

Written Evidence

Presented to:

Northern Ireland Assembly, Committee for Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

Evidence Subject:

Withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority Staff from Ports

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INTRODUCTION

The safety and wellbeing of the staff of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) is of utmost importance to Council's Elected Members and Chief Executive, who is also Chief of Staff.

Council has a low tolerance towards any factors that could potentially put officers at risk of harm, or impact officer safety and wellbeing.

Council is acutely aware that the Human Rights Act 1998 provides that it is unlawful for any public authority to act in such a way as to contravene Convention rights. Article 2 of the Act protects everybody's right to life.

As a Public Body, MEABC is responsible for taking positive action to ensure that officer safety is not compromised in any way by negligence, inadequate training, or the implementation of decisions which lack sound rationale which had the potential to infringe on officers Article 2 Rights.

In all and any circumstances where officer safety is compromised in any way, Council will adopt a prudent approach as a responsible employer and will always err on the side of caution. This includes liaising regularly with all relevant parties, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

As such, during the period 22 January 2021- 01 February 2021, senior Council officers had seven calls with the PSNI to discuss the ongoing situation and raise concerns about the safety of Council staff working at Larne Port. A detailed log of these calls is set out in the Appendices section of this document (Appendix 13).

There were six calls with the PSNI Local District Commander and one with a Regional PSNI Officer. In addition to this, Elected Members questioned the District Commander on the threatening graffiti at Larne Port at the monthly Mid and East Antrim PCSP meeting on the 27 January.

Further opportunities, however, for engagement between the PSNI and the Councils involved were missed, since Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and Belfast City Council were not made aware of, or invited to, the PSNI's Gold Command meetings - despite being key stakeholders and a critical source of information and sentiment within local communities. Whilst DAERA representatives had been invited to attend these meetings in advance of Monday 01 February 2021, Council was not made aware of these happening and was not invited to attend until Tuesday 02 February.

Below we have set out the timeline of events which led to the temporary withdrawal of 12 Environmental Health Officers from duties at Larne Port.

The decision to invoke this temporary withdrawal was taken unanimously by Council, with cross-party support, due to very serious concerns for the Officers' safety. This decision was taken on the sure understanding that this withdrawal was, indeed, temporary and was pending a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI.

This PSNI formal written threat assessment was essential for Council to be able to develop a new risk assessment accordingly for these specific circumstances, before returning staff to duties at Larne Port.

These 12 Environmental Health Officers were off-site from the evening of Monday 01 February until the afternoon of Friday 05 February, with minimal impact - if any - on the work at Larne Port during this time.

This has been a worrying and distressing period for the 12 staff members directly involved at Larne Port, many of whom are young workers in their twenties. It has also been extremely challenging for the Elected Members and senior officers of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council - and, in particular, for our Chief Executive who, regrettably, feels that her own personal safety and that of her young family has been compromised due to the portrayal of this entire situation, which has become politicised and highly charged across the media.

As such, Council has been extremely disappointed that what always was - and indeed always should be - a matter exclusively focused on the personal safety and wellbeing of 12 individuals, has unashamedly been mistreated, manipulated and exploited as a political 'football'.

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.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

December 2020

1. The commencement of Council's involvement in this operation at Larne Port aligned with the end of the Brexit transition period, which saw the Irish Sea border come into effect from Friday 01 January as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

EU customs rules came into force at Northern Ireland's ports, including Larne, and Council had an obligation to assist with checks on a number of items coming through Larne. Council's staff were introduced to Larne Port on Friday 01 January.

2. The safety and wellbeing at Larne Port was prioritised from the very beginning and this included the completion of a risk assessment.

Prior to this, on 18 December 2020, the Chief Executive had contacted the DAERA Minister to outline concerns around the quality and suitability of temporary facilities and to ensure the conditions were fit for standard for our staff.

Extra staff from Council's own Environmental Health Officer team - including at senior level and exceeding what had been agreed with FSA - provided support to the new team of 12 Environmental Health Officers at Larne Port in response to the Chief Executive's personal assessment of the level of resource and experience required.

Many of the 12 new recruits - recruited on an agency staff basis - were young and inexperienced and just out of university. For most, this was their first professional job. The average age of these agency staff is early 20s and all, but one, are young females.

The Chief Executive ensured that Council exercised its duty of care to all staff - whether direct Council employees or agency staff - and assured them of our full support. This included reassuring them that a robust regime was in place to ensure their safety and wellbeing at all times.

Council did everything within its power to ensure appropriate facilities and good working conditions for staff. However, there is no training that could have been provided that would have equipped officers to deal with being subjected to violence or the threat of violence.

With only a few days to go before the rollout of checks at Larne Port, the Chief Executive was advised by DAERA officials that temporary facilities at the Port were not yet completed.

The Chief Executive assisted DAERA in identifying a solution to this problem by offering Larne Town Hall for the staff, if required. She also offered to provide 24/7 security at the Town Hall, given the shift patterns staff would be expected to work.

Following discussions, DAERA finally agreed to locate staff at alternative facilities, with 24/7 security. These facilities were provided by the Department for Communities. The Chief Executive ensured that Council staff assisted DAERA with IT installation and any other support required in an effort to ensure day one readiness.

3. The Chief Executive reported to Elected Members on 04 January at a meeting of the full Council that all Port staff were in place, inducted and trained, and that the necessary checks were underway at Larne Port.

