins of the Project

In early August 2024 racist disorder erupted in Belfast at the same time as similar disturbances in a number of English cities. Whilst the disorder and a concurrent upsurge in racist attacks marked a significant escalation, it was not new in the Northern Ireland context. Rather the events formed part of an existing pattern of orchestrated racist intimidation largely occurring in specific areas with the involvement of elements of paramilitary groups. Further questions did emerge however as to the extent both disorder and the racist attacks were being fuelled by orchestration, disinformation and misinformation online by far-right actors and tropes.

Phase I: Snapshot Exercise

Through the Equality Coalition, the Co-Conveners CAJ and UNISON engaged local technology experts, the Rabble Cooperative, to immediately initiate an initial snapshot study on the online activity linked to the violent far-right protests occurring in Belfast from Saturday 3 August 2024 and an earlier series of

incidents of racist intimidation from housing in an area of south Belfast in late 2023.

This study was supported by Equality Coalition programme costs from the UNISON Campaign Fund. It produced interim findings which were presented in three roundtable events, firstly to BME and broader Coalition members, secondly to public authorities, and thirdly an online event for anti-racism groups in Great Britain and the south of Ireland, further to engagement with the Irish Network Against Racism and London-based Institute of Race Relations.

Phase II: The Present Report

Funding was generously provided by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, AB Charitable Trust and the Civic Power Fund Emergency Action Fund for a second stage of the project to further probe the patterns uncovered and to produce a more detailed analysis of online far-right activity in the Northern Ireland context in the form of a public facing report.

Intended Outcomes of the Project

- Shape and improve the public policy response to racist violence and intimidation, including: the response from the Stormont Executive in its hate crimes and tackling paramilitarism programmes; influencing hate crimes legislation and duties to remove hate expression; and a more effective policing response.
- Use the materials in training and capacity building anti-racism work within trade unions and the equalities NGO sector, particularly on how to combat misinformation and disinformation.
- Inform and shape approaches within the BME and anti-racism sector on how to report and seek effective remedy for online racist agitation.
- Engage with mainstream media on mapping of racist violence and combatting disinformation.

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).¹

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.² 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.³

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.*⁴

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.*⁵

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.

¹ Independent Review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Executive summary

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ ECRI Report on the UK, adopted 3 July 2024.

Introduction

Rabble Cooperative was commissioned by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) with the support of the Equality Coalition to conduct online research into far right, racist, and sectarian activity related to a number of events and time periods.

- Phase One: Belvoir anti-immigrant banners (October 2023)
- Phase One: Anti-immigrant protests and riots (August 2024)
- Phase Two: Live research into racist/anti-immigrant incidents and social media activity (October 2024 – February 2025)

Project Phases

The research involved analysing online agitation and associated accounts, indications of paramilitary connections and links, the location of accounts (where possible to determine or based on proxy indicators), key messaging and misinformation, and other relevant information. In essence, this research aimed to map and analyse online far-right activity associated with Northern Ireland.

While Phase One allowed us to identify specific accounts and emerging trends, Phase Two deepened this analysis by exploring how different networks interact to foster anti-immigrant sentiment within local communities. It also examined how this sentiment manifests in offline activities at the local level, how these local activities connect to broader regional movements, and how political positioning and policies emerge from this process.

Phase One commenced on 9 August 2024, and an unpublished interim report was produced in September 2024 which was then presented to Equality Coalition members, broader civil society and statutory authorities representatives from Northern Ireland, and partners from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The feedback from these sessions, including inputs of people with lived experience of anti-immigrant and racist violence, informed the direction of the research in Phase Two.

Social Media

Platforms

While Phase One focused primarily on X, Facebook, and Instagram, Phase Two expanded the research to include activity on Reddit, TikTok, and Telegram. However, due to inherent limitations and changes in how these platforms allow public data extraction and analysis, significant barriers exist to obtaining answers that could provide conclusive evidence in line with the objectives of the Terms of Reference.

As a result, much of the research was conducted manually, relying on publicly available information that adhered to the platforms' Terms of Service.

By its nature, this approach limited our ability to process an exhaustive amount of quantitative data across the platforms, leaning instead towards selective quantitative and qualitative analysis of activity. Quantitative analysis was possible by examining and comparing publicly accessible metrics such as follower counts, engagement levels, comments, and account profiles.

Terminology

Throughout the report, we use the term 'post' to refer to content shared by an account holder on any of the platforms. Posts, comments, and engagements across all platforms were analysed as part of the research. 'Likes' and 'loves' are categorised as 'positive engagements.' While reposting or sharing content can sometimes be considered a positive engagement, we recognise that this is not always the case. As such, shares were analysed separately.

Location of Accounts

Determining the location of accounts across different platforms conclusively is challenging. Data extracted through public access relies on user-added location details in account profiles, which can often be set to any location the account holder chooses. Additionally, many account holders omit location details entirely or adjust settings to switch off geolocation functionality. In cases where location information was absent, the account's posting history was analysed to infer their primary country or region of interest, which was then attributed to the account. If no proxy location could be determined, the account's location was classified as 'null.'

For simplicity and coherence in analysing data related to the UK and Ireland, we used the following classifications: "Great Britain," "Ireland (N)," and "Ireland (S)." For all other countries, full titles were used unless the data was too small for meaningful visualisation or non-critical to the analysis, in which case entries were grouped under the category "Other."

It is important to note that this approach is not fool-proof and merely provides an indicative approximation of account locations for the purposes of this investigation. A more in-depth analysis of account locations was not feasible within the scope of this project.

Tools Used

A variety of tools were used to help in the identification and analysis of data across the social media platforms:

- **Export Comments:** to extract comments and responses to posts across the social media platforms we used the online tool Export Comments. The comments were then processed for analysis offline
- **Qwen Chat⁶:** to carry out the sentiment analysis in the 'Northern Ireland's First Black Mayor' chapter, Qwen Chat was provided with a set of instructions to conduct an analysis. Examples of the analysis are provided in the relevant chapter.
- **Webalerts:** to monitor hate crime incidents and identify incidents that could be instrumentalised to spread anti-immigrant or racist narratives, online mainstream media outlets were monitored. Webalerts, an application developed by Rabble Cooperative which leverages APIs and RSS Feeds for websites, media outlets and the Stormont Assembly was used to provide daily alerts of keyword matches.

Political Reactions

To evaluate political responses to hate crimes in specific constituencies, a list of social media accounts operated by political parties and all their representatives at the Council, Assembly, and Westminster levels relevant to the constituency in question was compiled. A total of 231 accounts were identified across X, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. In many cases, either the party or the representative did not have an account on one of the platforms, or the account was inactive.

As noted throughout the report, caution is essential when drawing conclusions about a representative's or party's response to hate crimes based solely on social media activity. Social media does not represent the entirety — or even the primary — means by which representatives engage with the public or their constituents.



⁶Qwen Chat is an AI chatbot, based on Qwen's Large Language Models, developed by Alibaba

Date:

October - November 2023

Location:

Belvoir Estate, South Belfast

Anti-Immigrant Banners in Belvoir

Anti-Immigrant Banners in Belvoir

Overview

Towards the end of October 2023, anti-immigration placards and banners were erected in South Belfast's Belvoir Estate, subsequently classified by the PSNI as a "hate incident" [Fig. 1]⁷. The placards referenced rumours that vacant high-rise flats were to be allocated to "illegal immigrants" by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). Despite the rumours being false, given as irregular migrants are not eligible for NIHE accommodation nor do they have any recourse to public funds, they continued to circulate.

On 31 October, local SDLP Councillor Dónal Lyons, following concerns raised by constituents, removed the placards. His actions, and those of other parties condemning the placards, drew criticism on social media from local groups and a DUP representative. On 2 November 2023, a meeting between the NIHE and the DUP confirmed that there were no plans to temporarily house anyone in the flats. That same day, the windows and doors of the flat's foyer were smashed, and graffiti appeared in the estate warning local SDLP Councillor Dónal Lyons to "Stay Out."

No organisation or grouping claimed responsibility for the placards, although the Belfast Telegraph cited sources claiming that the loyalist paramilitary grouping, the Ulster Defence Association, was behind the initiative.⁸

Social Media

Facebook was the primary social media platform used to post about the events, with the following accounts and groups being the most active:

- Belvoir Area Residents Group
- Ballynafeigh Unionist Forum
- Cllr. Sarah Bunting

To a lesser extent, X was used to provide commentary on the event, such as by Cllr. Dónal Lyons.

The Belvoir Area Residents Group, a public Facebook group, hosted discussions about the placards, banners, public and media reactions, and post-event

political interventions. It is important to note that the Belvoir Area Residents Group was not associated with the signs, and explicitly stated that they had "nothing to do with these banners/posters."

The first posting of the placards was made by an anonymous participant in the Belvoir Area Residents Group on 31 October 2023. The post included three screenshots of the placards displayed across the estate [Fig. 1]. A random sample (20%) of the accounts that liked the post confirmed that 90% appeared to be based in Belfast. This suggests that the group is not a platform where external accounts are actively agitating to push political messages. The post generated 209 comments. While many comments echoed the sentiment of the original post and supported the placards and banners, there was also a vocal minority of seemingly local accounts that disagreed with them.

Despite efforts by some to counter the emerging narrative, the discussion perpetuated disinformation about a supposed government-sponsored initiative to move "illegal immigrants" into public housing, as well as far-right tropes about "military-aged men" abandoning their families to "flood" local communities.

Political Responses

On 31 October, the Ballynafeigh Unionist Forum posted that they had caught Cllr. Lyons "in the act of removing posters and banners in the Belvoir area" [Fig. 2]. They stated the posters had been placed around Belvoir, purportedly to highlight local residents' concerns on a number of issues.

Councillor Lyons responded on X, stating that he was acting on behalf of several residents who were "disgusted" by what they described as "anonymous and sinister" posters. [Fig. 3]

Messages of condemnation for the posters soon followed on X from local elected politicians representing Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party.

⁷ Sharkey, K. (2023, November 1). Belvoir: Anti-migrant signs treated as "hate incident."

⁸ Jordan, H. (2023, November 7). UDA gang suspected of being behind a racist poster campaign in south Belfast. SundayWorld.com.



Figure 1. Social media posts highlighting Anti-Immigration Banners in Belvoir Estate



Figure 2. Social media post in the Ballynaveigh Unionist Forum

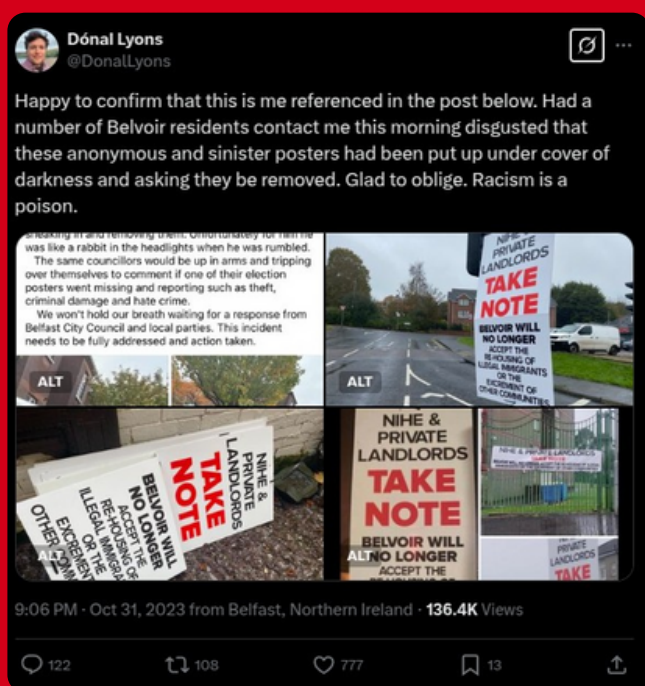


Figure 3. Social media commentary on posters by Cllr. Dónal Lyons.



Figure 4. Social media post in the Belvoir Area Residents Group

On 2 November, local DUP Belfast City Councillor Sarah Bunting issued a statement criticising “some elected reps” for “grandstanding” about the posters rather than engaging with the “community.” While she acknowledged that “the wording on the posters isn’t appropriate,” she argued that the posters reflected a community “pushed to its limit.”

Cllr. Bunting highlighted frustrations over the lack of social housing in the Belvoir estate, compounded by the perception that the flats were being used to house individuals convicted of serious offenses, including sexual assaults on women and children, drug dealing, theft, and more. She stated, “...while I condemn any racism, intimidation, threats, or criminality, I stand with the community, of all creeds and colours, in their desire to have a safe and settled place to live and raise their families.”

In a separate statement to the Irish News, DUP South Belfast MP Edwin Poots addressed the rumours about housing “illegal immigrants” in public housing. He remarked:

“Speculation that the flats are to be used for illegal immigrants is rife, and it is for [the Housing Executive] to confirm its veracity or deny it... It should be understood that being against uncontrolled immigration does not make a person racist.”

On the same day, after Cllr. Sarah Bunting and Edwin Poots MLA met with the NIHE and received confirmation that no one would be temporarily housed in the empty flats, the windows and doors of the flat’s foyer were smashed. Graffiti was sprayed in the Belvoir estate, warning Councillor Lyons to “Stay Out.”

On 26 November 2023, an anonymous participant in the Belvoir Area Residents Group posted an image of a copycat placard erected in the Taughmonagh estate in South Belfast [Fig. 4]. The placard featured identical wording to those previously seen in Belvoir but was addressed specifically to the Taughmonagh area of south Belfast. Comments below the post included remarks such as “Well done, about time a community taking a stand,” while another commenter alleged that similar placards had also been erected in Rathcoole area of North Belfast.

Insights

Limited role of social media in organisation:

This event was not driven by social media. While social media served as a platform for commenting and reporting on developments, there is no evidence to suggest it was used to organise or mobilise efforts.

Local grievances framed in anti-immigrant terms:

The status of the flats in the Belvoir estate was clearly a long-standing local issue that was co-opted into an anti-immigrant narrative. One news source claimed that loyalist paramilitaries were involved in organising the action and the framing.

Spread of disinformation online:

Commentary and discussions in Facebook groups spread disinformation and anti-immigrant tropes with minimal pushback or moderation from community leaders, allowing harmful narratives to gain traction unchecked.

Clarification of housing policies and legal scope absent:

The NIHE does not provide accommodation for asylum seekers and lacks the legal authority to house “illegal immigrants.” This is a fact every elected representative should be fully aware of. The failure to clarify this early on—and thereby prevent the spread of rumours—was deeply concerning. It served to fuel groundless fears, particularly about people (who do not qualify for housing) accessing public housing ahead of others on the waiting list, and more broadly about “illegal immigration”, whilst also seeming to set a precedent that this type of orchestration works. The subsequent copycat posters in Taughmonagh and Rathcoole evidences this precedent-setting dynamic.

