

Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Committee request for evidence

Written evidence submission from Belfast City Council

Evidence from Belfast City Council is provided by:

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive, Belfast City Council	As Chief Executive, Suzanne holds senior oversight and responsibility for Belfast City Council staff and service delivery functions. This includes the City and Neighbourhood Services Department which delivers Port Health services at Belfast Port.
Siobhan Toland, Director of City Services, Belfast City Council	As City Services Director, Siobhan has direct oversight and responsibility for the services within her directorate. This includes management of the City Protection Service which includes the Council's environmental health functions and the Port Health service at Belfast Port.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Alongside other port health duties relating to public health and food safety, Belfast City Council is a competent authority for delivery of food import controls for certain products, including fish and fish products, high risk food not of animal origin, organic products, plastic kitchenware from China and Hong Kong entering the EU single market.
- 1.2 Prior to 31st December 2020 these import controls were applied to imports from countries outside the EU. Since the end of the transition period for the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and the commencement of the Northern Ireland Protocol, Belfast City Council is required to also undertake these controls in relation to goods arriving into Northern Ireland from Great Britain.
- 1.3 The Council works closely with both the Food Standards Agency and DAERA to undertake this role. At an operational level, this requires Council staff to engage and work closely with DAERA staff, particularly while temporary inspection facilities are in operation.
- 1.4 The Council had recruited 20 staff at the 1st February 2021, working on shifts all hours of day and night. Further staff recruitment is ongoing. Belfast City Council has experienced practical difficulties with this function over this period of time and has taken a legal opinion on its specific responsibilities, funding and lead agency. The Council is represented on the Solace Sub Group, known as the NI EU Exit Task and Finish Working Group, chaired by the Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council.
- 1.5 The Council staff are located in a discrete Unit in Corry Place, access to which is controlled by a barrier with CCTV installed. There is also a dedicated police force in the harbour estate. Staff parking is also available in an adjacent site and is screened from the road. A copy of the location of the Unit is provided in Appendix 2.
- 1.6 Belfast City Council takes the health and safety of its staff extremely seriously and has had a risk assessment in place for staff working at the port which is kept under review. The Council was in regular contact with its staff and the Trade Unions during the timeframe over which the committee has an interest. Belfast and Larne are unique and somewhat

different facilities, with the Council staff in Corry Place having additional security. Whilst no decision was made to remove staff from Corry Place on 1st February or subsequently, physical checks were temporarily paused and a dynamic risk assessment process was put in place, with daily updates on threat assessments by PSNI, additional assurance patrols put in place and additional personal and physical measures taken to ensure staff did not feel vulnerable.

1.7 The details provided below outline Belfast City Council’s perspective on the points raised in the terms of reference presently under consideration by the committee

2. Establishing a timeline regarding discussions that took place between officials in the local authorities and DAERA, which led to the decision to withdraw staff, including those that took place on 31st January between the then Minister, Edwin Poots, and the DAERA Permanent Secretary.

2.1 An outline of the events and timeline of Belfast City Council engagement with the other agencies in the lead up to the decisions of DAERA and Mid and East Antrim Council to withdraw staff is provided below (the timeline below includes events up to and including the evening of 1st February 2021). Events following after 1st February are then subsequently summarised in section 3.

Date	Engagement details
21/1/2021	Email received from a Trade Union official at GMB seeking to discuss staff concerns relating to service provision and staffing arrangements at Port. This did not include any mention of concerns relating to security. A meeting was arranged with the TU concerned for 4.30pm on 26 January 2021 at which security concerns were not raised.
Saturday 23/1/2021	BCC contacted DAERA (Veterinary Service Animal Health Group) via email to seek information on press reports relating to graffiti that had appeared in Larne. What if any action had been taken or if any information was available relating to Belfast.
Monday 25/1/2021	Reply received from DAERA (Veterinary Service Animal Health Group) advising DAERA and Border Force had engaged with PSNI, Mid and East Antrim Council, Trade Unions and DAERA Minister. Advised not aware of any issues in Belfast.
Tuesday 26/1/2021	A Belfast City Council member of staff at Corry Place enquired with the Port Health Manager following reports in media of graffiti at Larne to ask if Manager was aware. The officer was advised that BCC Director had sought information from DAERA who were liaising with Police, but they had indicated they were not aware of any issues re Belfast Port. The officer was advised this would continue to receive attention and we would continue to seek further updates.