She updated that work was being carried out smoothly and commended Council's officers for their hard work and assistance in ensuring day one readiness.

4. From the inception of the Border Control Post, Council has sought continued clarification, both verbally and in writing from DAERA and FSA officials, as to who the lead authority is in terms of the Border Control Posts.

Various correspondence has been received in relation to DAERA, FSA and Council roles as competent authorities, however no clarification has been forthcoming as to who has the lead responsibility and accountability for the Border Control Post.

Both Belfast City Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council are seeking legal opinions on same due to the lack of clarification on this matter.

Thursday 21 January - Saturday 23 January

5. The first worrying turn of events was the appearance of menacing graffiti, sprayed close to Larne Port, which stated that 'All Border Post Staff are Targets'.

Please see attached at Appendix 1: "All Border post staff are targets".



A member of Council Port staff reported the incident to their Line Manager, voicing their serious concern at the appearance of graffiti of this nature. Recognising the seriousness of the situation, the Line Manager escalated this to the Chief Executive.

As our staff at Larne Port were temporary agency staff, the Chief Executive, through the Council Director responsible, requested that the employees' agency was made aware of the situation, and to assure the agency that Council was taking their safety very seriously.

The Chief Executive instructed the Director responsible to report this graffiti immediately to the PSNI on Friday 22 January. The local PSNI District Commander confirmed that the PSNI was already aware of a graffiti incident in the vicinity of Larne Port and that this was being investigated. He stressed that there was no threat, and this was an isolated incident.

Following the appearance of the threatening graffiti on the 21 January, DAERA issued an internal memo to its Port Staff, reassuring them that both PSNI and DAERA were investigating this. The memo also advised that this appeared to be an isolated incident but urged Port Staff to report any suspicious activity.

6. The appearance of this graffiti was roundly condemned by political parties within Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, who hit out at "threats" to staff and expressed their concerns in the media.

Please see attached at Appendix 2: PSNI probing sinister threat made to employees working at Border Control Port.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9178925/Police-Northern-Ireland-probe-sinister-graffiti-threat-aimed-Brexit-port-workers.html>

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/border-control-posts-on-alert-as-sinister-graffiti-appears-in-larne-40000631.html>

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Police in Northern Ireland probe sinister graffiti threat aimed at Brexit port workers warning 'all border post staff are targets'

- 'All border post staff are targets' spray painted on a wall in Larne, County Antrim
- Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Government are investigating
- Brexit Operational Readiness bosses urged port workers to report suspicions
- MPs warned political violence could increase on the border as a result of Brexit

By DAVID O'DORNAN and JEMMA CARR FOR MAILONLINE
PUBLISHED: 10:05, 23 January 2021 | UPDATED: 13:00, 24 January 2021



7. It was confirmed to the Council's Director responsible for Larne Port by the PSNI that this was an isolated incident. The Director informed the Chief Executive of this.
8. A number of political representatives made contact with the Chief Executive and Council on Friday 22 January to raise their concerns about the threatening nature of the graffiti and seek assurance that this was being removed.

The Chief Executive instructed the Director responsible to arrange the removal of the graffiti by a contractor to avoid putting any Council staff at any risk or to cause them any alarm.

This graffiti was removed by a contractor on behalf of Council on Saturday 23 January. Based on the communications received and assurances received from PSNI, Council's Director responsible and Chief Executive were of the belief that this isolated incident was now dealt with.

The Chief Executive was satisfied that there was no immediate threat to staff and that no further mitigations needed to be invoked. This was based on the assurance received from the PSNI that this was an isolated incident. The Director responsible and the Chief Executive therefore believed that duties could continue to be exercised safely at Larne Port by all the staff involved, having considered the advices of the PSNI in line with Council's Risk Assessment.

Council continued to engage with Port staff regularly to ensure they felt supported by Council and to reiterate that their safety and wellbeing remained our top priority at all times.

Wednesday 27 January

9. At the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, an Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) spoke of growing discontent within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) community in regard to the Protocol.

The ACC was quoted in the media as saying: *"We are seeing signals, there are signal incidents that have happened, particularly in recent days. We are starting to see graffiti, we are picking up social media sentiment of growing discontent, particularly within the Protestant/loyalist/unionist community. That has not manifested itself in any out workings at this point."*

The ACC added: *"If we get to the point where we don't have such stringent restrictions, where people are not as worried about the health crisis, we may see that manifest in the likes of protests, and we are prepared for that."*

This commentary contradicted reports received by the PSNI (as per points 5 and 7 above) regarding an “isolated incident” and heightened Council’s concerns for its officers.

10. The ACC’s comments were flagged to the Chief Executive as a matter of concern by a number of political representatives and staff. It was also raised that, at a grassroots level, there was growing discontent and some apprehensions were beginning to emerge about our staff at Larne Port.
11. Across the media, a number of senior politicians had made comments about underlying tensions in regard to the Protocol, referring to a “*powder keg*” and there being “*anger and bitterness*” in the community. Another senior politician said it was proper that the senior PSNI officer be measured in his comments, saying “*We do not need any trouble at a very difficult time.*”
12. The issue of threatening graffiti was raised by Elected Members with the PSNI at the meeting of Mid and East Antrim’s Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PSCP) on the evening of Wednesday 27 January. This was the first communication local PSNI had with Council representatives since the appearance of this graffiti the weekend prior.

An Elected Member specifically raised the matter of threatening graffiti at Larne Port, saying that “The graffiti at Larne Port threatened staff working the Border Posts.”