Date:

August 2024

Location:

Belfast, Bangor

Anti-Immigration and Islamophobic Protests & Riots

Anti-Immigration and Islamophobic Protests & Riots

Overview

On 3 and 10 August 2024, protests took place in various towns and cities. In Belfast, these escalated into attacks on immigrant-owned businesses and homes. While several arrests were made following the violence⁹, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) faced public scrutiny and criticism for its handling of the rioters on the 3 August, who were allowed to march unobstructed through the city while violently attacking businesses.

The protests and marches were not organised under the auspices of any specific group. However, the intent of the organisers was made explicit in social media advertisements leading up to the first event: it was a protest targeting non-Christian communities, particularly members of the Islamic community in Belfast. The “Christian West under siege” rhetoric echoed far-right tropes and the racist Great Replacement theory [Fig. 5]. The march was to culminate at the Islamic Centre, and demands were made for the “withdrawal” of members of that community from the country [Fig. 6].

There were deliberate efforts online to portray the protests as uniting both Irish nationalists and British unionists against the perceived common enemies of immigration and Islam. On 3 August, a group of anti-immigrant activists from Killcock, Co. Dublin, attended the rally carrying Irish tricolours and were seen posing for videos alongside loyalist anti-immigrant protesters. A further protest was planned for 10 August; however, both events were dwarfed by counter-protesters advocating for the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants.

Social media

Advertisement of the protest

Advertisements for the 3 August protest first appeared on social media via Facebook on 31 July. Two distinct images were used to promote the event: one image based and one text based (which seems to have been copy and pasted from Whatsapp chats) [Fig. 8 & 9]. The accounts promoting the protest, including that of prominent loyalist Dee Stitt¹⁰, were overwhelmingly associated with Ireland (N) based on their posting history.

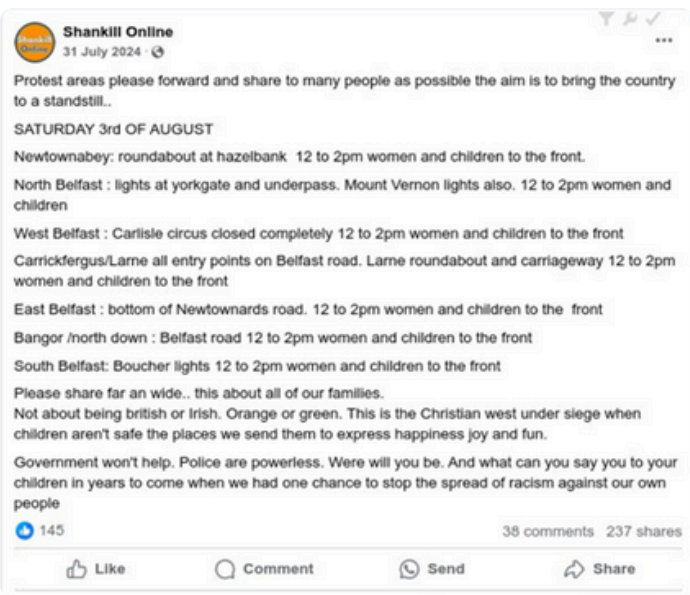


Figure 5. Facebook post organising August 2024 protest



Figure 6. Facebook post organising August 2024 protest

⁹ Deeney, N. (2024, August 8). All the people who have been charged and in court so far following Belfast riots. Belfast Live.

¹⁰ Dee Stitt: Loyalist “incited hatred” while on Spanish holiday. (2024, August 29). BBC News.

Of the 35 accounts identified as promoting the protest, 24 (69%) could be confidently categorised as self-identifying with the Ulster loyalism, based on their profile descriptions and posting history. While most of the accounts appeared to belong to individuals, some seemed to represent groups or communities of interest, including:

Account	Followers
The City of Bangor, its past, present and future	44,000
Shankill Online	11,000
Warrior Mum & Dad Awareness Group	7,200
LCR Bonfire	7,000
Ballymacash Cultural Awareness Project	6,800
Glencairn Way Bonfire	2,400
The Millbrook Times	898
Bute Bonfire Ballybeen	853
Shore Crescent Community Centre	496
CRAG. Cregagh Retired Active Gentlemen	9

An analysis of the top 10 Facebook posts advertising the event, ranked by their performance in terms of shares (engagement levels beyond the top 10 were all in single figures), revealed 667 likes and loves, and 825 shares [Fig. 7].

By any measure, while this provides some insights into communities coalescing around issues and actions, the level of engagement remains relatively low.

The first posts promoting the event on Instagram appeared on 1 August 2024. Jolene Bunting, a former independent unionist councillor in Belfast who was suspended in 2018 for reasons including facilitating the filming of Britain First’s deputy leader in the council chambers, shared the promotional image on Instagram without comment. The post received only 59 positive engagements.

On 1 August 2024, the text-based promotional image was posted by Tracy O’Hanlon, Irish Freedom Party candidate for Dundalk and Carlingford area. The following day, on 2 August 2024, the account of well-known English far-right activist Tommy Robinson also shared the image-based promotional advert [Fig.8 &9].

With a total of 7,268 positive engagements, and approximately 200,000 and 100,000 views respectively, these two posts exceeded the combined total of of positive engagements for the Ireland (N) posts promoting the protest by a ratio of almost 9:1.

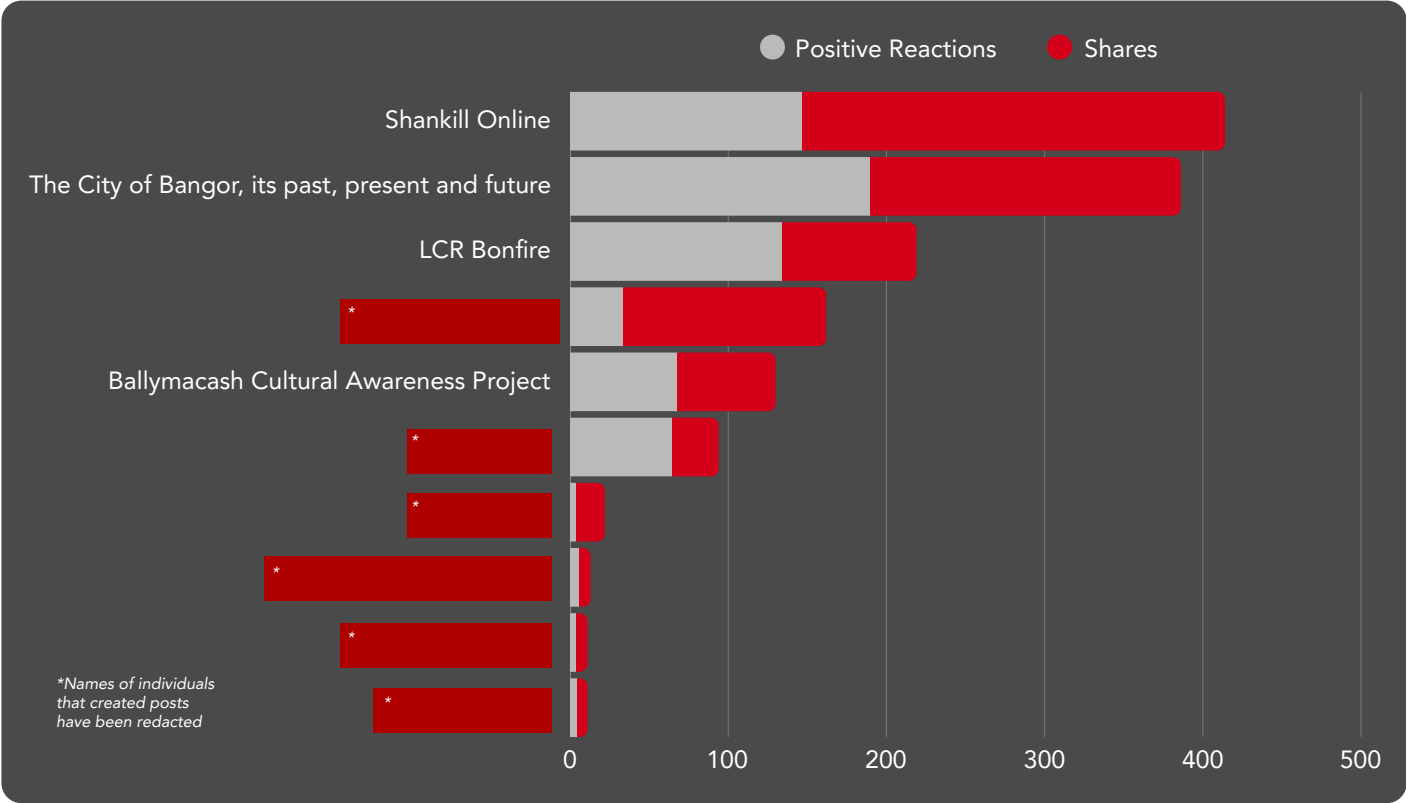


Figure 7. Positive reactions and shares per Facebook post promoting the August 2024 Anti-Immigrant Protests



Figure 8. English far-right activist, Tommy Robinson shared image-based promotional image for August 2024 protests.

During the protest

While the initial social media advertising for the protest was primarily concentrated on Facebook, commentary and reporting on the protests appeared across all three platforms. Local Facebook accounts that had initially promoted the protest continued to emphasise the message of “orange and green unity” in their posts about the event. However, these accounts still garnered relatively low levels of engagement on Facebook:

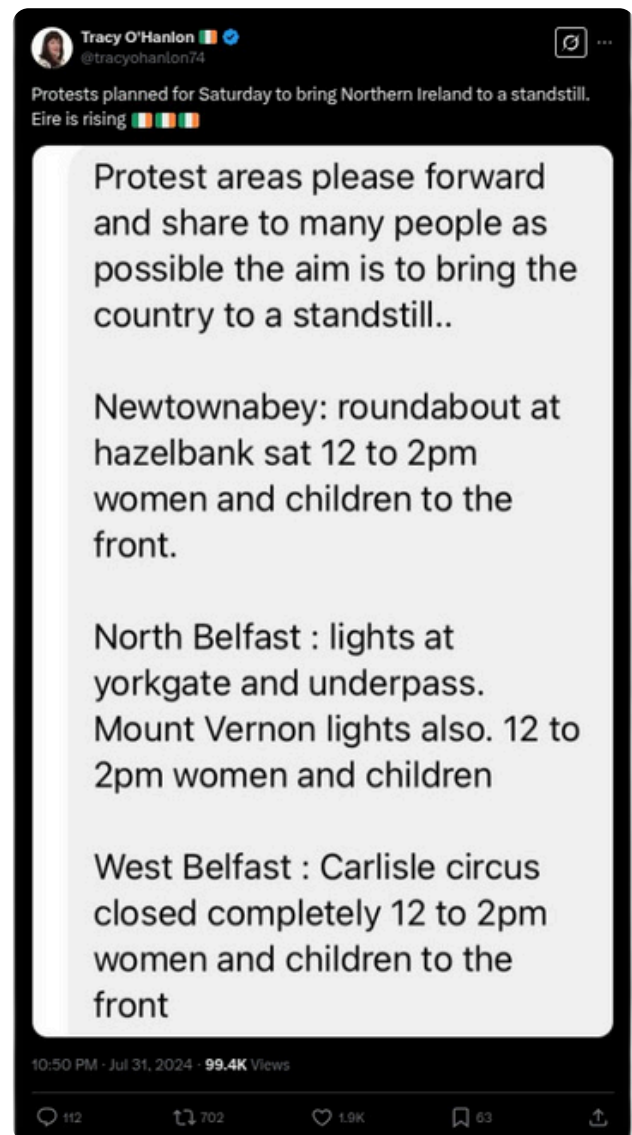


Figure 9. Tracy O'Hanlon, Irish Freedom Party candidate shares text based promotional image for August protests.

Account	Content	Shares	Positive Engagement
LCR Bonfire	ITS HAPPENING	87	263
Shankill Online	When 2 sides can unite to protect our kids 🤝	62	339
Warrior Mum & Dad Awareness Group	What a sight for Belfast today 💪❤️ STAND TOGETHER 🇬🇧🇮🇪	0	14
Ballymacash Cultural Awareness Project	Share from Ballycraigy Bonfire post	3	53
The Millbrook Times	Stop the illegal immigrants We need to protect our children We stand together	2	4

Based on the posting history of the publicly available followers of these groups, most of these accounts primarily engage with a local audience and are not connected to broader anti-immigrant or far-right networks in Ireland (S) or Great Britain.

One notable exception in terms of reach was a post from the account *'The City of Bangor, its past, present and future'*, which gained significant traction. In particular, a video featuring a man with an English accent addressing the protesters in Bangor garnered 57,000 views. Notably, the messaging in this post did not emphasise a narrative of "cross-community" anger or unity, nor did it appear staged or prepared for wider syndication. An analysis of the publicly visible shares (approximately 20% of the total shares) indicates a stronger connection to British accounts sympathetic to anti-immigrant causes [Fig. 10].

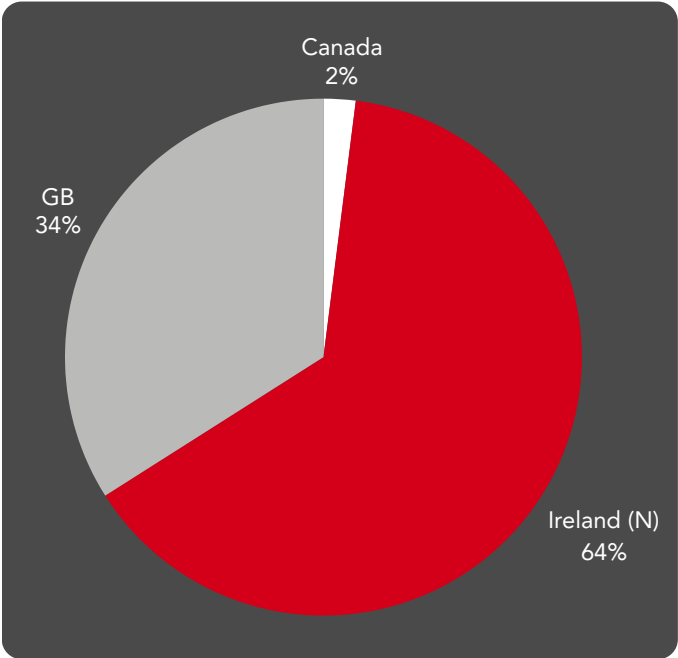


Figure 10. Location of Bangor post shares

The vast majority of social media accounts covering the unfolding events directed their messages at an external audience. By isolating the Facebook posts with the highest levels of positive engagements and shares, 36 accounts were identified for further analysis to gain insights into who was invested in shaping commentary and narratives around the events [Fig. 11].