Tuesday 26/1/2021	4.30pm meeting with Trade Union representatives from GMB Union regarding staffing issues at Belfast Port. Security concerns were not raised by Trade Union representatives at this meeting.
Wednesday 27/1/2021	Email enquiry made to Belfast Harbour Police because of media attention to see if any intelligence re any concerns relating to Belfast.
Wednesday 27/1/2021	Email reply received from Belfast Harbour Police advising they would look into this enquiry and respond on 28/1/2021
Thursday 28/1/2021	Email reply received from Belfast Harbour Police advising they would increase patrols in vicinity of the Council's Port health facility, and offered a crime prevention survey visit.
Thursday 28/1/2021	BCC Officers (Portfolio and Programme Manager and City Protection Manager) attended a SOLACE subgroup meeting (EU Exit and Brexit implementation group) with officers from all 11 Councils. At the meeting Port Health issues were discussed. DAERA, Chief Veterinary Officer, attended the meeting to provide an update from DAERA perspective, during which the recent graffiti in Larne was mentioned. CVO advised that information received by DAERA from PSNI had been reassuring and that the information suggested this was not related to any organised group or serious threat. Mid and East Antrim Chief Executive (and Chair of the SOLACE subgroup) indicated some concern regarding this information and that the matter should be further reviewed.
Friday 29/1/2021	Concerns re graffiti at Larne briefly mentioned at the standard early morning multiagency operational update meeting hosted by DAERA and attended by BCC City Protection Manager and Port Health lead EHO, along with representatives from other agencies (e.g. other Councils, Border Force, DEFRA). DAERA advised their security officer was liaising with PSNI.
Sunday 31/1/2021	9.30pm Phone call from DAERA Minister to BCC Chief Executive on her mobile – asked about whether she was aware of the graffiti particularly evident around Larne Port, threatening Port workers and indicated he was concerned and that Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council was also concerned. BCC Chief Executive advised she would speak to the relevant Director, the PSNI, and to the Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council, to obtain information.
Monday 1/2/2021	8.45am BCC Chief Executive contacted the BCC Director of City Services, who confirms that the service has been in contact with harbour police and they have stepped up patrols for reassurance. BCC Chief Executive asks the BCC Director of City Services to contact police, port staff managers and to assess any graffiti making threats. BCC Chief Executive also speaks to Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council about her concerns.

	<p>1.10pm BCC Director of City Services emailed BCC City Protection Manager and Emergency Planning Coordinator to seek further assessment and information that would help understating from a Belfast perspective as outlined below.</p> <p>1.10pm Further contact made by BCC with Belfast Harbour Police by email to seek update following further graffiti referring to 'no Irish Sea Border' that had appeared in parts of Belfast, to check if any further issues had been detected and if Harbour Police had been liaising with PSNI on intelligence on this.</p> <p>1.30pm Email reply received from Belfast Harbour Police confirming they are in regular contact with PSNI colleagues regarding information and intelligence, and they had plans in place to manage any protests at sites/facilities should they arise. Confirmed patrolling strategy also in place to give special attention to DAERA and BCC facilities.</p> <p>1.42pm Email enquiry received from a Trade Union regarding concerns relating to recent graffiti seeking assurance BCC aware and risk assessing the situation. An initial response was issued the following day advising BCC liaising with PSNI and assessing the situation, but that no information to indicate a threat to BCC staff had been received.</p> <p>1.50pm BCC Chief Executive spoke to the Belfast Commander Chief Superintendent who provided a read out on the situation, stating that the threat level was considered low and that graffiti was not carried out under the auspices of any organised group. He also stressed that if there was any credible intelligence that any individual or group of staff was under threat, that this would immediately be communicated to them and to the BCC Chief Executive.</p> <p>3.30pm Contact made by BCC Emergency Planning team to PSNI Emergency Planning contacts for further information. Advised they were aware of the graffiti and low level community unrest as highlighted in press, but no specific intelligence indicating an immediate security issue for Belfast City Council site. PSNI advised they were supporting Harbour Police in patrols.</p> <p>4.45pm BCC Chief Executive and Director of City Services attended a meeting organised by MEA Council Chief Executive with DAERA Minister, DAERA Permanent Secretary, Chief Veterinary Officer and</p>
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	<p>Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council. Concerns regarding the graffiti at Larne were discussed by MEA Council and DAERA. The differing situations were discussed in terms of the graffiti and the physical protections in place at Belfast and Larne ports. The Minister stressed the level of concern for staff safety and referred to information that had come through Crime stoppers, expressing surprise at the police assessment. PSNI were not in attendance at this meeting. The Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Council conveyed the fact that the issue had been to her Party Group Leaders and would be discussed at their Council meeting that night with all likelihood that her staff would be withdrawn.</p> <p>5.30pm (approx.) Following the above meeting BCC Chief Executive held a series of telephone calls with PSNI Chief Superintendent and BCC Director of City Services. The BCC Chief Executive mentioned the issues discussed at the earlier meeting with DAERA and MEA Council. The PSNI re-iterated its assurance that threat levels at Belfast Port were low and not organised, that PSNI had increased patrols and there was no graffiti directly relating to Port staff in Belfast.</p> <p>7.25pm MEA Council Chief Executive texted BCC Chief Executive, to advise of decision taken by MEA Council to withdraw staff from Larne Port. At that time Belfast City Council was also holding a meeting of full Council, during which an elected member, on hearing reports of the MEA Council decision, openly asked the BCC Chief Executive about any risk to BCC staff. Later a decision was also made by DAERA to stop physical checks. The BCC Chief Executive outlined the verbal reports given by police and assured Members that the situation was being monitored very closely.</p> <p>8.40pm BCC Director of City Services spoke to PSNI Chief Superintendent to see if there is any more information BCC should be aware of, any areas of concern and he advised that there had been no change but that the PSNI Assistant Chief Constable will also be in touch with the BCC Chief Executive at some point. BCC Director of City Services advised that the BCC Chief Executive is attending the Council meeting which is in progress.</p> <p>8.50pm BCC City Protection Manager and other BCC staff noted media reports of decision taken at Council meeting of Mid and East Antrim Council to withdraw Council staff from Larne Port, and also the DAERA Minister's announcement on twitter re his decision to withdraw staff from Larne and Belfast Ports. City Protection</p>
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	<p>Manager notifies BCC Director of City Services and Head of HR in BCC via email for information. Director of City Services and City Protection Manager liaise with Port Health Senior EHO to confirm PSNI advice received earlier that evening. BCC Port Health Manager then took decision as a precaution that whilst BCC staff could remain on site undertaking duties for the evening, physical checks would need to be temporarily paused pending further discussion with all parties the next day. It was also not practical to carry out these checks without DAERA colleagues.</p>
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3. How DAERA and the relevant local authorities, gathered, assessed and reported on the alleged threats to staff; to whom, within each organisation, that information was provided; who, within each organisation, made the decision or otherwise, to withdraw council / DAERA staff. Additionally, how was the decision reached to return staff to work and who took that?