At the meeting, the local PSNI District Commander advised that PSNI deployments in terms of the EU exit were continuing and the area surrounding Larne Port was being monitored by the PSNI. He advised that an active investigation was ongoing, and intelligence had been gathered by the PSNI. He reassured Elected Members that there was no immediate threat.

13. Whilst Council welcomed that this matter was being investigated by the PSNI, we continued to keep this under review. The PSNI had referred to there being no “immediate threat” but, since no clarity or assurances were provided relating to threats in the forthcoming days, there was sufficient reason for Council concerns remaining heightened. Council did not have the luxury or capabilities to task resources to determine the credibility or veracity of information held by the PSNI regarding the ongoing situation.
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Thursday 28 January

14. The Chief Executive chaired what was the fifth meeting of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) NI EU Exit Task and Finish Working Group (which had initially met 14 December 2020).

The EU Working Group had been established a year previously and was previously chaired by the SOLACE policy officer. However, SOLACE decided it was appropriate that this meeting be chaired by a Council Chief Executive as the Protocol was now being implemented and this unforeseen development required strategic leadership at a senior level. Ms Donaghy was subsequently appointed Chair of the SOLACE-led EU Exit Task and Finish Working Group.

In order to prepare for day-one readiness and to sort out early operational issues in the implementation of the NI Protocol, the Chief Executive devoted a significant amount of time to this. Demonstrating her strong commitment to resolving issues surrounding the NI Protocol, she arranged and chaired five meetings within a matter of just a few weeks (between 14 December 2020 and 28 January 2021), with representation from across all 11 Councils in Northern Ireland.

Ms Donaghy had ensured that a DAERA representative and FSA representative were invited to these meetings as lead competent authorities, in order to deal with the early difficulties faced in implementing the Protocol.

These meetings were strategic, operational and non-political, and the Group's membership was made up of officers only. This body reported through to the SOLACE Chief Executives' meeting and did not report its work to any political body. Each individual Chief Executive was responsible for keeping their own respective Council up to date in relation to Brexit and EU exit matters, and no direction was given as to how this should be done.

At the EU Exit Task and Finish Working Group meeting on Thursday 28 January, the sinister graffiti was discussed by all stakeholders present. Whilst this item was not on the agenda - nor was it due to be raised due to the meeting being about the implementation of the NI Protocol - it was raised by the Chief Veterinary Officer. He advised that this was of concern to DAERA and updated that there was information to suggest that it was young people who were behind it.

There was widespread concern among those present at the appearance of this graffiti and the need for stakeholders to work together in addressing this was emphasised by the Chair and Dr Huey. Dr Huey stated that, "we needed to work together to counteract it and those behind it."

The Chair advised that ongoing talks at grassroots level suggested there was more behind this and felt that the situation was concerning generally. She stressed that the safety and wellbeing of staff remained a top priority at all times.

The Chief Executive, as Chair, advised the meeting that this matter should be taken offline due to its sensitive nature. She felt that this did not concern all of the 11 Councils present, since it was outside the scope and terms of reference of the Group - which was focused on the smooth implementation of the NI Protocol.

[Please see Appendix 5: SOLACE EU Exit Task & Finish Working Group, relevant extract from Minutes](#)

Friday 29 January

15. The Council Director responsible for Larne Port had a call with the PSNI local District Commander regarding the ongoing situation.

The Chief Executive was also contacted by a senior Department of Justice (DoJ) official, who requested feedback on what intelligence was emerging 'on the ground' in relation to the graffiti incident at Larne Port and what was happening at community/grassroots level.

During this conversation, the DoJ official referred to the previous day's meeting of the EU Exit Task and Finish Working Group, where it had been suggested that young people were responsible for the graffiti. However, he felt that it could be more sinister given the concerns raised by both DAERA officials and the Council.

The Chief Executive advised the official that she was not sure who had carried out the graffiti, but the fact that it was threatening was a very serious concern to Council in relation to our staff. She further explained, whilst this was very concerning, she had taken the advice of the PSNI, who had provided assurances that there was no immediate threat.

The DoJ official asked that the Chief Executive would come back to him with any intelligence that was brought to her attention from political or grassroots contacts in relation to the incident and what the feeling was on the ground. The Chief Executive advised she would be happy to do so, as Council had already reported the incident to the local PSNI and it was being investigated.

The Chief Executive confirmed to the DoJ official that she had been informed by a political representative, who had heard through grassroots contacts, that an individual may have been involved in the graffiti attack. This individual allegedly had a criminal record in relation to drug dealing offences, as well as potential links to organised crime. Ms Donaghy stressed that this information was alleged and had not been substantiated. The DoJ official suggested that this was more likely to be the case, as young people would not have a sufficient understanding of the wider context.

The political representative had advised the Chief Executive that a PSNI officer had referred to the graffiti incident as being a “sinister threat”.

(Having advised the DoJ official that she would be happy to discuss the wider situation at Larne Port further over the weekend if required, the Chief Executive attempted to call the DoJ official on Saturday 30 June. This call was not returned until the following Monday 01 February.

The Chief Executive updated senior members of Council staff and the Mayor on her conversation with the DoJ official.

16. Later that day (Friday 29 January), the Chief Executive was made aware by a member of Council staff that video footage that had been taken at Larne Port was posted on an anti-Protocol group on social media. This video footage clearly showed personal vehicles on the Larne Port site.