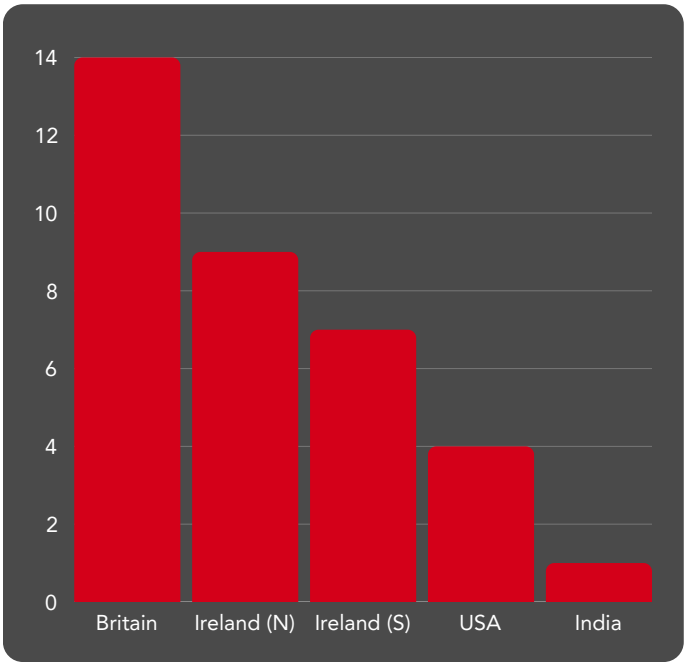


Figure 11. Location of Facebook accounts providing commentary

This does not answer the question of whether these accounts are bots or operated by "external" actors — a more rigorous examination of their behaviour would be necessary to determine this. However, it is evident that the narrative framing on social media was shifting from local accounts to external ones.

On the day of the Belfast protest, a contingent of anti-immigrant protesters from Dublin arrived to show support.¹¹ There is no evidence on social media of accounts from Ireland (N) that would be identified as nationalist/republican supporting the anti-immigration protests. While local amplification of the event remained relatively limited, the involvement of anti-immigration activists from Ireland (S) succeeded in reaching a much broader audience. Two pieces of video content, along with accompanying text commentary, played a particularly significant role in shaping the general reporting on the protest.

¹¹ Lally, C. (2024, August 5). Gardaí investigate presence of far-right figures from Dublin at Belfast riots. The Irish Times.

i. **“Now this is interesting....”**

At 12:22pm on 3 August 2024 an X account of Mick O’Keeffe, an Ireland (S) based anti-immigrant activist, posted a live video from the protest [Fig. 12].

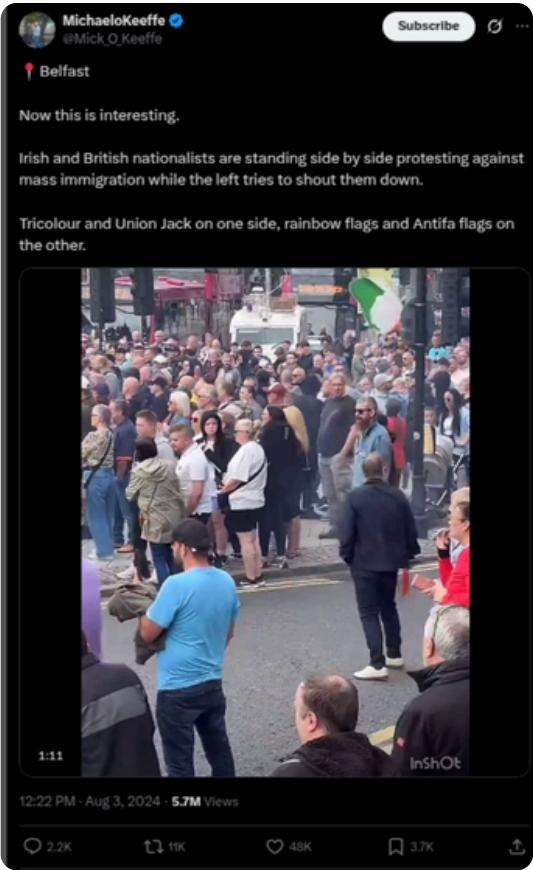


Figure 12. Mick O’Keeffe shared live coverage footage of the protest on X

What is immediately striking is the significant surge in engagements for the post (48K positive engagements, 2.2K comments, 11K shares, 5.7M views), especially when compared to the relatively low levels of engagement received by local accounts. The video and accompanying text were subsequently amplified across a wide range of anti-immigrant Facebook accounts, seemingly based in Britain and Ireland (S). Notably, this included posts by the co-leaders of Britain First, Paul Golding and Ashlea Simon, which collectively garnered 176K views, 1.9K shares, and 7.6K positive engagements.

The content of this post were then amplified by accounts on Instagram:

Account	Followers	Likes
FreedomConvoyEurope	51,200	3,883
london_ukstreetnews	223,200	3,748
theliberal.ie	19,800	646

The video received over 62,300 views on Facebook.

ii. **“Catholics and Protestants marching shoulder to shoulder to end mass immigration”**

At 4:32pm on 3 August another X account linked to another southern based anti-immigrant activist, Andy Sharpe, posted a live video from the protest [Fig. 13].

The video in question was first posted to TikTok by an account named @andy.sharpe5. Although this account has since been deleted, it appears to belong to the same individual behind the @andy.sharpe2.0 account - a Dublin-based anti-immigrant activist - who later shared the same content.

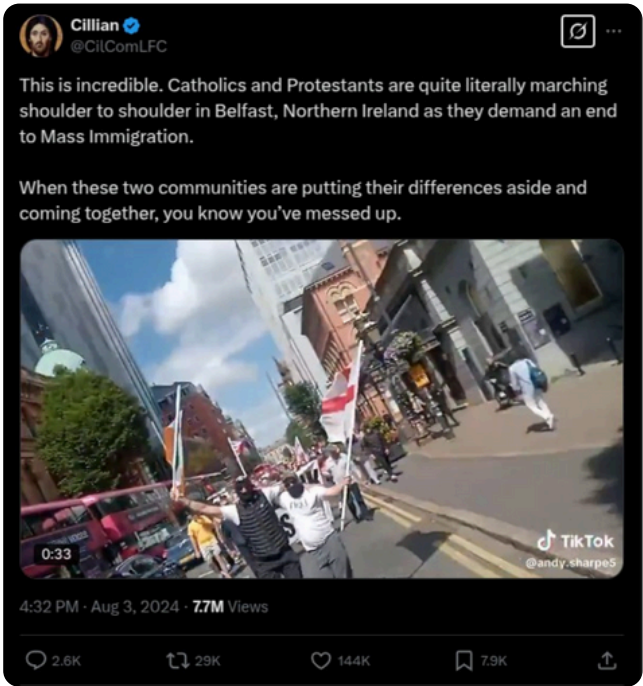


Figure 13. Twitter coverage of the August 2024 protests

As with the previous post, the dramatic increase in engagement compared to local accounts is striking. The phrase “shoulder to shoulder,” paired with a video of two men wearing face coverings while flying an Irish tricolour and a Union Jack, shouting “send them home,” was repeatedly repurposed across all social media platforms. This content was used to construct a narrative of the day’s events. Unlike the earlier post, it also gained traction through promotion by several larger USA-based accounts on Instagram.

Account	Followers	Likes
mindsetoftherich	1M	12.960
worldreplacement	34,600	340

Our research on Facebook found that the “shoulder to shoulder” text, accompanied by either the @andy.sharpe5 video or footage of the protesters, was posted by 175 different accounts. The locations of these accounts, as well as their intended audience, indicate that the narrative was transitioning from a local focus to a broader, more expansive one [Fig. 14].

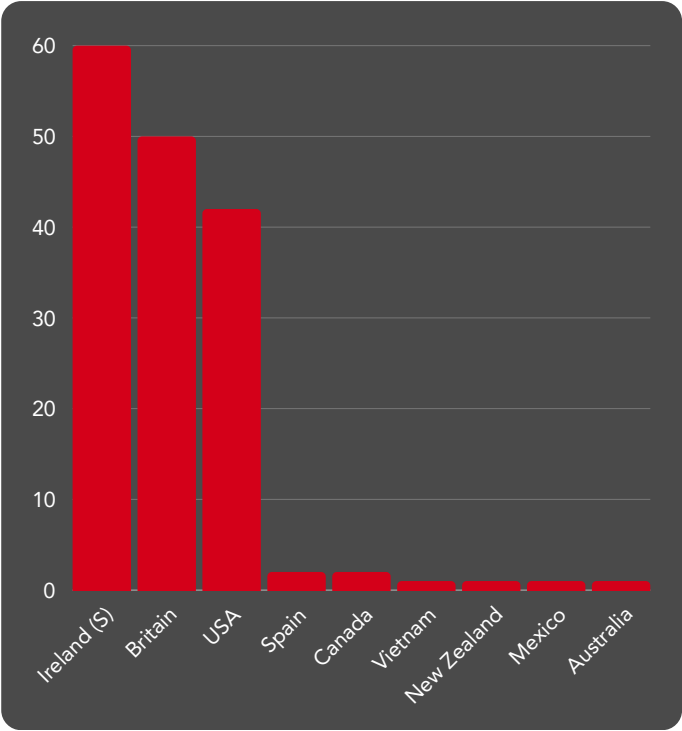


Figure 14. Location of accounts using “shoulder to shoulder” terminology

The research did not identify any Facebook accounts based in Ireland (N) that reused this content. While social media analysis cannot definitively prove the extent to which the involvement of anti-immigrant activists from Dublin was deliberately staged to promote the narrative of “nationalists and unionists united” against immigration, their participation was crucial in framing the protest in this way. Without their intervention, it would have been impossible to present the protest in such a manner to either a domestic or international audience. In contrast to this artificial framing, indications of cross-community participation were more easy to identify at the much larger anti-racist counter protests representing trade unions and communities from across Northern Ireland.

Political Responses

The responses from unionist parties were examined in relation to this case study for the following reasons:

- all of the other political parties represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly were visibly present in the counter demonstrations
- the promotion of the event online was confined to accounts the majority of which would self identify as being linked loyalism

It was therefore determined that this examination would align most effectively with the terms of reference and provide the greatest insight.

Ulster Unionist Party

On social media, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was unequivocal in its condemnation of the violence that erupted during the Belfast protests. Its Facebook page shared messages of support for local businesses affected by the violence, condemned attacks on healthcare workers, and highlighted meetings with trade unions and representatives of communities impacted by the unrest.

From 4 August 2024, strong condemnations also appeared on X, including statements from party leader Doug Beattie MLA and Andy Allen MLA [Fig. 15]. Additionally, a comprehensive statement on the violence was issued by the party’s Deputy Leader, Robbie Butler MLA, via a Facebook post. In his statement, Butler described the protests as “race hate” and emphasised that “the failings we are all impacted by here are not the fault of migrants, but of politics in many jurisdictions... [those] who are responsible for ruining these young lives need to be held to account.”¹²

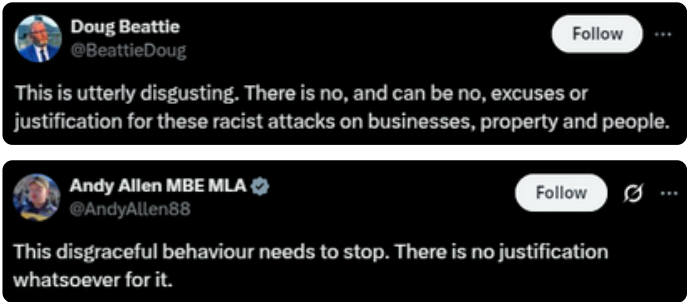


Figure 15. UUP Members condemning violence used during the August 2024 riots

¹² Butler calls for common sense to prevail. (2024). UUP Live

On 9 August 2024, the Belfast News Letter posted on Facebook that *"Former PUP deputy leader John Kyle has warned that both racist 'thugs' and 'middle class liberals' are at fault as anti-immigration violence continues in Northern Ireland."* The quote from the current UUP councillor actually states that racist thugs are scapegoating migrants, while middle class liberals are scapegoating loyalism.¹³ While Kyle condemns the violence and *"racist troublemakers"*, he also identifies deprivation as a causal factor behind the riots. This position is a departure from the unequivocal positions taken by his party colleagues and gravitates more towards the positions adopted by the DUP, TUV and – to a lesser extent – the PUP, as we will see below.

Progressive Unionist Party

The main social media accounts for the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) on Facebook and X remained silent during the protests (the X account has been inactive since 2012). The only online remarks from the PUP came via the East Londonderry Progressive Unionist Party's Facebook page, where Councillor Russell Watson issued a statement regarding a planned protest on 9 August 2024 in Derry.

Councillor Watson condemned the disorder, stating that while he *"share[s] the concerns about immigration,"* he urged those who call themselves Loyalists not to associate with neo-Nazis, as doing so *"betrays everything we hold dear."* It is worth noting that, as with the initial protests on 3 August 2024, the Derry protest was organised under the guise of *"protecting children."*

Democratic Unionist Party

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, representatives of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) adopted divergent perspectives. On 4 August 2024, the party's Leader and East Belfast MP posted a clear condemnation of the riots on X.

On 5 August 2024, DUP Councillor Sarah Bunting addressed a special meeting of Belfast City Council. Cllr. Bunting condemned all violence and racism but contextualised the protests as a response to *"a number of attacks which have taken place across the UK & Ireland in recent weeks & months..."*. She referenced the murder of children in Southport, England, stating that *"[u]nfortunately, this incident has followed a string of other attacks across the UK and Ireland, including smaller incidents here in Belfast."* These comments occurred in a context whereby false narratives had been circulating on social media. It should be noted that the Southport killings were not

carried out by an asylum seeker, a member of the Muslim faith, or an immigrant.

Cllr. Bunting further repeated the false narrative that on 3 August 2024, people *"from all sides of the community"* had come together to protest illegal immigration. She called on the City Council to create a space *"for those with genuinely held concerns."* The motion, supported by both the DUP and the UUP, was opposed by all other parties on the council and ultimately defeated.

On 7 August, senior DUP representatives Emma Little-Pengelly MLA (Deputy First Minister) and Gregory Campbell met with health workers to demonstrate solidarity and support. On Facebook Emma Pengelly MLA posted: *"No one should feel intimidated and it is hugely saddening to see some health workers expressing concern and thoughts of leaving due to the actions of a violent minority."* She added *"[g]enuine concerns about access to public services including affordable housing are matters for the Government, to be worked through by democratic means. We hear the concerns and the frustrations. Action is required."* The following day, Emma Little-Pengelly MLA met with DUP representatives from south, west, and east Belfast, including those who had supported the motion at Belfast City Council, and pledged to *"seek solutions"* to local concerns [Fig. 16].



Figure 16. Little-Pengelly's post following the August 2024 riots

¹³ Bradfield, P. (2024, August 9). Northern Ireland immigration riots: Former PUP deputy leader Dr John Kyle says both racist "thugs" and "middle class liberals" at fault. Belfast News Letter.