- 3.1 Information received by Belfast City Council from Belfast Harbour Police and PSNI in the run up to the evening of 1 February indicated Police held no information to indicate any organised or credible threat to Council staff at the Council’s facility within Belfast Port.
- 3.2 PSNI had indicated awareness of general community tension but it was at a low level (reflecting discontent as reported in the media and expressed via graffiti) but had confirmed no organised threat to staff had been identified.
- 3.3 Graffiti that appeared in parts of Belfast over the weekend of 29-31 January 2021, were largely directed at political parties and general statements such as ‘No Irish Sea Border’ **(Examples in appendix 1)**. Belfast City Council reported this graffiti to the police.
- 3.4 The Belfast City Council facility is located within an access controlled part of Belfast Port (accessed via security controlled barriers and CCTV systems), which provides additional security and a degree of reassurance for staff. The Port area has more than one entrance/exit. Staff car parking is in a secure compound out of public view. **(Site map showing location of BCC facility and security barriers provided in Appendix 2)**
- 3.5 Apart from one enquiry from a member of staff regarding press reporting of the earlier graffiti in Larne, BCC staff were not reporting any specific concerns relating to continuing their duties at that time. At a meeting on 26 January 2021, with Trade Union representatives which was called during the week prior to the MEA/DAERA decision, specifically to discuss staffing issues at Port, did not mention any staff concerns regarding security issues.
- 3.6 Numerous discussions had taken place at various levels between Council officials and both PSNI and the Harbour Police to assess their intelligence on the level of threat right up until the meeting of Belfast City Council between 6pm and 11.20pm on 1st February. They continued to reassure the Council that the threat level was low and not organised. On the basis of all of this information, and taking a risk based approach at that time, no decision was taken on 1 February 2021 by Belfast City Council to withdraw its staff from Port duties. However, as a precaution physical checks were temporarily paused. The Council could not reinstate its physical checks because it was not practicable to do so without colleagues

from DAERA present, however it did continue to undertake those checks at the Council facility in Corry Place which did not involve DAERA staff (ie on goods from third countries).