Please see Appendix 3: Screengrab of video footage taken of cars at Larne Port, which subsequently appeared on social media.



There were genuine concerns from the staff member at this evidenced filming of vehicles in Larne Port, which was giving rise to fears that number plates were being recorded.

Council staff raised their concerns through to the Council Director responsible that they had noticed the slowing down of cars at the Port and felt worried. Understandably, this added significantly to senior Council officers’ concerns about the safety and wellbeing of our staff at Larne Port.

Political representatives across Mid and East Antrim, who were in regular communication with community representatives and neighbourhood police, were also bringing these fears to the attention of the Chief Executive.

17. That day (Friday 29 January), the EU invoked Article 16, introducing controls on vaccines made in the bloc, including to Northern Ireland, amid a row about delivery shortfalls.

The First Minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster MLA, described the move as "*an incredible act of hostility*" by the EU and there was backlash from unionist parties and the Prime Minister.

This only served to further heighten Council's concerns. The Chief Executive raised this increased alarm to Council's senior team and to the Director responsible for Larne Port.

Saturday 30 and Sunday 31 January

18. Throughout the weekend, the Chief Executive made and received a number of communications from stakeholders regarding the ongoing situation at Larne Port - including the DAERA Minister, representatives from the PSNI (two calls), political representatives and senior officers within Council.
19. Political sources again raised reports that an individual suspected of involvement in the graffiti incidents was alleged to have links to organised crime gangs. It was claimed they were working without sanction or direction from others. With no evidence nor means to substantiate these alleged claims, the Chief Executive passed them to the PSNI for their attention.
20. There was a serious, unproven allegation made by a confidential source that a member of DAERA Port staff had been followed home and graffiti had appeared close to their home in East Belfast. The Chief Executive was informed that this information had been passed to the PSNI already and, therefore, didn't need reported to the PSNI by Council.
21. Such was her growing concern on Saturday 30 January, the Chief Executive attempted to contact the DAERA Permanent Secretary to seek clarification on this - however, the number she had was no longer in use when she tried to call. Ms Donaghy was furnished with his new number later that week, by the Permanent Secretary himself through his office.
22. Having not been able to reach the DAERA Permanent Secretary, the Chief Executive rang the DAERA Minister directly, seeking an update on his views on what was happening at Larne Port, and in relation to DAERA staff.

She advised the Minister that she had been made aware of a number of alleged but unconfirmed issues, as set out in this document. The Minister confirmed that he was aware of similar reports and advised the Chief Executive he would make the necessary checks through his contacts.

He said he had been informed of an allegation that staff number plates were being recorded at the Port, and an increase in stationary and slowing down vehicles had been observed at the Port. The Minister also advised that information had been received via Crimestoppers that a number of Port staff had been targeted.

It was relayed to the Chief Executive that threatening graffiti had appeared close to a DAERA worker's home in East Belfast - an incident which subsequently appeared in the media the following weekend.

Please see Appendix 4: Anti-Border graffiti sprayed near home of female Port worker.



The Chief Executive raised her concerns with the Minister specifically around Larne Port, highlighting that it has only one point of access and egress, and that it would be easy to monitor traffic, should those claims/concerns be factual. Ms Donaghy also pointed out that Council staff posted at the Port were all in their early 20s and this was, for most, their first professional job.

The Minister said he would remain in contact with the Chief Executive regarding the ongoing situation at Larne Port and from a DAERA perspective, as well as at the other NI ports.

23. Over the weekend, the Chief Executive spoke twice with Council's local PSNI District Commander and relayed the claims about alleged monitoring of staff and vehicle registrations and the potential video recording of vehicle registrations. She asked him if he had any further information on the validity of the threats and he confirmed that he was aware of these allegations.

Lack of clarity was growing, and initial reports suggesting that a young person was behind the graffiti had since progressed to suggestions that an individual with links to organised crime was behind the graffiti. Further to this, the DAERA Port worker in Belfast had received threats and staff had alleged that number plates being recorded at the Ports.

She also reported to him that she had been made aware of an allegation that individual Port staff were under threat. She updated that a Port worker had given her a specific example of an individual Port worker, employed by DAERA, who had felt very threatened and frightened when she had been followed home and graffiti was sprayed close to her home.

Ms Donaghy also informed the District Commander that she had been made aware of an alleged Crimestoppers report being lodged in relation to threats to a number of staff at Ports, as well as the alleged monitoring of vehicles.

At this stage the District Commander became guarded and replied: *"Some of my best information comes from Crimestoppers, and some of my worst information comes from Crimestoppers."* This offered no reassurance to the Chief Executive and, in fact, only added further to uncertainty.

She again summarised the information received, including threatening graffiti, claims around number plates being recorded and alleged involvement of individuals or small groups, possibly with links to organised crime.

The Chief Executive relayed to the District Commander that both she and Council staff were feeling under pressure due to the amount of concerning information that was amassing, and the lack of confirmation and communication from the PSNI surrounding the validity of this information. She asked for a full briefing of the situation as a matter of urgency.

24. The Chief Executive made the Mayor and senior Council staff aware of the latest information she had following her conversations with the Minister and PSNI and asked them to ensure strong lines of communication with staff at Larne Port throughout the weekend.
25. Council was now feeling deeply concerned for the safety and wellbeing of staff and continued to monitor the situation extremely closely.