On 13 August 2024, the News Letter published an interview with DUP MLA Jonathan Buckley, in which he outlined the intersection of anti-immigrant sentiments with broader concerns affecting working-class communities:

“Long term uncontrolled immigration policies are having considerable impact right across the western world, but particularly if we look at the British Isles, the UK and Ireland, there is a lot of unrest from everyday citizens that are concerned about its impact... Whether that be on housing costs, whether it’s on other issues such as schooling or council services. You can be a compassionate, considerate nation – and support legal, controlled, managed immigration.”

Traditional Unionist Voice

On 4 August 2024, the day after the protests and violence, TUV Belfast City Councillor Ron McDowell issued two posts: one from the party’s Facebook page and one from his own. Through these posts, Cllr. McDowell spoke of public services being stretched in his constituency while *“due to the level of their need migrants quite often attain of services as a priority. The elephant in the room walked onto the road over the weekend.”* He stated that *“hand on heart I cannot condone”* racist attacks on property or people, but that *“open doors migration also has to stop and we need to give ourselves the breathing space we need to fix our broken services.”* Cllr. McDowell described what he witnessed as *“ordinary working-class communities which are at breaking point.”*

On 7 August 2024, the TUV’s Facebook page shared a post about party MLA Timothy Gaston tabling an Assembly motion amendment concerning *“the right to peaceful protest, including against uncontrolled immigration.”* The post emphasised that the TUV rejects *“all forms of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism.”*

During the motion’s debate on 8 August 2024, Mr. Gaston acknowledged the benefits of immigration in supplying labour to local businesses, urging protesters to consider this. However, he also called on the Assembly to *“recognise the pressures on housing, which immigration has played a factor in.”* He further stated that immigration had increased strains on GP and dentist services, as well as school places. Despite the relatively marginal nature of his contribution to the Assembly, the video of his remarks garnered significant attention, with 41K views. Whether this surge in exposure is linked to the TUV’s structural ties with Reform UK and its access to online networks in Britain would require further investigation.

Insights

Limited role of social media in local organising:

The low level of local activity on social media in advance of the 3 August protest suggests that social media played a minimal role in organising or galvanising people to attend.

External amplification by far-right accounts:

The intervention of far-right accounts from Ireland (S) and Great Britain elevated the protests into an international spectacle on social media. A clear level of coordination in messaging, content, and timing was evident among these external accounts. Local accounts supporting the protests do not seem to be connected into external far-right networks or audiences on social media.

Externally imposed narrative:

The narrative of *“Irish nationalists and British unionists uniting to oppose immigration”* was inaccurate and externally imposed, targeting an international audience. In reality, the counter-demonstrators more authentically reflected the anti-sectarian unity of Belfast.

Failure to fully condemn the protests:

With the exception of the Ulster Unionist Party, there was a notable failure from other unionist parties to condemn the protests in their entirety - as Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, racist, and explicitly violent in intent.

Flawed framing of social and economic neglect:

The framing of the protests as a response to *“social and economic neglect”* fails to address two critical questions: a) why other areas, often more deprived across social and economic indices, did not erupt in violence, and b) why people from working-class unionist areas did not support the rallies en masse. It also flatly contradicts the purpose of the protests as advertised and articulated by the people who organised them.

Date:

2 January 2025

Location:

Mourneview Estate, Lurgan

Mourneview Estate Racist Attacks and Disorder

Mourneview Estate Racist Attacks and Disorder

Overview

On 2 January 2025, following reports of a child being “suspiciously approached” in a local park, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) arrested a man in the Mourneview estate, Lurgan.¹⁴ During the arrest, a crowd gathered outside the house and attacked the PSNI, smashing the windows of their vehicle. The officers were forced to escort the remaining occupants out of the house for their safety. After their departure, the windows of the house were smashed, and three other homes in the community - unrelated to the incident but occupied by immigrants - were also attacked. The arrested man was reportedly an immigrant. The PSNI classified the attacks as hate crimes.

On Monday 6 January 2025, signs appeared outside Dickson Primary School in the Mourneview estate. One sign read, “Local homes for local people,” while another declared, “Islamic State X Mourneview Estate ✓” [Fig. 17]. This was not the first instance of racist violence or intimidation in Mourneview. In November 2020, a home was attacked in what the police labelled “racially aggravated criminal damage”¹⁵ while in January 2022 racist graffiti was daubed on a home.¹⁶

Social media

The events that appeared to trigger these attacks unfolded in real time and did not seem to require or involve significant social media amplification or coordination. Between 7–10 January 2025, there were 15 posts on X reporting on the Mourneview Estate incidents. These posts received minimal engagement, with no indications of support for the attacks. Instagram and TikTok saw fewer posts, limited primarily to party political statements.

As with other race hate incidents, the primary platform for local posting and discussion about this incident was public Facebook groups. The Moygashel Bonfire Association page posted support for the actions taken during the unrest [Fig. 18].

In the comment section, discussions praised the activities of local “vigilantes” and accused DUP representatives of failing to take a sufficiently strong stance against immigration. The Alliance Party was criticised for allegedly not addressing the reported attempted child abduction. Private landlords who rented homes to immigrants also came under attack - a tactic observed during the August riots in West Belfast, when an estate agency was targeted.¹⁷

Notably, none of the posts or commentary on social media referenced the attacks on households occupied by immigrants, which were unconnected to the incident in the park.



Figure 17. Irish News article thumbnail displaying signage outside Dickson Primary School

¹⁴ Staff Reporter. (2025, January 3). Windows of homes smashed after report of “suspicious approach” made at play park. Belfast Telegraph
¹⁵ Rainey, M. (2020, November 22). “Racially aggravated” attack on house in Co Armagh. Belfast News Letter.
¹⁶ Anon. (2022, January 20). McNulty Condemns Racist Graffiti at Mourneview Park. Clanryenews.com
¹⁷ News, B. (2024, August 7). Estate agency rammed in Belfast in “racially motivated” attack. BBC News.

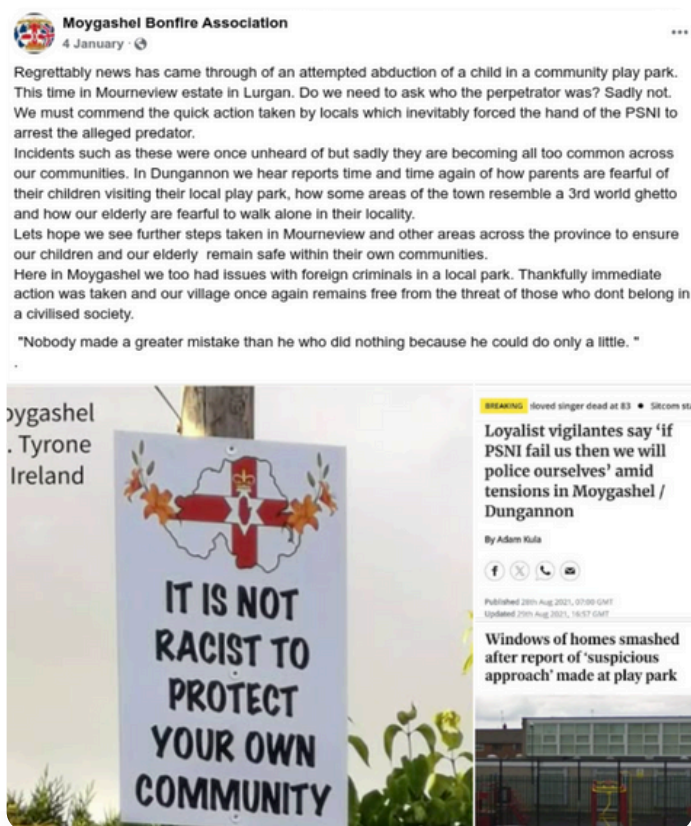


Figure 18. Moygashel Bonfire Association page posted support for the actions taken during the unrest

Political Responses

Statements condemning the posters were issued on social media by Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party [Fig. 19] across all levels of their political representation in the constituency. In contrast, neither the UUP nor the DUP made any mention of either the racist attacks or the school posters on social media, despite having representatives at Council, Stormont, and Westminster levels. Notably, their representatives remained active on social media and posted on other matters during this period.

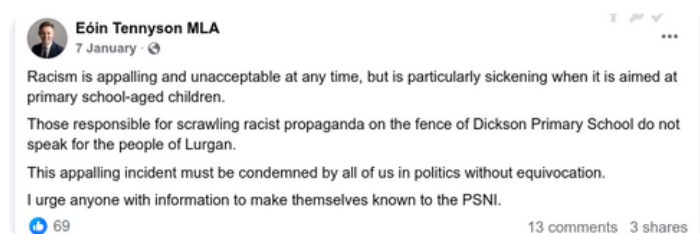


Figure 19. Alliance Party MLA, Eóin Tennyson condemning the posters placed at Dickson Primary School

Insights

Lack of social media coordination in Mourneview:

The events in the Mourneview estate were not coordinated or organised through social media. Instead, they represented a group within the community claiming to protect their area by attacking the homes of immigrant families, despite these families having no connection to the events that allegedly sparked the attacks.

Repetition of tactics to displace immigrants:

Similar tactics appear to have been employed to pressure immigrant families into leaving the estate: attacks on homes, targeting schools, and pressuring landlords to rent only to "locals." The effectiveness of these tactics should be investigated to determine whether "no-go" areas for immigrants are being created across the region.

Responses from political parties

As explained in later chapters, social media is not the sole — or even primary — platform for condemning racist attacks. However, if condemnation is absent from these platforms, is it being clearly communicated by all political parties in positions of power that such attacks are unacceptable? If so, where and how is this message being conveyed?

Date:

12 November 2024

Location:

Girls' Model School, North Belfast

Girls' Model

Girls' Model

Overview

On 12 November 2024, a physical altercation between students occurred at Girl's Model Secondary School in north Belfast¹⁸. The incident involved groups of girls, with one of these groups including children from immigrant families. The PSNI was called in to investigate the incident, which was being treated as a potential "hate crime." Despite efforts by the school, PSNI, and political representatives to address the situation, disinformation spread rapidly online. False allegations quickly gained traction, including claims of a Muslim gang terrorising other students, carrying knives in their hijabs within the school, images of some of the immigrant families were circulated online and spurious allegations of families harassing others at a local hospital post-incident were spread.

From the outset, discussions on social media platforms - primarily Facebook and Twitter - framed the incident in an Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, and

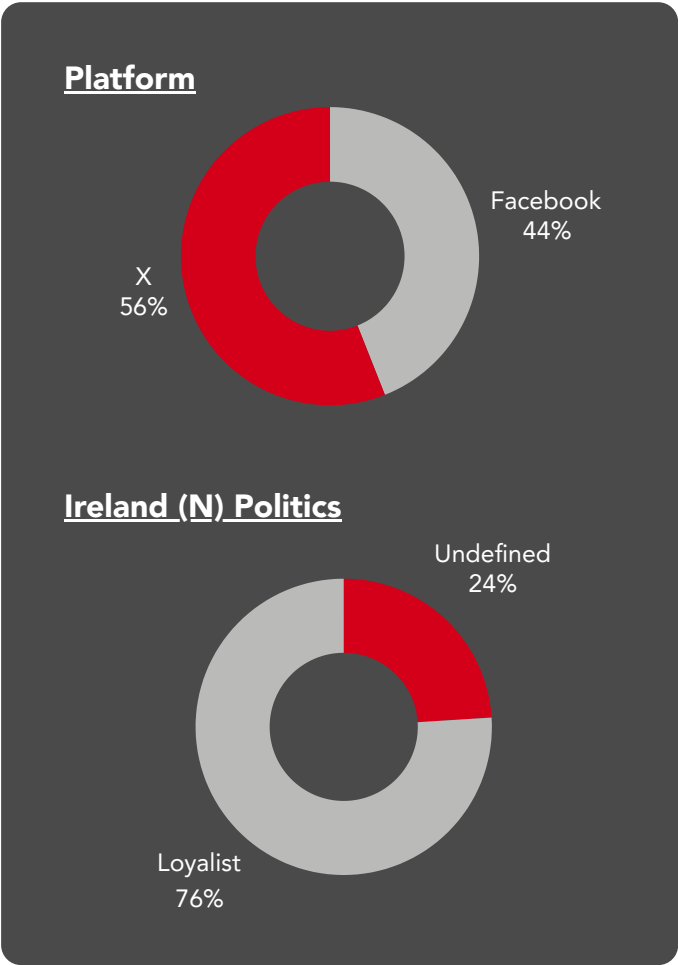
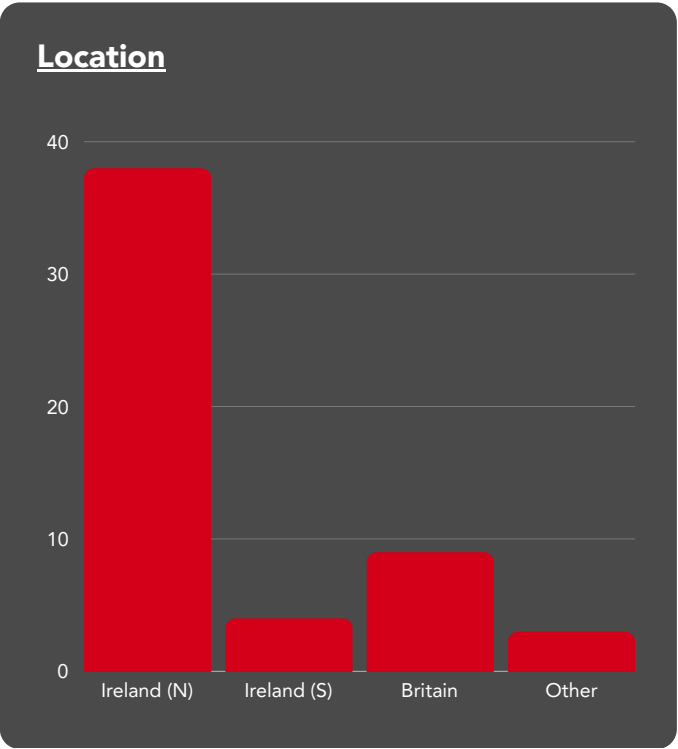
racist light. On 13 November 2024, a home near one of the immigrant families' residences was mistakenly attacked. Following this, the school management informed the girls that their safety could no longer be guaranteed. The girls have since enrolled in schools elsewhere.

Social Media

The overwhelming majority of social media activity concerning the Girls Model incident took place on X and Facebook. We identified 48 accounts posting original content about the incident with a racist or anti-immigrant framing [Fig. 20].

There appeared to be two primary accounts which were driving the narrative framing and discussions as events unfolded: David Atherton (X) [Fig. 21] and the Community First public group (Facebook).

Figure 20. Location, platform and political leanings of the 48 accounts posting original content about the Girls' Model incident with a racist or anti-immigrant framing



¹⁸ McCullough, M. (2024, November 13). Principal calls for speculation to cease after alleged assault at school. Belfast Live.