- 3.7 In light of the MEA Council decision and subsequent DAERA minister's decision that evening, BCC Director of City Services confirmed that BCC staff could remain on site undertaking documentary checks only as a precautionary approach while further assurances from PSNI were received and risk assessments reviewed. Some physical checks on goods from GB continued to be paused from that time, due to operational dependencies on DAERA staff who had paused this work at nearby DAERA locations as a result of the Minister's decision.
- 3.8 Following the decision by Mid and East Antrim Council and the DAERA minister to withdraw staff on evening of 1st February 2021, BCC Chief Executive contacted PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Mark McEwan the next morning on Tuesday 2nd February at 8.05am. Mark McEwan confirmed that the threat level was low and that there was no change in the information previously provided to indicate any increased level of concern re staff at Belfast Port. BCC Chief Executive asked for a written assessment and Mark McEwan said that he was organising a meeting with partners to discuss the situation further. This meeting was arranged for later that morning at 11.45am.
- 3.9 BCC Chief Executive and the Director of City Services attended the partners' meeting organised by PSNI at 11.45am on 2 February 2021. PSNI confirmed their assessment of threat level remained low, and that they would provide a written assessment to partners. Further partners meetings convened by PSNI also took place on 3 February (attended by BCC Chief Executive) and 4 February (attended by Director of City Services), during which no change to the threat assessment was reported.
- 3.10 BCC Chief Executive met with the Council's Party Group leaders at 3pm on 2/2/2021 to update them on latest information and that while Council staff remained on site undertaking documentary checks and other Port duties, physical checks on GB goods had been temporarily paused. The Party Group leaders agreed that this was an appropriate course of action and that this position should remain, unless any further escalation of any threats became available.
- 3.11 Port Health Managers engaged with staff to update on this decision and listen to any concerns, and Trade Unions were kept updated during this time.
- 3.12 The written Threat Assessment confirming no organised threat to Port staff was received from PSNI on 4th February 2021.
- 3.13 The review of the risk assessments for the Corry Place was updated in consultation with the Councils Health and Safety Manager over 2-4 February 2021, taking into account information from PSNI and partners at the daily meetings on those dates (referred to in 3.7 and 3.8 above). A revised version of the Risk Assessment for the Council's facility was documented on 4 February 2021. This identified further actions for Management including making arrangements for a number of crime prevention/security surveys to identify potential security enhancements as a precaution against future increases in threat levels. Other actions taken at that time included personal safety and crime prevention advice being made available for staff (this included PSNI crime prevention webinars being offered to staff, alongside Police safety advice leaflets), and arranging for regular visits by Harbour Police to provide continued reassurance. Staff were also reminded to continue to use the

secure parking arrangements currently in place and ensure vigilance in reporting any suspicious activity. A communication chain for PSNI to alert Council of any security issues was also put in place, alongside the commitment from PSNI to engage at Senior level should urgent security concerns arise. A regular engagement with PSNI to discuss reviews of the PSNI Threat Assessment is also now in place, and BCC participates at these regular meetings. (Security surveys have since identified scope for enhancements at the site, including enhanced access controls, CCTV, perimeter treatments and lighting; DAERA in their co-ordinating role in provision of the temporary contingency facilities for the checks will be providing these enhancements in the coming weeks.)

- 3.14 BCC officers remained on site undertaking Port duties, including documentary checks of GB goods and were subsequently able to resume all physical checks once DAERA staff returned to their duties on the morning of 10th February 2021.

4. **Consider the difference in approach between the councils and the rationale to remove/maintain council staff at ports.**

- 4.1 We are committed to working closely with all of our Partner organisations within Belfast Port, and in particular we engage regularly in joint working with PSNI, Belfast Harbour Police DAERA officials and other Councils, both at senior and operational levels, to ensure information and security concerns are shared and addressed in a co-ordinated manner.
- 4.2 Belfast City Council decisions on 1st February 2021 were based on consideration of information provided by PSNI and a risk based approach, specifically in relation to our own Council facility and the Council staff operating at Corry Place, which is within the access controlled area of Belfast Port. The rationale and timeline for decisions taken is outlined in 3 above. Whilst a written threat assessment from the PSNI was not received until 4th February, there were multiple senior level contacts with the PSNI over that time including three formal SKIES meetings. The senior police officers were confident in the verbal assessments they provided and assured the CEO that she would be contacted immediately if the situation changed in any way,
- 4.3 We did not have sight of any other additional information the other bodies may have received in relation to this matter and are unable to comment on the rationales used in reaching their decisions on 1st February 2021. These matters are for each employing organisation.

5. **Establishing what consideration was given by DAERA and Mid and East Antrim Council to the PSNI assessments of the threat in deciding to withdraw staff.**

- 5.1 This is a matter for DAERA and Mid and East Antrim Council.

APPENDIX 1: Examples of graffiti in Belfast that appeared around Mid-Late January 2021 (taken from Press articles)



Stroud Street (BBC, 27 Jan 2021) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55827679>



Shankill Road (Belfast Telegraph, 1 February 2021)
<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/further-anti-dup-and-irish-sea-border-graffiti-appears-off-shankill-road-40036006.html>



Shankill Road (The Mirror, 2 February 2021) <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/brexit-checks-northern-ireland-goods-23426635>



Belmont Road, East Belfast (Belfast Telegraph, 16 Jan 2021) <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/brexit/alliance-and-dup-mps-clash-as-irish-sea-border-row-intensifies-39974481.html>

Appendix 2: Site location map (Belfast City Council Port Health Facility)