Monday 1 February

26. The Chief Executive received information from political representatives about increasing tensions on the ground, and additional graffiti/signage that had appeared in the Borough during this weekend - including at the main roundabout near to the entrance to Larne Port.
27. That morning, the Chief Executive received a call from the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council, who said she had received a call from the DAERA Minister over the weekend in relation to Belfast Port.

Ms Donaghy shared her concerns with the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council in relation to Larne Port, highlighting there was only one way in and out of the Port. The Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim highlighted that she had received information from a number of sources over the weekend and had passed these to the PSNI and that she had not yet received clarity from the PSNI on the situation.

Ms Wylie highlighted that she found the whole situation very unusual. She felt that this was a very unique situation and that there was a lack of clarity from PSNI. Both Chief Executives agreed that concerning this situation was emerging fast.

Given the safety and political issues surrounding the Port, Ms Donaghy advised that she would request an urgent meeting with the DAERA Minister and officials, the FSA and representatives from Larne and Belfast Ports to enable both Councils to gain a wider and more in-depth understanding of the situation.

28. The Chief Executive emailed DAERA at 10.30am requesting this urgent meeting to discuss ongoing concerns around the health, safety and wellbeing of staff at the Ports. This meeting was arranged for 4.45pm that day, Monday 01 February.

Whilst this was short notice, the Chief Executive stressed that the meeting was urgent. She highlighted that she had spoken with her colleague, the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council, who also had concerns and who was happy to be part of the meeting to consider any implications in relation to Belfast Port. Ms Donaghy suggested that the DAERA Permanent Secretary and the FSA also be invited.

29. At around 12noon that day, the Chief Executive received a call from the same PSNI District Commander she had spoken to over the weekend, who informed her that the PSNI, having taken on board all of the information, would be deploying “extra crew in the vicinity of Larne Port”. This would include “enhanced beat patrols” and “monitoring of social media” over the next week.

The District Commander assured the Chief Executive that this would be the PSNI's top priority this week.

30. Since there was to be a full Council meeting that evening (Monday 01 February), the Chief Executive met the Mayor that afternoon, as is standard procedure. The Chief Executive briefed the Mayor on the latest information, impressing to him that she didn't believe this matter could be treated as a normal staffing issue due to the uniqueness of the situation.

Given the high level of contact the Chief Executive has as standard with Elected Members on the day of a full Council meeting (and the fact that over the past year of the pandemic the Group Party Leaders met as often as twice a week) and - being respectful of the Elected Member/officer working relationship - Ms Donaghy and the Mayor agreed that it would be prudent to update and take soundings from the Group Party Leaders confidentially.

This would also serve to gain a steer from them regarding the course of action they felt most appropriate, and to take their soundings around grassroots and community sentiment in advance of the full Council meeting later that evening.

31. At 1.45pm on Monday 01 February, Council's Head of Human Resources received an email from a major Trade Union.

This email outlined concerns for staff safety at Larne Port, noting that staff "*appear to have been threatened via graffiti and potentially other methods*" - the trade union did not specify which these "other methods" were.

The Trade Union added that they "*hope to hear from you soon on how the employer is intending to address these potentially very serious threats*".

The Head of Human resources responded to the Trade Union to acknowledge receipt of this email and to assure them that their concerns would be discussed with Group Party Leaders, and at full Council later that evening.

32. At around 2.30pm, the Chief Executive had a second telephone conversation with the PSNI District Commander. He updated the Chief Executive that the PSNI had a resource plan in place for the area surrounding Larne Port that included an "uplift in resources," and "an increase in way markers". He said the PSNI would continue to liaise with DAERA, alongside engaging with UK Border Force on a bi-weekly basis.

The Chief Executive advised the PSNI District Commander that she was soon to meet with Group Party Leaders and urgently requested a PSNI threat assessment. It later emerged that, on a call with DAERA official, an Assistant Chief Constable agreed to share a formal written threat assessment the next day (Tuesday 02 February).

33. At 3.15pm, a meeting of the Group Party Leaders took place. All Group Party Leaders meetings are confidential. The role of the group is advisory, acting as a strategic sounding board on a wide range of Council matters. Due to the sensitivities around this particular issue, it was reaffirmed in the meeting agenda that the matter for discussion was confidential.

The Chief Executive briefed the Group Party Leaders and Mayor in full, providing them with a detailed update on the information that had been assimilated to date. The Chief Executive reinforced there were mixed messages and ambiguity in the detail of some of the facts from the range of key stakeholders, and that the information she was sharing was yet to be fully substantiated by the PSNI.

However, she advised them that whilst the PSNI hadn't yet substantiated this information, they had earlier confirmed rising tensions at grassroots level within the PUL community. PSNI had also confirmed that they were increasing resources at Larne Port, but Members felt a much stronger response from PSNI was needed since community tensions could escalate quickly.

Having discussed the matter, the Group Party Leaders were unanimous, with cross-party support, in their view that the safety of staff was paramount and felt that staff should be withdrawn temporarily until the matter was resolved by securing a much better understanding of the level of threat to staff.

It was agreed that this could only be achieved through a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI as the expert authority, and that this would be a recommendation put to full Council later that evening.

34. Following this meeting, the Chief Executive updated the Council Director with responsibility for Port staff that it was the Group Party Leaders' recommendation that staff be temporarily withdrawn pending a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI, however, this was subject to Council ratification at the meeting later that evening.