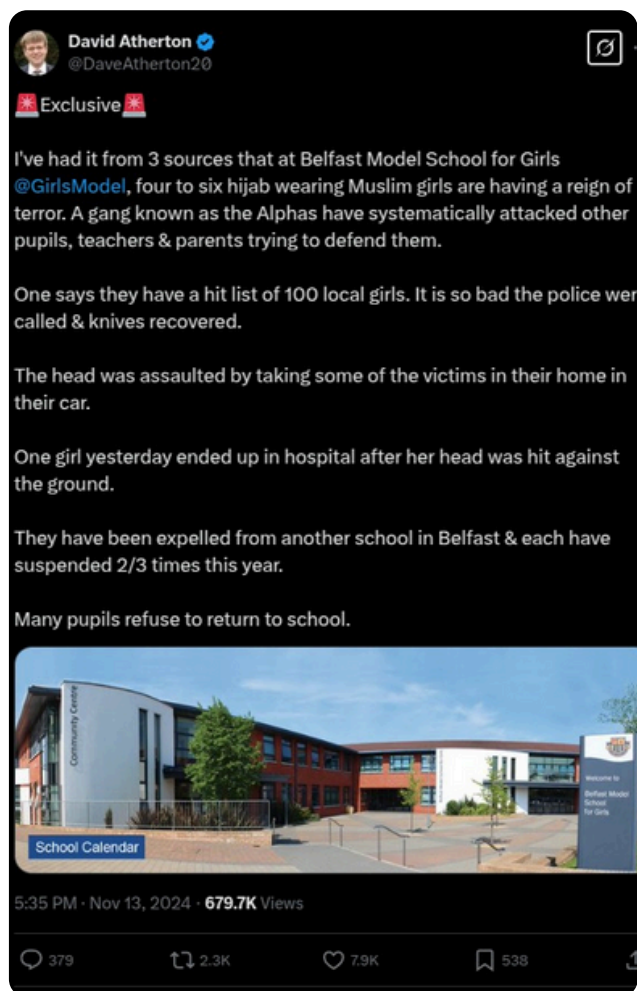


Figure 21. London-based journalist, David Atherton's post on X regarding the incident at Girls' Model school

According to his X profile, @DavidAtherton20 is a London-based journalist with The European Conservative (@euroconofficial), an online and offline publication whose editor-in-chief is Mick Hume – a former communications worker for both Nigel Farage's Brexit Party and Reform UK during the 2024 UK General Election.

Atherton has a history of posting support for far-right and anti-immigrant causes. During the southern Irish election in 2024 an Irish Times article named him as a source of disinformation¹⁹, spreading false news about Gardaí escorting children to school to protect them from immigrants. Atherton has also penned a series of articles opposing the "persecution" of English far-right activist Tommy Robinson and calling on Reform UK to embrace the views expounded by Robinson²⁰.

¹⁹ Gallagher, C. (2024, June). Anatomy of a fake story: How anti-immigration candidates spread false information to boost their profile. The Irish Times.

²⁰ For example, Atherton, D. (2024, October 29). By disowning Tommy Robinson, is Reform shooting itself in the foot? - The Conservative Woman. The Conservative Woman.

Community First (a Facebook public group with 19K members) describes itself as follows: "A Shankill Road based non profitable group set up to help families in the greater Shankill and further afield in times of need. We arrange and facilitate charity fundraising events for different people or groups in the area." The group shares a wide range of content related to community matters, including lost pets, reported burglaries, anti-social behaviour concerns, charity events, community initiatives, local business offers, and more.

During the Girls Model incident, the forum hosted discussions – with participants seeming to use their real names - that sought to frame the school incident as a consequence of immigration [Fig. 22].



Figure 22. Comments under a post in Facebook group 'Community First' regarding the incident at Girls' Model school

Members of another Facebook public group, which has subsequently been removed from the platform, Official Protestant Coalition, posted:

"Should find out where they live and wonder what their parents think of it. Apple doesn't fall to far from the tree. That's if they're not going back to a hotel or already moved to a different area already." - Comment in Facebook Group

"Deport the lot of them back to where they came from" - Comment in Facebook Group

Attempts were made on the Community First group to draw connections between the Girls Model incident and a documentary produced by Tommy Robinson about immigration and schooling in England. One post, shared by an 'Anonymous participant,' directly compared the situation at Girls Model to incidents in England and claimed that Tommy Robinson had been contacted about the matter.

Political Responses

Sinn Féin and DUP representatives urged the public to allow the PSNI and Education Authority to conduct their investigations without interference. The Sinn Féin MP for North Belfast called for calm at the school, asking parents and the community to avoid speculation. Following meetings with the School Governors, DUP's Brian Kingston MLA clarified that no knives were involved and reiterated requests to stop social media speculation.

Both parties faced social media criticism, albeit from different quarters [Fig. 23]. DUP representatives were attacked by some online accounts for following a "woke agenda" and failing to be sufficiently assertive about assigning blame and failing to link the issue to immigration [Fig. 24]. Similar comments were made in Facebook groups, including the now-removed Official Protestant Coalition.

Attacks on Sinn Féin primarily came from accounts in Ireland (S), including @real_eire on X, where commentators accused the party of being Islamists and anti-Irish. These criticisms were aimed at undermining Sinn Féin's political support in Ireland (S) and were unrelated to the Girls Model incident.



Figure 23. Tweets condemning Sinn Féin's response to social media discussions on the Girls' Model school incident

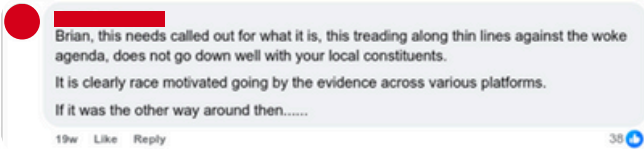


Figure 24. Comments on DUP MLA, Brian Kingston's Facebook status discussing the Girls' Model school incident

Insights

Escalation into anti-immigrant and racist backlash:

The rapid escalation of an incident at a girls' secondary school into an anti-immigrant and racist witch hunt - including an attempted violent attack on an immigrant family's home - should be treated as seriously as the August Belfast riots. It's particularly alarming that the school couldn't guarantee the safety of the girls involved, forcing them to transfer. This sets a dangerous precedent, where child protection and minority safeguards appear to have failed.

Community Facebook groups as amplifiers of hate:

The role of community Facebook groups in spreading racist and anti-immigrant sentiment requires deeper exploration. On the Community First group, events at Girls Model were followed by unverified reports of "foreign nationals" involved in abductions, assaults, and thefts on the Shankill Road. These claims, often based on a single post, contribute to a narrative that fuel fear and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Political opportunism in criticism of representatives:

Political opportunism is evident in the criticisms directed at political representatives, though the dynamics differ. Critics of Sinn Féin are predominantly far-right actors seeking to undermine their support base in working-class areas of Ireland (S). In contrast, DUP critics tend to emerge from other far right and loyalist leaning accounts focused on Ireland (N) and British issues. This highlights how political attacks are often tailored to specific audiences and agendas, rather than addressing the core issues at hand.

Date:

April - May 2024

Location:

Derry City and Strabane District Council

**Northern Ireland's
First Black Mayor**

Northern Ireland's First Black Mayor

Overview

On 3 June 2024, SDLP Councillor Lilian Seenoi-Barr became Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council and made history by becoming the first black mayor in Northern Ireland. From the outset, Cllr. Seenoi-Barr faced a campaign of racist abuse and harassment online. Her appointment even attracted the attention of international conspiracy theorists such as former TV news presenter David Icke and USA Infowars presenter Alex Jones.

In February 2025, Derry resident Kevin Barry McIntyre, was sentenced to 5 months in prison for posting racist messages about Mrs. Seenoi-Barr on social media in March 2024. On 11 December 2024, following an address a number of days prior at the Committee on the Administration of Justice Annual General Meeting in Belfast a comment on X, which has subsequently been removed, called for Mrs. Seenoi-Barr to be “dragged through the streets mid evil [sic] style and beheaded” [Fig 25]. In March 2025 the PSNI confirmed that it was investigating “online posts and commentary” surrounding Mrs Seenoi-Barr.²¹



Figure 25. Since removed X response calling for the beheading of Mrs. Seenoi-Barr

As Northern Ireland's first black mayor, and only the third black mayor on the island of Ireland, the decision by the SDLP to select Cllr. Seenoi-Barr as their mayoral candidate attracted significant media

attention – both in legacy and social media. Cllr. Seenoi-Barr is also a high profile figure due to her work with the North West Migrants' Forum – an organisation, based in Derry, that advocates on behalf of the broad immigrant community. Her activism generated a media profile from which she unapologetically condemned acts and threats of violence against asylum seekers and immigrants.

Methodology

This case study focused on the period of time from late-April to mid-May 2024 when Cllr. Seenoi-Barr was appointed Mayor. The intention was to conduct a sentiment analysis of the posts and comments concerning her appointment on the primary social media platforms:

- What were the dominant sentiments?
- Did sentiments vary according to platform?
- Did sentiments vary according to the geographical location of the original post's author?
- Did sentiments vary according to the original sentiment/intentions of the original post's author?

“Sentiments” were broken down into four categories:

1. Positive
2. Negative
3. Malevolent
4. None

“Malevolent” sentiments were then further analysed to determine the toxicity of the comment:

1. Malevolent (Hateful)
2. Malevolent (Racist)
3. Malevolent (Anti-Immigrant)
4. Malevolent (Xenophobic)

Artificial Intelligence²² was used to conduct the sentiment analysis – providing not only the applicable sentiment(s) for each comment but also an explanation of how that designation was assigned.

Each comment was designated with at least one sentiment. The sentiment titles were developed over a series of iterations, attempting to classify various comments into appropriate categories. Each comment was considered in isolation, as opposed to within the context of previous or following comments and posts. As such, comments which may have been affirming previous “malevolent” comments, but were not in themselves “malevolent”, could have been only partially classified. Examples of the classifications are as follows:

²¹ Deeney, N. (2025, March 5). PSNI explores “online posts” as NI’s only black politician faces fresh abuse. Belfast Live.

²² Qwen Chat, an open source AI developed by Alibaba

Comment	Intent	Explanation
"Well done Mayor Designate Lilian Barr. A deserved recognition of your outstanding community work and leadership in the North-West and in Kenya. We should not give the haters (a minority across this island) the time of day and focus on celebrating an excellent public servant."	Positive	"The comment congratulates Lilian Barr and highlights her community work and leadership, pushing back against negativity and promoting celebration of her achievements."
"Everyone should send complaints to the SDLP"	Negative	"The suggestion to complain reflects dissatisfaction with the SDLP, contributing to a negative narrative without targeting race or immigration."
"Get this f***ing m***key out of my country"	Racist, Xenophobic, Anti-immigrant, Hateful, Negative	"This comment uses racially charged language to demand Lilian's removal, making it `racist`, `xenophobic`, `anti-immigrant`, `hateful`, and `negative`"
"This is unbelievable that this immigrant should even be a Councillor, let alone a mayor. She should be removed immediately."	Xenophobic, Anti-immigrant, Negative	"This comment dismisses Lilian as an outsider unfit for office, expressing xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments. Marked as `xenophobic`, `anti-immigrant`, and `negative`."
"Sounds familiar Hello from the United States,don't let them do to Ireland,what they did to our country.They get away with raping, assaulting,beating our citizens Nothing is done to them Especially in sanctuary cities."	Anti-immigrant, Negative	"The comment draws parallels between the U.S. and Ireland, suggesting that immigrants commit crimes and are protected, reinforcing anti-immigrant sentiment."
"She's black"	None	"The comment is a factual statement and does not convey clear sentiment."
"Wait till the money laundering n corruption comes out in the accounts in a few years yeah can see it coming a mile off cause color of skin gives you protection look at south africa and see how the water infra structure collapse is going cause people had feelings hurt b4 doing the work"	Racist, Negative	"This comment makes baseless accusations of corruption tied to race, promoting racist stereotypes and negativity."
"Go back to where you belong"	Racist, Xenophobic	"This comment explicitly tells Seenoi-Barr to leave, displaying both racism and xenophobia."

"Maybe people have already forgotten the P█ki councillor in Limerick who called for Dubliners to be "shot in the head and beaten to death in the streets". He was never charged with incitement to hatred like you or I would be. Foreigners should never be in positions of power here"	Racist, Xenophobic, Anti-immigrant, Hateful, Negative	"This comment uses racial slurs ('P█ki') and suggests that foreigners should not hold political power, making it `racist`, `xenophobic`, `anti-immigrant`, `hateful`, and `negative`."
"Former refugee.. aka another lying former asylum seeker who shouldn't be here. If they will lie about their history how can anything else be taken honestly."	Anti-immigrant, Negative	"The comment accuses her of lying about her refugee status, reflecting anti-immigrant and negative sentiment."
"No that's not what she said at all. She's making a claim that the far right extremists in Ireland are organised and brainwashing young people."	Positive	"The comment defends the mayor's statements, rejecting the negative portrayal in the original post."
"C█ons are like that DaveThey kill their children because they're possessed by devils That's why pinko English jerks use them to serve their Anglo-Norman colonial incentivesBlack & tans, nightmare at elm house, Bobby England's 'all my children now'Climbing a stairway to "	Racist, Xenophobic, Hateful, Negative	"This comment uses racially charged language and perpetuates harmful stereotypes, making it racist, xenophobic, and hateful."

Social Media



Across the case study period, 44 posts from 5 social media platforms – including 4582 comments - were analysed. 28% of the sentiments were designated "negative": some of these comments relate to criticism of the manner in which Cllr. Seenoi-Barr was selected as Mayoral candidate for her party, some relate to criticism of her alleged political persuasions (e.g. 'Marxist') and some are negative comments in the context of an online discussion – but were not determined to cross the line into malevolence. Such comments may or may not be valid, but they fall into what should be considered legitimate debate in a democratic society.

The largest proportion of comments - 33% - were designated "malevolent", over double the total amount of positive comments (13%). Of the malevolent comments, about half of them were deemed to be "anti-immigrant" [Fig. 26]

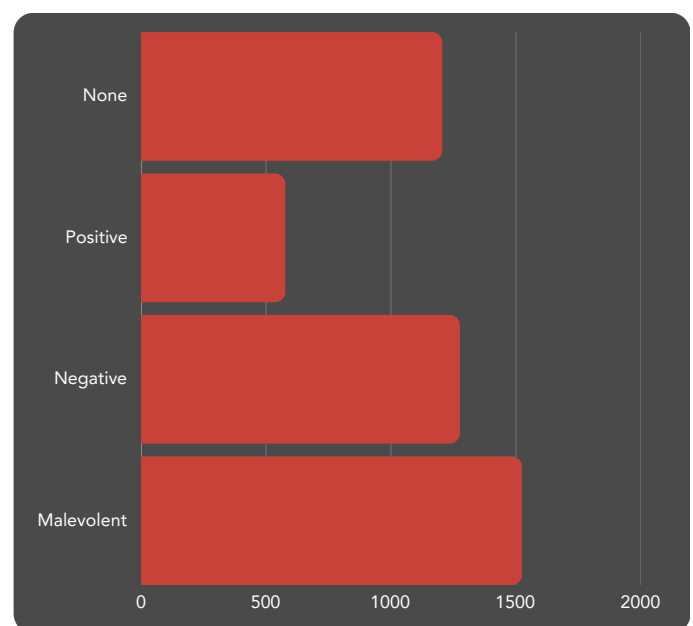


Figure 26. Sentiment of Comments: 4,852 Social Media Comments on Cllr. Seenoi-Barr

By Location

The majority of the posts made during the study period were made from accounts that, seemingly, were located either in Ireland (N) (41%) or Ireland (S) (27%) with 16% coming from "other". While "malevolent" comments outweighed "positive" comments regardless of the assumed region of the original author, there was wide variance in the ratio of "positive:malevolent" comments [Fig. 27].

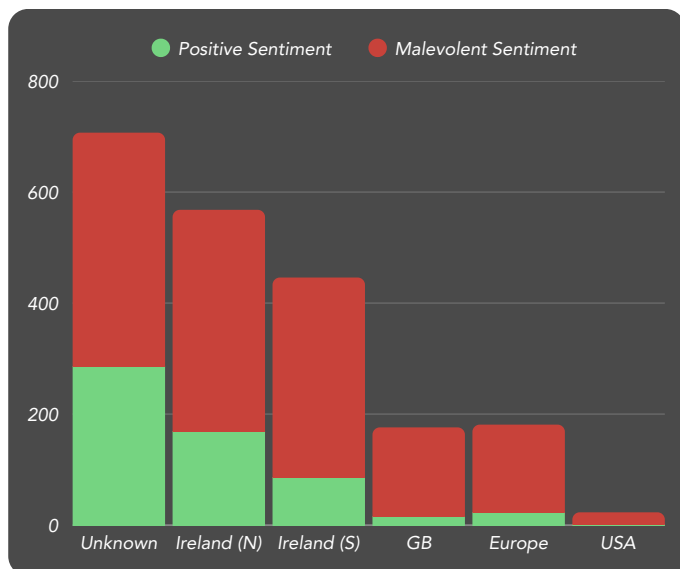


Figure 27. Sentiment by Poster Location: 4,852 Social Media Comments on Cllr. Seenoi-Barr

By Original Post Sentiment

Of the 44 original posts analysed during the case study period, 48% were 'positive' and celebrated Cllr. Seenoi-Barr's appointment as Mayor, while 32% were 'malevolent.' The sentiment of the original posts appeared to shape the nature of the comments to some degree, likely influenced by the expectations of their followers. [Fig. 28] However, in every instance, 'malevolent' comments outnumbered 'positive' ones.

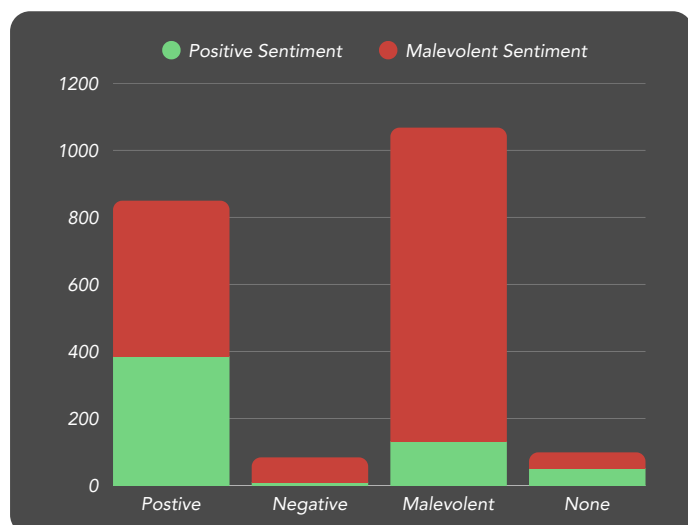


Figure 28. Sentiment of comments categorised by original post sentiment: 4,852 Social Media Comments on Cllr. Seenoi-Barr

By Platform

The platform analysis was heavily influenced by the dominance of posts on X and Facebook, with Instagram (2), TikTok (1), and Reddit (2) accounting for only 5 of the 44 posts analysed. Nevertheless, TikTok (44%) and Instagram (49%) had the highest proportion of positive comments during the case study period. This appears to reflect the location and nature of the accounts posting content, rather than an inherent characteristic of the platforms themselves, as discussed further below.

'Malevolent' comments on X accounted for 35% of all comments, more than three times the number of positive comments. While Facebook had a more balanced distribution, malevolent comments still made up the largest proportion across all platforms. Notably, 'anti-immigrant' sentiments were the most prevalent type of malevolent comment [Fig. 29].

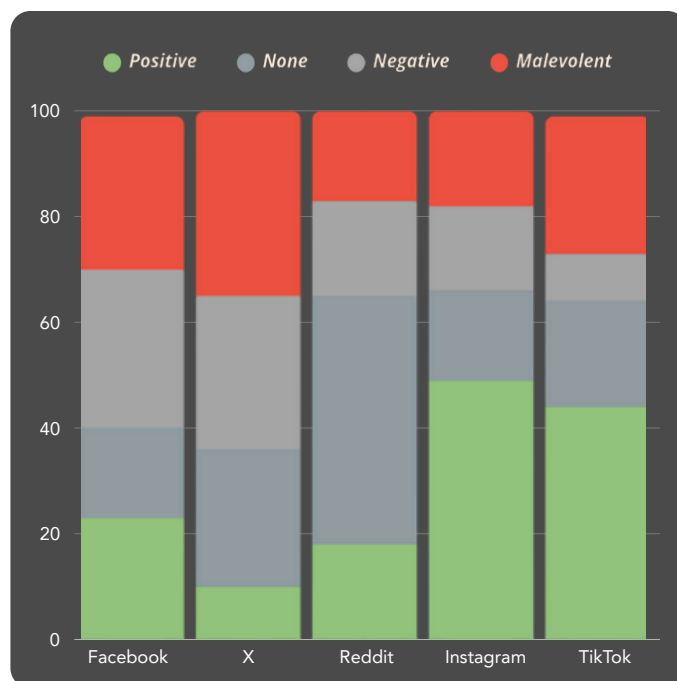


Figure 29. Sentiment of comments categorised by Platform: 4,852 Social Media Comments on Cllr. Seenoi-Barr

Insights

Skewed data and comment dynamics:

The higher prevalence of posts and comments on X may skew the data. However, neither the intentions nor the apparent location of the original post's author appear to significantly influence the tone or direction of the resulting conversations in the comments section. Whether this is due to algorithmic behaviour, heightened engagement from anti-immigrant movements on social media, or the presence of bots remains unclear and requires further investigation.

Social media as a weaponised tool:

Despite the posts and comments analysed in this section, Ms. Seenoi-Barr's mayoral term was highly successful. Nevertheless, the high volume of malevolent commentary highlights that these social media platforms are not conducive to constructive discussions on sensitive topics like immigration. Instead, they have become weaponised tools that fail to accurately reflect broader public opinion or sentiment.

The myth of platform neutrality:

Viewing social media platforms as neutral spaces for discussing and debating public issues is naïve. Effectively combating online hate and building public support for asylum rights and anti-racism efforts requires a comprehensive understanding of how each platform's algorithm functions and the best way to engage – or disengage – from such platforms. Strategies to maximise visibility and amplify marginalised voices are essential to fostering a more equitable online environment.

Date:

October 2024 - February 2025

Location:

Belfast | Derry | Lurgan

Hate Crime Incidents and Political Narratives

Hate Crime Incidents and Political Narratives

Overview

Eleven separate hate crime incidents across Northern Ireland were monitored during the study period [Fig. 30]. To determine the extent to which political parties were using social media platforms to denounce racist attacks or construct political narratives around such incidents, we analysed the social media accounts of political party representatives and elected officials at the local Council, Stormont Assembly, and Westminster levels in the aftermath of each incident²³ [Fig. 31]. These incidents were initially identified through media alerts from specific publications during the study period:

- Irish News
 - Belfast Telegraph
 - BBC Northern Ireland
 - The Detail
 - Impartial Reporter
- Belfast Media Group
 - RTÉ
 - The Guardian
 - Belfast Live

Social media activity does not represent the full range of actions a political party might take in response to racist or anti-immigrant incidents. It is important to note that this monitoring is not intended to assess the anti-racist credentials of political parties. Instead, it aims to analyse how social media is being utilised by parties in addressing issues of anti-immigrant and racist violence.

In parallel with the social media monitoring, written and oral questions posed to Ministers in the Stormont Assembly were also tracked over the same period. This analysis sought to understand whether racist and anti-immigrant narratives were being

reflected in democratic processes. The questions submitted by political representatives reveal the issues they prioritise when holding government Ministers and the Executive to account. As with the social media analysis, this should not be viewed as an exhaustive study but rather as a means of gaining insight into how these issues are being integrated into the political mainstream — and by whom.

Immigration is a non devolved matter under the jurisdiction of the UK Parliament at Westminster, with the Northern Ireland Assembly having limited authority to develop policies or legislation in this area. During the monitoring period, 30 written and oral questions related to immigration and asylum — addressed from various perspectives — were submitted to Northern Ireland Executive Ministers.

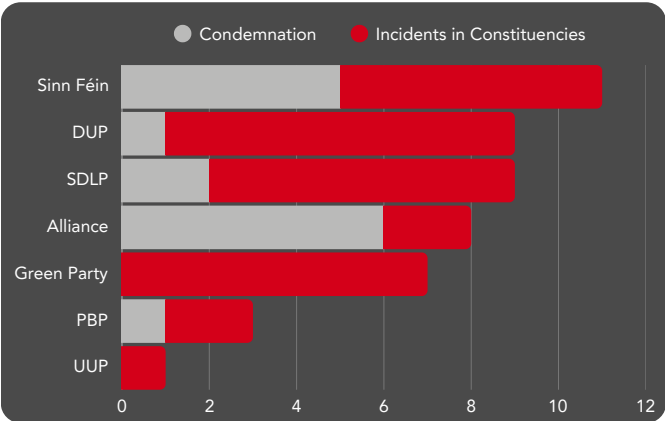





Figure 31. Responses to hate crime incidents from NI Parties compared to the number of incidents within their constituencies




Date	Nature of Incident	Location
10 Oct 2024	Attack on family home	Thalia Street, South Belfast
14 Oct 2024	Stabbing incident	Foyle Street, Derry
04 Nov 2024	Attack on family home	Roden Street, South Belfast
20 Nov 2024	Attack on shop owner	Ormeau Road, South Belfast
22 Nov 2024	Attack on family home	City Way, South Belfast
11 Dec 2024	Attack on property	Great Northern Street, South Belfast
06 Jan 2024	Attack on family homes & signs erected on school	Mourneview estate, Lurgan
02 Feb 2025	Man assaulted	Royal Avenue, Belfast City Centre
03 Feb 2025	Graffiti on family home	Beechmount Street, West Belfast
03 Feb 2025	Teenager assaulted	Aughrim Park, South Belfast
08 Feb 2025	Graffiti on wall	Andersonstown, West Belfast

Figure 30. Summary of 11 separate hate crime incidents monitoring during this case study

²³ Electoral Areas covered were Westminster constituency, Assembly constituency and Council District Electoral Area.

Political Party Response | Social Media and Assembly Questions

Political Party	Social Media Response	Assembly Question Topic	Asked By (MLA)	Assembly Question Ref
	<p>Sinn Féin have political representatives in at least one of the electoral constituencies where each attack occurred.</p> <p>They commented on 45% of the incidents, condemning each one. Condemnation of racist incidents came from all levels of representation (Local Council, Stormont and Westminster), as well as from regional and national party accounts.</p>	Plans for a post-2025 Racial Equality Strategy	Emma Sheerin	AQO 911/22-27
		Plans to try resolve the issue of visas for migrant workers in the agri-food industry with the UK Home Office	Michelle McIlveen	AQW 19686/22-27 , AQW 18087/22-27
		Details of any meeting with the UK Home Office to address challenges the agri-food sector has in accessing migrant workers		AQW 16180/22-27 , AQW 18146/22-27
		Requesting a meeting between Minister and representatives of fishing industry to discuss labour supply		AQW 16785/22-27
	<p>The DUP had at least 1 representative in 9 of the 11 areas where attacks occurred. They commented on 1 of the incidents and this was from a Belfast City Councillor in south Belfast.</p>	Challenges facing the fishing industry, including migrant worker issues	Diane Forsythe	AQW 19394/22-27
		support for children of asylum seekers who have been resettled far away from their schools	Matthew O'Toole	AQW 18447/22-27
		assessment of a report into young people's attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees	Daniel McCrossan	AQW 23537/22-27
		extension of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme		AQO 1625/22-27
	<p>Alliance Party representatives were consistent in using their social media platforms to condemn racist incidents in the constituencies they represent. 8 of the incidents occurred in areas where the party has political representation, and they commented on six occasions — or 75% of the time. Alliance MLAs were the most active, with the party's official social media accounts often echoing or reposting their statements.</p>	how the government is supporting people moving from physical residence permits to eVisa system	Kate Nicholl	AQW 17413/22-27
		update on the GP referral pathway for asylum seekers		AQW 18033/22-27
		update on the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme for Asylum Seekers		AQW 14470/22-27
		impact of racism on mental health of minority ethnic communities		AQW 23096/22-27
		update on the Refugee Integration Strategy and the housing needs of displaced Ukrainians	Peter McReynolds	AQW 14820/22-27
		referrals to Schools Trauma Advisory and Referral Service, including for children of asylum seeker	Michelle Guy	AQW 16715/22-27
		available funding to further education colleges for English classes for new asylum arrivals		AQW 15815/22-27