The Chief Executive and Director discussed any potential impact this action may have on the services delivered and on staff. They both agreed that the potential impact on service delivery was considered low and, when it came to staff, a "better safe than sorry", precautionary approach was the only approach to take - given that they had expressed concerns and were feeling vulnerable in the current situation.

They agreed that the only way to confirm this was through a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI. They anticipated that this would provide the reassurance required promptly, so that - if Elected Members decided to withdraw Port staff that evening - they could be restored to their posts as soon as possible.

The Chief Executive asked the Director to be prepared to withdraw staff, pending Council ratification at the meeting that evening.

35. Shortly afterwards, the Chief Executive and Director with responsibility for Larne Port were informed by Council staff that DAERA had advised their Port staff not to travel to Larne Port in their own vehicles if they did not feel comfortable. DAERA Port staff were told that alternative transport, from Loughry College campus (DAERA), was being arranged and that this was for their reassurance. It was later confirmed that this direction was provided by DAERA's Chief Veterinary Officer.

This further reinforced to the Chief Executive and Director that there were sufficient grounds for concern about the safety and wellbeing of Council staff at Larne Port, and further emphasised the need for a formal written threat assessment from the PSNI.

36. At 4.45pm on Monday 01 February, the meeting with the DAERA Minister took place. This was attended by Council's Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services; the SOLACE Policy Officer; representatives of Belfast City Council; the FSA and DEARA.

The Minister advised those in attendance that he had looked into the matter and was satisfied that concerns around Larne and Belfast Ports were real. He was "dismayed to hear" what he'd "heard on the ground."

Minister Poots said he was "quite angry" that some information had not been brought forward to him before by the PSNI, saying that he felt that the situation was "unacceptable".

He reminded attendees that he had a duty of care to his DAERA staff, reiterating that so, too, did the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council and Chief Executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council to their own Council staff.

The Minister said he had noted ACC McEwan's comments at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee the week before (see above at point 9), at which the ACC acknowledged the appearance of graffiti near the Ports and "growing discontent" within the PUL community.

Ms Donaghy updated the meeting about a number of concerns raised to Council over the past week, saying that she had just that morning received an email from a major Trade Union expressing their concern about staff at Larne Port.

Alongside additional graffiti appearing close to the Port over the weekend, she advised that local sources had warned about potential information gathering exercises, including the recording of vehicle registrations as they entered and left Larne Port.

Ms Donaghy advised that Group Party Leaders within Mid and East Antrim Borough Council were of the view that a "safe, not sorry" precautionary approach should be adopted.

She updated that, at a meeting that afternoon, Group Party Leaders had unanimously agreed that a recommendation be brought to full Council later that evening that staff should be temporarily withdrawn from the Port with immediate effect, pending a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI.

This would be the first order of business at the full Council meeting later that evening and would be held in closed session, to facilitate full and thorough debate and questioning by Elected Members.

Ms Donaghy stressed that Council urgently required confirmation from the PSNI of the level of threat in the form of a comprehensive formal written threat assessment, so that a way forward could be planned. This was echoed by the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council.

The Chief Executive of Belfast City Council then updated the meeting on the situation at Belfast Port, noting that graffiti around Belfast Port was political in nature and not specific to staff, which was not the case in Larne. However, she said that the graffiti was still of great concern to Belfast City Council.

The DAERA Minister advised the meeting that information received via Crimestoppers suggested that a number of members of Port staff were being targeted (see Point 22 above). Ms Donaghy confirmed that she had been informed of the same from various sources and had passed this information to the PSNI at the weekend.

The Chief Executive of Belfast City Council said it was concerning that such things were going on and that information was being withheld by the PSNI from those responsible for the workings of the process.

The Minister agreed that it was “appalling” that the Councils had not been updated fully on the situation, referring to this as “a dereliction of duty” on the part of the PSNI.

The DAERA Permanent Secretary pointed out that he and the Department had a low tolerance for health and safety risks.

The DAERA Chief Veterinary Officer advised the meeting that, first thing that morning (Monday 01 February), he had informed DAERA Port staff that if they didn't feel comfortable they did not have to attend work in their cars for the time being.

He updated that he had advised the EU Commission of the issues that morning as well, since they had staff present at the Port also. (Disappointingly, however, Council had not been advised of this directly by DAERA - instead, being informed by a member of Council staff at Larne Port).

The Chief Veterinary Officer agreed that an assessment of the threat faced was required urgently and that this was a job for the PSNI.

The DAERA Minister noted that the feedback he had received from political representatives was that there was at least some paramilitary involvement in the issues.

Ms Donaghy expressed her alarm at learning that a PSNI Gold Command Group (SKIES OP) had been set up to deal with risks and threats relating to the Ports, and that Councils had not been included within this Group. Her previous experience of Gold Command operations suggested that this was a serious incident requiring strategic PSNI leadership at the most senior level.

For reference: The generic command structure, nationally recognised, accepted and used by the police, other emergency services and partner agencies, is based on the gold, silver, bronze (GSB) hierarchy of command and can be applied to the resolution of both spontaneous incidents and planned operations.

This structure provides a framework for delivering a strategic, tactical and operational response to an incident or operation. It also allows processes to be established that facilitate the flow of information and ensures that decisions are communicated effectively and documented as part of an audit trail.

The gold commander assumes and retains overall command for the operation or incident. They have overall responsibility and authority for the gold strategy and any tactical parameters that silver or bronze commanders should follow.

Ms Donaghy expressed concern that such a senior-level approach within the PSNI was obviously deemed necessary, but was happening outside of the knowledge, or indeed involvement, of the Councils.