		<p>provision of asylum accommodation for families with children with a disability</p> <p>details of discussions between Minister for Communities and organisations of refugees and asylum seekers in relation to accommodation</p>	Paula Bradshaw	AQW 21238/22-27
				AQW 21012/22-27
	<p>Three incidents occurred in constituencies represented by People Before Profit, with Gerry Carroll MLA (West Belfast) condemning one of them in his constituency via his social media accounts. Assembly Questions</p>	<p>intended expenditure of the Budget Cover Transfer from the UK Home Office (£6.8m)</p> <p>educational provision for children living in contingency asylum accommodation</p> <p>provision of trauma-informed practice when providing support to asylum seeker children and refugees</p> <p>access to SmartPass scheme for asylum seekers and survivors of human trafficking</p> <p>payments made to private contractor Tarasis Housing, which includes services funded by the UK Home Office for Asylum Seeker Accommodation</p> <p>Education Authority's review of temporary arrangements for children in the asylum process</p> <p>Education Authority's review of temporary arrangements for children in the asylum process</p> <p>details of Intercultural Education Service review, equality screening and the role of representative families/organisations of people living in asylum accommodation in policy development</p>	Gerry Carroll	AQW 21340/22-27 AQW 19972/22-27 AQW 19974/22-27 AQW 16977/22-27 AQW 16667/22-27 AQW 16889/22-27 AQW 23187/22-27 AQW 19972/22-27, AQW 19879/22-27, AQW 19878/22-27, AQW 19877/22-27, AQW 19876/22-27, AQW 19875/22-27
		<p><i>The Green Party does not currently have any MLAs elected to the Stormont Assembly.</i></p>		
		<p>UK Home Office's Full Dispersal Asylum Seekers Scheme which provides monies to council areas for the housing of asylum seekers while their applications are under consideration</p> <p>whether there is evidence to support the claim made in a Committee session that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is institutionally racist</p> <p>details on the numbers of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation across all constituencies</p> <p>details of funding received by each Stormont Development to manage pressures generated by the asylum process</p> <p>details of expenditure on Strategic Migration Partnership – Asylum</p>	Timothy Gaston	AQW 22485/22-27 AQW 15406/22-27 AQW 18548/22-27 AQW 19180/22-27, AQW 19177/22-27, AQW 19090/22-27, AQW 19178/22-27, AQW 19092/22-27, AQW 19279/22-27, AQW 19179/22-27, AQW 19091/22-27 AQW 22487/22-27
	<p>Party's local councillor nor the party's social media accounts for south Belfast are active. Therefore all 6 incidents occurred without Green Party representatives commenting on social media.</p>			
				

Insights

Limited use of social media for condemnation:

During the research period, Alliance consistently used social media to condemn racist attacks. Of the two largest parties Sinn Féin responded at a relatively high rate from Council, Assembly, Westminster and party accounts. However, based on the incidents monitored the DUP does not appear to consistently use their social media accounts to publicly condemn racist attacks and anti-immigrant violence despite six of the eleven incidents occurring in what would be considered traditionally “unionist” areas. Whether this is due to oversight, the de-prioritisation of social media as a communication tool on this issue, the de-prioritisation of anti-immigrant and racist violence as a political priority - or other reasons - would require further investigation.

Social media is not the only forum for response:

It is important to note that social media is not the sole — or even primary — platform through which politicians respond to racist and anti-immigrant incidents. For example, in response to both the Beechmount and Andersonstown incidents, political parties in West Belfast organised and addressed rallies in support of Gerry Carroll MLA and immigrant families who had recently been attacked.²⁴ Additionally, constituency services and direct support provided by political representatives to victims play a critical role. A more comprehensive study examining political responses to racist incidents across different media would provide a fuller picture of their actions.

Assembly questions reflect priorities:

Assembly questions offer insight into the constituency concerns that different parties and MLAs prioritise when holding government departments and Ministers accountable. These questions covered a range of topics, including asylum-seeking families, community and voluntary organisations, and the agri-food and fishing industry. Notably, the TUV MLA appeared to be the only one critically analysing the total contributions to immigration and asylum matters, including direct services and local strategic partnerships, while querying Ministers from a critical perspective on the issue of immigration.

²⁴ Neeson, A. (2025, March 21). “If we don’t stand together, it could be you next”: Anti-fascism rally hears. Belfast Media Group; Belfast Media.

Date:

October 2024 - March 2025

Location:

Belfast City Hall

**Anti-immigration
Rally | 23 March
2025**

Anti-immigration Rally

23 March 2025

Overview

In late February 2025, the TikTok account @orlaaerial announced a scheduled rally in Belfast and Derry for 23 March 2025. Two promotional posters were released, but the first was withdrawn after concerns were allegedly raised to @orlaaerial²⁵ about displaying the Irish Tricolour alongside the Union Jack to promote the event [Fig. 32]. In the week leading up to the rallies, the Derry protest was cancelled, allegedly due to alleged “threats” from counter-protesters.

However, given the low turnout at the Belfast rally, it is likely that insufficient support or poor local organisation also played a role. The Belfast protest saw significantly lower attendance compared to the August 2024 demonstrations. Although one man was arrested, the event concluded without violence, unlike its predecessor. As with the August anti-immigration rally, the “Refugees Welcome” counter-protests overshadowed the main event, drawing participation from local communities, trade unions, religious groups, and NI Assembly political parties (except the DUP, UUP, and TUV).

A further rally was organised for Belfast City Hall on 30 March in an attempt to attract a larger crowd to Belfast. A small number of protestors assembled, however, one of the apparent organisers, public Facebook group Northern Ireland Migrant Watch alleged that they had received “threats... from politicians linked to a terrorist organisation... just after lunchtime” (even though the rally was organised for 1pm). The account further suggested that the police could be “in cahoots” with the “terrorist organisation”. A rally has been organised at the same location for 27 April 2025.

Between October 2024 and February 2025, in addition to 11 reported hate crime incidents, 33

events in Northern Ireland were monitored. These events were identified through posts on social media accounts to assess the extent to which single accounts consistently framed incidents using racist and anti-immigrant narratives. If such patterns were identified, the nature of these accounts and their traction across platforms were analysed.²⁶ It is important to note that these events were not necessarily racist incidents — or did not begin as such — but were instrumentalised on social media to promote racist and anti-immigrant narratives. Only posts and comments deemed to contribute to such narratives were selected for analysis.

The announcement of the 23 March rally provided an opportunity to examine the involvement of accounts known for framing local issues with anti-immigrant rhetoric in mobilising for protests and rallies.



Figure 32. Promotional posters released for the 23rd March Anti-Immigration Protests

²⁵ The post has since been deleted from TikTok.

²⁶ These events included posts and comments relating Derry and Strabane District Council’s Mayor, Lilian Seenoi-Barr, dating back to her formal appointment.

Social Media
October 2024 – February 2025

As with the other case studies, the primary platforms for racist framing during this period were X and Facebook; Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram collectively accounted for only 3% of the activity. Across the 33 events monitored, the research identified all contributions (posts and comments), the accounts involved, the posts (and associated accounts) that provided the original framing. In total, 59 accounts were responsible for 92 posts, which generated 1,302 additional posts and comments from 1,090 accounts [Fig. 33].

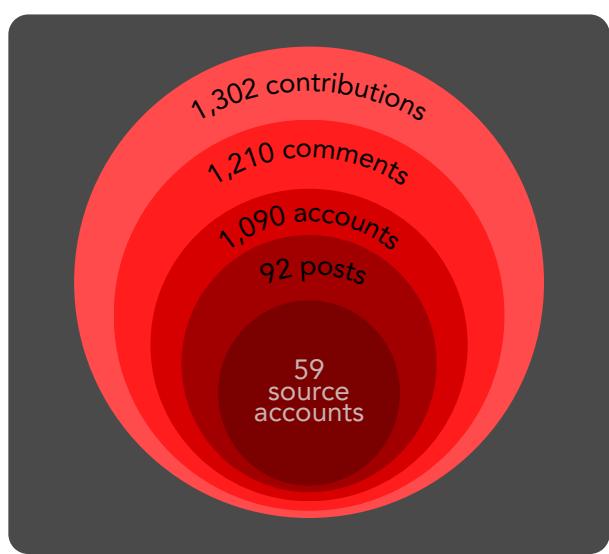


Figure 33. October 2024 - February 2025 anti-immigrant social media framing

Of the accounts posting about local events, 58% appeared to be based in Ireland (N), 22% in Ireland (S), and 10% in Britain. While 65% of the Ireland (N) accounts (22 accounts) were identified as originating from the loyalist leaning accounts, 6% (1 account) came from a republican leaning account, and 30% (10 accounts) could not be clearly defined [Fig. 34].

February - March 2025

Promotion for the 23 March rally began in mid-February. Of the 59 accounts identified as providing anti-immigrant narrative framing to local events between October and February, 25% posted about the rally, but only one account promoted it in advance of 23 March.

The decision to remove flags from the social media posters advertising the rally demonstrated a conscious effort to present the event as transcending the sectarian divide. Our research identified 9 accounts on Facebook and X that promoted the rally prior to 23 March. These accounts appeared to be located in various regions, including Ireland (S), Ireland (N), Great Britain, Italy, and France. Of the posts published by these 9 accounts, 8 used similar or identical language [Fig. 35].

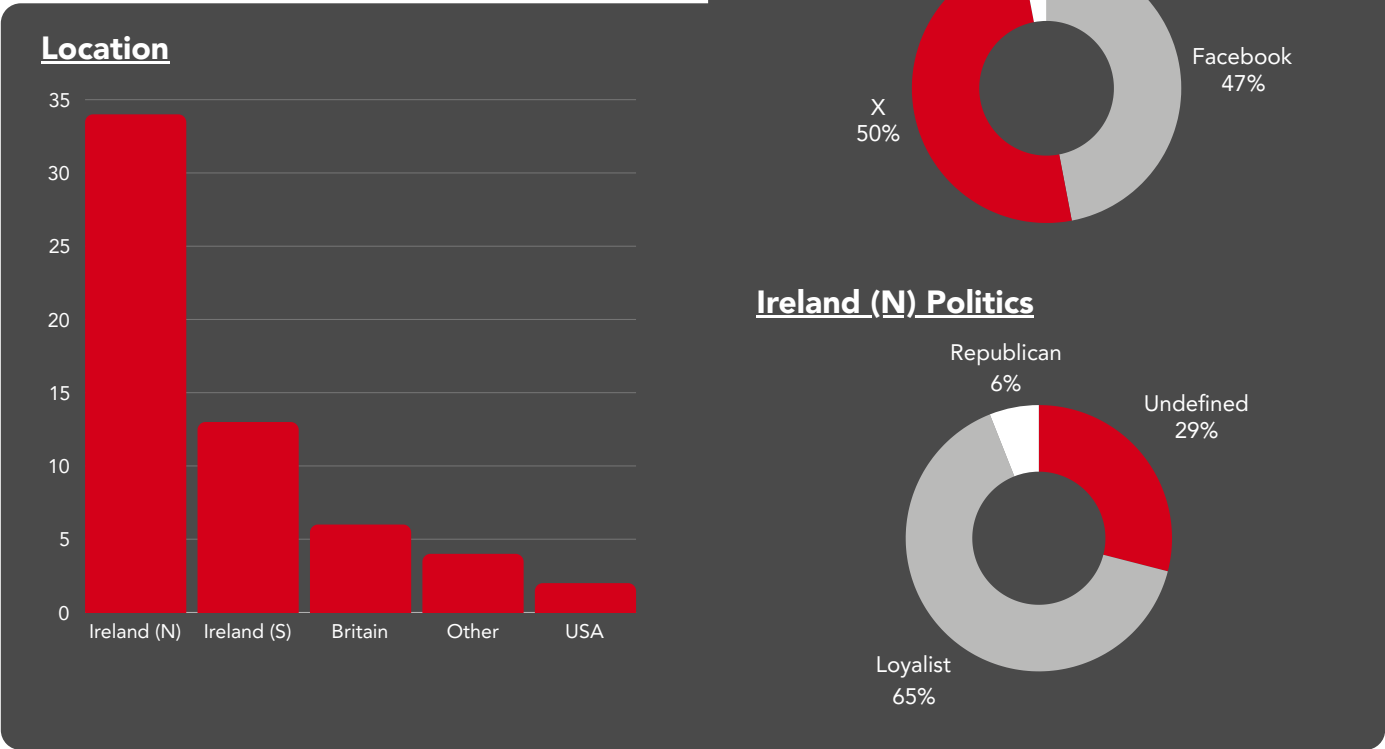


Figure 34. Location, Platform and political ideology of the 59 accounts posting content about the 23 March protests

“Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are set to JOIN FORCES at an anti-Immigration Protest in Belfast next month. This is INCREDIBLE news. When THESE two communities are putting their differences aside and coming together, you know you’ve messed up” - repeated post text.

On TikTok, promotion of the rally appeared to focus on a couple of influencers: @orlaaerial and @lynseytinybrown. Both accounts had garnered followers due to other interests; for example, @lynseytinybrown describes herself as a “mentor,” “author,” and “keynote speaker.” The involvement of these influencers suggests a possible attempt to appeal to a specific demographic, distinct from the more overtly anti-immigrant accounts active on Facebook or X.

Although the account has been deleted, @orlaaerial appeared to begin posting anti-immigrant content in October 2024, including claims about alleged incidents of “foreign nationals” attempting to kidnap children in, what appeared to be, the Newry & Mourne District Council area. It is not clear whether any police records, articles, or reports appear to exist which substantiate these allegations. Meanwhile, @lynseytinybrown was a supporter of the August 2024 anti-immigration protests.

23 March 2025

In terms of reporting on the rally itself, and echoing the social media trends in the aftermath of the August 2024 riots, the highest performing posts across the platforms came from accounts external to Ireland (N) [Fig. 36]

While this provides a snapshot of the top performing posts, the quantity of posts and comments is considerably less than during the August 2024 protests and riots.

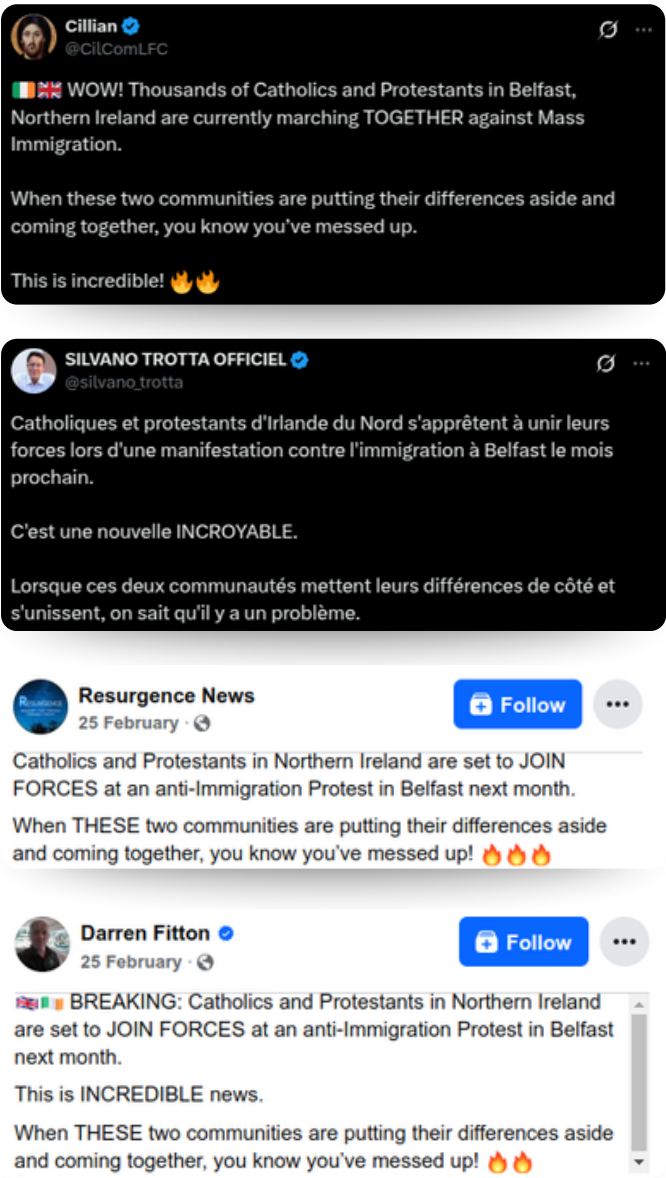


Figure 35. Accounts in Ireland (S), Ireland (N), Great Britain, Italy, and France promoting the protests

Platform	User	Location	Positive Engagements	Shares	Views	Date
X	@CilComLFC	Ireland (S)	103,900	23K	2M	23.03.25
Facebook	ResurgenceUK	GB	974	-	27K	25.02.25
Facebook	OffGridIreland22	Ireland (S)	1480	280	29K	25.02.25
TikTok	@brokerteejones	USA/ Ireland (S)	9444	1116	150K	26.02.25
Instagram	redhandshirtcompany	Ireland (N)	360	-	51,887	24.03.25

Figure 36. Analytics of social posts discussing the March 2025 rally

Insights

Social media as a communication tool:

Social media appears to function more as a communication tool than as an organising or coordination aid. This is evident from the disconnect between accounts providing racist and anti-immigrant narratives in response to local events in the five months leading up to the rally and those actively promoting the rally. There is little consistency on social media between accounts involved in localised incidents and those attempting to organise larger rallies.