The Chief Executive of Belfast City Council agreed that it would be important that the issues discussed today would be raised at the Gold Command meeting the next day.

The Permanent Secretary felt it was important that the Councils now joined the Gold Command Group.

(Note: Having voiced this concern that Council, as a key partner and stakeholder had not been privy to the discussions of this group, Council was invited to future meetings and was represented from 02 February onwards).

The Minister once again advised that he was concerned that information was not being passed on to the relevant stakeholders by the PSNI and that it was an “intolerable situation to be in”. He said he was “fundamentally unhappy” with how the PSNI conducted the matter.

37. Following this meeting, the situation at Larne Port was brought to Full Council at 6.30pm on Monday 01 February.

[See Appendix 6: Mid and East Antrim Full Council Minutes of 01st February 2021, relevant extract from Minutes.](#)

This matter was discussed in closed meeting by all 39 Elected Members present due to the obvious sensitives and to allow Elected Members to fully debate and ask the relevant questions of the Chief Executive.

On eight separate occasions during the Council meeting, the Chief Executive advised Elected Members that she was very unclear as to the veracity of the high volume of information received within the space of a few days.

Ms Donaghy updated that this was all she had been advised of. The fact that a Gold Command had been set up by the PSNI to deal with risks and threats at the Ports further reinforced the seriousness of the situation.

She added that the fact that she did not know the full extent and detail of everything, was part of the reason why she felt that a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI was so critical at this juncture.

Throughout the closed Council meeting, the Chief Executive responded to Elected Members' queries and questions, and all Members had every opportunity to seek clarity or ask whatever specific questions they wished to raise.

One Elected Member stated that the safety of Council's staff was paramount and referred to the previous week's PCSP meeting, which was attended by seven Elected Members that make up the MEAB PCSP. At this meeting the PSNI had been questioned by a number of these Elected Members directly on the issue and responded to their queries, advising that there was no threat.

All seven of the PCSP Elected Members were present at the Full Council meeting and had the opportunity to query the issues that had been presented since the PCSP meeting, and to question the Chief Executive on the matters prior to making a decision on the matter and to determine what had changed in the intervening period.

When an elected member at the full Council meeting asked if there was paramilitary involvement, the Chief Executive informed that she did not know the source of the threat.

She reiterated that the reason why a formal PSNI written threat assessment was being requested was that she did not know and had no way of finding out the validity of the allegations other than through the PSNI.

She advised that she did know that the situation had initially been accredited to young people, but that this had changed and that messages received were extremely mixed over the previous few days.

The meeting openly debated the issue at length for around 40 minutes in closed Council, during which a number of Elected Members from across the political spectrum engaged in the debate.

At the end of this, all unanimously agreed with a recommendation - put forward by the DUP and seconded by Alliance - that Council's staff be temporarily withdrawn from Larne Port duties with immediate effect until a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI was received, and Council's own risk assessment could be completed following this.

The decision was agreed by representatives of the DUP, Sinn Fein, SDLP, UUP, Alliance, TUV and independents. All Elected Members present were in agreement with the recommendation.

When the decision was made by Elected Members, Council's Director responsible immediately contacted a senior member of staff in her team at 7.24pm to inform them of Council's decision.

She directed that the 12 EHOs be temporarily removed from the site, pending the formal written PSNI threat assessment and completion of Council's risk assessment. The staff on shift at the time were due to finish at 8.20pm, with the evening shift due to begin 20 minutes previously at 8.00pm.

The removal of staff from Larne Port was always intended to be temporary and was invoked explicitly pending a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI. Council believed that this formal written threat assessment by the PSNI would be returned promptly - possibly even within 24 hours, given that Gold Command was already established.

It was made clear that, if the formal written threat assessment by the PSNI gave the necessary reassurance and Council's own risk assessment found the same, staff could be returned to their duties at Larne Port as soon as possible.

The Director responsible also updated the FSA on the position that evening.

38. Later that evening (Monday 01 February), DAERA announced it was temporarily suspending physical inspections of products of animal origin at Larne and Belfast Ports. No formal communication of this was received by Council from DAERA - the Council learned about this in the media.
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Tuesday 02 - Friday 05 February

39. The Line Manager of Council's 12 EHOs maintained daily communications with the staff involved that week, keeping them informed and reiterating that their safety was Council's utmost priority. Since there was a lot of media attention around this issue, it was important to keep staff reassured.

The staff were informed they would only return to Larne Port once the formal PSNI written threat assessment was received, and Council's own risk assessment completed. This gave the necessary reassurance needed at this time by the staff and their families.

40. On Tuesday 02 February, DAERA emailed their staff at Larne Port reassuring them that they and UK Border Force were engaging with the PSNI to ensure their health, safety and welfare, which they said was their priority.

41. Throughout this week, there were a number of attacks on the offices of political representatives in Mid and East Antrim and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Alongside this, numerous media reports cited the Loyalist Communities Council, who reportedly said it may be necessary to *"fight physically to maintain our freedoms within the UK."*

Please see [Appendix 7: Incidents of graffiti appeared elsewhere in Northern Ireland, claiming that Port staff in Belfast and Larne were targets.](#)



42. At a meeting of the Gold Command SKIES OP on Tuesday 02 February, the PSNI advised that a threat assessment was already in place and there was no threat. However, having been pushed on the matter by Council (in light of the instructions given by Elected Members at the Full Council meeting the previous evening), the

PSNI agreed to provide a formal written threat assessment for the organisations involved in the Port duties. The PSNI said they would have it issued within the next few hours - or, at the very latest, the next morning. Each organisation also agreed to undertake their own risk assessments at Larne and Belfast Ports upon receipt of this.