Limited pre-event promotion:

The relatively limited pre-event promotion on the social media suggests that much of the organising likely occurred outside of publicly visible platforms, for example in private chat applications, groups or offline.

Uncertainty around coordination and bots:

It is difficult to determine how coordinated the amplification of the rally was or the extent to which bots were employed to boost visibility and lend credibility. However, the identical messaging across accounts and platforms suggests this is a significant factor.

Differences between August 2024 and March 2025 rallies:

Notable differences were observed between the August and March rallies. While the August events attempted to project an anti-sectarian message, they remained closely tied to elements within the loyalist community, both in terms of rallying points for protesters and the involvement of loyalist leaning accounts in online promotion. In contrast, the March rally appeared to attract greater participation from individuals in Ireland (S). Whether this reflects diverse voices within the broader anti-immigration movement or a deliberate effort to broaden its appeal remains unproven. Regardless of the shifting tactics, the counter-demonstration was larger than the previous one and significantly outnumbered the anti-immigrant rally [Fig. 37]. The planned rally on 30 March was an abject failure with a tiny attendance and no placards or speakers.

Sophistication of accounts by region:

Local accounts with anti-immigrant sentiments are supporting the initiatives online but are not achieving a significant same level of visibility or engagement. Anti-immigrant accounts seemingly located in Ireland (S) and Great Britain appear to be far more sophisticated than those in Ireland (N), particularly in their understanding of platform algorithms, their messaging strategies, and their ability to reach wider audiences.

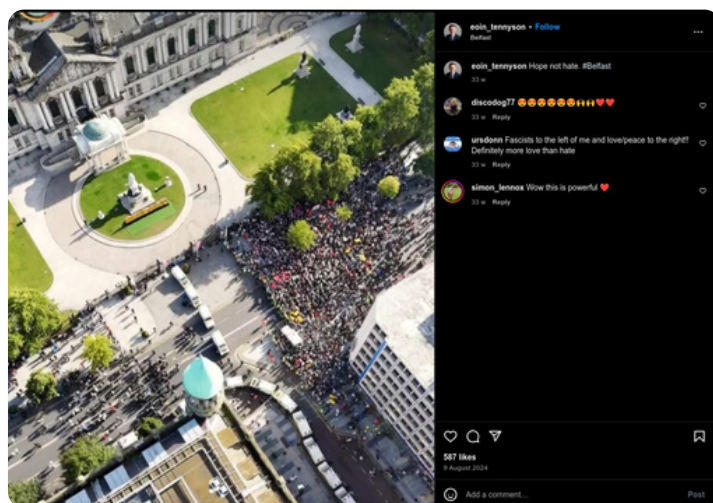


Figure 37. Belfast counter-protest far outnumbered the anti-immigration protest

Conclusion

The evidence gathered in this study reveals a disturbing pattern of locally driven racist and anti-immigrant activity in Northern Ireland. This activity appears to be rooted in local dynamics, organised through private chat groups or offline interactions, with publicly accessible social media serving to frame narratives and escalate tensions. As such, social media has primarily been employed as an amplification mechanism rather than a tool for mobilisation.

This amplification has involved both local and external accounts. Based on engagement rates observed in this research, external accounts demonstrate significantly greater sophistication in disseminating their messages, employing coherent narrative framing and reaching an apparently global audience. By contrast, local accounts spreading disinformation and anti-immigrant rhetoric do not seem able to gain the exposure which anti-immigrant accounts based in either southern Ireland or Britain do.

Nevertheless, local racist and anti-immigrant accounts contribute to a toxic online ecosystem—a phenomenon that should not be underestimated. Incidents such as the Girls' Model case study illustrate how ostensibly benign community Facebook groups can become conduits for disinformation. A recurring and deeply troubling trend is the proliferation of false and inflammatory claims, including fabricated narratives about migrants receiving disproportionate state benefits, alleged links to criminal activity, child endangerment, or the "great replacement" conspiracy theory.

These narratives are designed to stoke fear and hatred, frequently singling out Muslim communities or entire migrant groups for the actions of isolated individuals. Some posts meet the legal threshold for criminal offences, encompassing incitement to violence, housing intimidation, and explicit threats. The cases examined in this research demonstrate how such disinformation fosters an environment conducive to real-world racist and anti-immigrant violence against vulnerable families.

In August 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called for "robust measures to prevent and combat paramilitary racist violence and intimidation against ethnic minorities and migrants in Northern Ireland."²⁷ The link between online rhetoric and organised community violence cannot be overlooked.

Factually refuting far-right tropes and disinformation online may seem straightforward. However, social media, as it currently operates, is ill-suited to thoughtful discourse, let alone evidence-based policy debate. Strategies to counter these forces must account for the nature of the platforms themselves. For instance, X (Twitter) reportedly hosts 335.7 million active users²⁸, yet a January 2024 study estimated that 64% of its accounts are bots.²⁹ Allowing public narratives, news cycles, political agendas, or human rights strategies to be shaped by such metrics is both misleading and dangerous.

²⁷ McKee, R. (2024, August 23). UN committee urges NI Executive to tackle racist violence. BBC.

²⁸ SOAX. (2024). How many monthly active users does X (Twitter) have? SOAX.

²⁹ Elon Was Right About Bots. (2024, January 25). Internet2-0.com.

Migrant rights advocates must adopt a more deliberate and clear-eyed approach to social media—both in promoting their messages and combating online racism. This could entail:

- Regulation and enforcement, including demands for stronger state intervention at policy and operational levels;
- Platform engagement, such as identifying and challenging disinformation, exposing harmful accounts and revealing their interests;
- Diversification of the social media landscape, encouraging a more critical approach to exiting platforms and fostering alternative spaces for discourse.

A comprehensive strategy will likely require all three approaches and more.

However, the need for political and civic leadership is urgent. While this report alone should not be used to draw conclusions regarding a political party's or politician's stance on immigration or racism, further scrutiny is warranted to evaluate which issues public representatives prioritise across their communications and advocacy. Racist and anti-immigrant threats and violence demand the same consistent, unequivocal condemnation that is expected in responses to sectarian incidents.

Notably, the incidents monitored in this report involved several instances of exemplary leadership: elected representatives removing anti-immigrant placards and racist graffiti, residents blocking roads to halt violent anti-immigrant protesters, communities mobilising public rallies in the immediate aftermath of attacks and large cross-community demonstrations to counter far-right mobilisations. Such leadership is required in our communities, on the social media sites we use, in the chat groups we are part of and in the decision-making rooms of government. Failure to use public platforms to challenge disinformation or condemn attacks on migrant families emboldens perpetrators, further marginalises victims, and normalises anti-immigrant discourse.



Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed by CAJ for public authorities and elected representatives utilising the patterns which are identified in the case studies in this report and the broader contexts of how far right actors operate.

Legal Framework for Public Authorities and Elected Representatives

Public authorities in NI are already under legal duties to take positive action to tackle racism, including sectarianism and other specific forms of racism such as Islamophobia.

There are specific duties on public authorities to take positive steps to tackle racist and sectarian expression.²⁹ This includes positive obligations³⁰ under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which are directly enforceable in the courts due to the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA).³¹ It has been established that there are positive obligations under ECHR Article 8 (right to private life) to protect persons from racist expression.³² This was reiterated in the judge-led review in to hate crime legislation in NI.³³

Further positive obligations to tackle racism and sectarianism are placed on designated public authorities in Northern Ireland by the 'good relations duty' under Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.³⁴ Whilst the 'good relations' duty is regularly misinterpreted³⁵ its meaning has been authoritatively interpreted both by the Equality Commission and international standards. In international standards, the Council of Europe anti-racism body has stated that:

*Promoting good relations between different groups in society entails fostering mutual respect, understanding and integration while continuing to combat discrimination and intolerance.*³⁶

Similarly, the Equality Commission, which has a statutory function to advise on the Section 75 duties, has promoted an interpretation of the Good Relations duty as constituting a duty that involves 'tackling prejudice' and 'promoting understanding.'³⁷

These definitions therefore provide a sound basis of how 'good relations' should be interpreted by public authorities, as a duty to take positive action to tackle prejudice, hatred, hostility, discrimination and intolerance. The good relations duty applies within a public authority's 'functions.' In relation to local Councils there is also a general statutory duty under Article 67 of the Race Relations NI Order 1997, (RRO) to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality and 'good relations'. Council's Community Planning functions, which include, coordinating with partners in the district, the long-term social wellbeing of the Council, including in relation to promoting equality and 'good relations'.

²⁹ The Council of Europe and UN anti-racism committees have held that sectarianism in Northern Ireland is to be considered as a form of racism

³⁰ Human rights duties can be characterised as either negative or positive. Negative in that they impose duties on States not to do particular things (e.g. torture people or imprison without a fair trial), positive when they impose duties to take action to protect and secure rights.

³¹ By virtue of the HRA, public authorities must interpret and give effect to all other legislation, insofar as possible, in a way that is compatible with ECHR rights.

³² See *Askani v Turkey* (app no 4149/04, 41029/04) 15 March 2012, and *Király and Dömötör v Hungary*, (2017).

³³ "[The ECHR] is given further legal effect by the Human Rights Act 1998, so, for example, Article 8 of the ECHR, the right to a private life, provides for positive obligations to intervene to tackle racist expression by providing obligations that engage with the rights of individuals to the peaceful enjoyment of their private life." Hate Crimes Review, Vol 2, paragraph 10.9.

³⁴ The Section 75(2) duty provides that designated public authorities (including DfI, NIHE and Councils) in carrying out their functions are to "have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group" (without prejudice to the duty to promote equality of opportunity under s75(1).)

³⁵ For details see (CAJ-UNISON) Equality Coalition Written Evidence to Executive Office Committee of NI Assembly. Inquiry into Gaps in Equality Legislation

³⁶ ECRI General Recommendation no 2 (revised), explanatory memorandum, para 21

³⁷ This interpretation is drawn from the definition of good relations set out in the Equality Act 2010 (which applies in Great Britain). Furthermore, drawing on other legislation in Britain, the Equality Commission has stated that "Good relations can be said to exist where there is a high level of dignity, respect and mutual understanding; an absence of prejudice, hatred, hostility or harassment; a fair level of participation in society." Equality Commission (September 2015), Equality Commission Advice on Good Relations in Local Councils.

Elected representatives conduct and duties are already regulated by Codes of Conduct approved by the NI Assembly, including acting in a way which tackles racial (and other forms of) prejudice and promotes understanding.

The Code of Conduct for MLAs includes the following duty:

9. Promoting Good Relations: Members should act in a way that is conducive to promoting good relations by tackling prejudice, promoting understanding and respect and encouraging participation between people on the grounds of different religion, political opinion, race, gender, age, sexual orientation and disability.³⁸

There is also a provision in the Code of Conduct for local councillors to act in a way conducive to promoting good relations in acting as a positive example to the wider community by embracing 'diversity in all its forms' and promoting a culture of respect.³⁹

Whilst regulation of social media remains a problem the criminal law already provides significant relevant offences to tackle the most harmful racist posts.

The most serious forms of racist, sectarian, homophobic or disablist expression can reach the threshold of the criminal offence of stirring up hatred or arousing fear under Part III of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987.⁴⁰

Other criminal offences relevant to hate expression include the offence of intimidation under the Protection of the Person and Property Act (NI) 1969, whereby it is an offence to unlawfully cause "by force, threats or menaces, or in any way whatsoever" a person to leave their home, employment, to terminate a person's employment or "refrain from doing any act".⁴¹ Threats of violence will also constitute criminal offences.

There are also clear binding duties under international human rights standards, placing positive obligations on public authorities to proactively tackle racism.

As alluded to above ECHR Article 8 places positive duties on public authorities to take steps to tackle racist expression. These provisions should be read and interpreted in line with other relevant human rights standards. This would include Article 6 of the Framework Convention for National Minorities which obliges public authorities to:

...take appropriate measures to protect persons who may be subject to threats or acts of discrimination, hostility or violence as a result of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity.

Racist expression constitutes a form of racial discrimination under ICERD (the UN anti-racism convention).⁴² Duties on public authorities under Article 2 of ICERD include pursuing "by all appropriate means" policies of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms; this includes measures to "prohibit and bring to an end" racial discrimination by third parties, and undertaking not to "sponsor, defend or support" such discrimination.

Under Article 4, ICERD states there are specific duties to take "immediate and positive measures" to eradicate incitement to or acts of discrimination, including banning expression ('propaganda') that promotes racial hatred and discrimination. There are also specific duties not to assist racist activities. These provisions can be read as placing duties on public authorities not to assist racist (including sectarian) expression by third parties, (by for example providing funding to groups involved in such activities).

³⁸ the-code-of-conduct-and-the-guide-to-the-rules-relating-to-the-conduct-of-members-march-2021.pdf

³⁹ The Code of Conduct | NIPSO

⁴⁰ This covers offences of 'stirring up hatred' or 'arousing fear' against a group of persons on grounds of religious belief, sexual orientation, disability, colour, race, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origins. The categories of sexual orientation and disability were added in 2004.

⁴¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1969/29/section/1>

⁴² CERD/C/GC/35 General Recommendation 35 (Combating racist hate speech).

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. Our recommendations should be considered with this context in mind.

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