43. On Tuesday 02 February, the PA news agency quoted PSNI Assistant Chief Constable McEwan, who said police believed disgruntled individuals or small groups were behind the activity in Larne.

ACC McEwan was quoted as saying: *“We were able to share with partners our assessment today that there is absolutely no information to substantiate or corroborate the claims made that paramilitary organisations are involved or behind threats or intimidation to staff at points of entry.”*

He added: *“We are concerned about the actions of a number of individuals and small groups. We don’t believe that those actions are organised. But they do give us cause for concern.”*

44. The Chief Executive noted this update but advised the PSNI that Council still required a formal written threat assessment in order to develop Council’s own risk assessment. Council had made it clear from the outset, that a formal written threat assessment was the necessary assurance needed before staff could be returned to Larne Port.

45. Council’s requirement for this formal, written threat assessment was not only a matter of good governance, but was a regulatory and legal obligation on the part of the Council, as per the *Health and Safety at Work Order (NI) 1978*, which states:

Mid & East Antrim Borough Council, as an employer, has a Duty of Care to ensure as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all its employees which includes Agency and temporary workers. It is this Order which imposes these duties on the Council, and which must be complied with.

In addition, the Council must then ensure risks to staff have been identified with preventative and protective arrangements put in place, as required by the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (NI) 2000*. These Regulations are mandatory and require the Council to undertake a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of its employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work.

46. On Wednesday 03 February, Council again asked for the formal written threat assessment and was told by the PSNI that they were working on this and intended to make it available that afternoon. The fact that this then did not come forth that day as indicated only raised concerns further within Council.

47. By the morning of Thursday 04 February, the PSNI's formal written threat assessment had still not been delivered to Council. A senior Council officer emailed the relevant PSNI ACC expressing Council's disappointment that this was still outstanding.

This was an extremely worrying time for Council and, given the seriousness of the situation, rising tensions and the length of time Port staff had now been out of post, the Chief Executive felt it necessary to escalate this delay to the Office of the Chief Constable of the PSNI.

Ms Donaghy spoke with the Chief Constable's Office twice on Thursday 04 February to stress the urgency of the delivery of the completed formal written threat assessment. She also expressed her disappointment at the long delay in receiving this critical document - which, in itself, had led to further concern within Council, and particularly among Elected Members.

48. Following this intervention, the Chief Executive received the formal written threat assessment from the PSNI by email at 2.09pm that day (Thursday 04 February).

The PSNI explicitly stated in writing that this threat assessment was a restricted document and must not be shared.

49. The Chief Executive immediately met with Council's Director responsible for Larne Port to discuss the PSNI formal written threat assessment, which considered carefully in producing Council's own risk assessment.

Mindful of the fact that the PSNI's formal written threat assessment was broad and general, the Chief Executive and Director carefully considered the range of issues that were very specific to Larne Port.

Council's risk assessment was then shared with Port staff, Council's health and safety team and the Trade Unions. This included one of the Environmental Health Officers, who is a Trade Union representative.

50. The PSNI formal written threat assessment and Council's own risk assessment were now in place, and both documents deemed the risk to Port staff to be minimal.

Council had introduced all necessary mitigations - including additional safety precautions to be followed by staff, both when arriving to and leaving their place of work, and on their journey to and from work. Staff were also instructed only to wear high vis jackets and MEA-branded clothing within the secure boundary of Larne Harbour to avoid identifying themselves outside of these confines.

Council had fulfilled the instructions of Elected Members from the full Council meeting on 01 February. On that basis, at 3.34pm on Friday 05 February, the Chief Executive directed the return of the staff to Larne Port with immediate effect.

Ms Donaghy gave the staff Council's commitment that we would continue to review and monitor the situation closely, reiterating that their safety remained the utmost priority of Council. The Trade Unions were also kept updated throughout this time.

(Following concerns raised by the Trade Unions with regards to the content of the Mayor's statement, read out at the full Council meeting on 01 February, the Mayor, Chief Executive and Council Director later met with the Trade Union Officials on 26 February. Clarification was provided, and Trade Union were content with the previously amended statement of the Mayor. The meeting was constructive and positive and Council are continuing to work with Trade union side to improve our communications going forward).

51. All Group Party Leaders had been kept regularly updated on the progress of the PSNI formal written threat assessment throughout that week, and had shown an eagerness to have the staff returned, provided that the PSNI's threat assessment and Council's own risk assessment gave the necessary reassurances that it was safe to do so.

The Chief Executive updated the Mayor and Group Party Leaders by email on Friday 05 February at 16.59 that this was now being actioned. The email stated:

"In relation to Larne Port, I would advise that Council's Risk Assessment is now complete, following receipt and consideration of the Threat Assessment from the PSNI. Council Officers will return to their work location as of tonight. The Threat Assessment and Risk Assessment are both confidential documents and will not be circulated. The staff and Trade Unions have been communicated with. The health, safety and wellbeing of our staff remains a high priority and thus the risk assessment will be kept under continuous review".

Saturday 06 February onwards

52. The weekend immediately following the return of staff to Larne Port (Saturday 06 February and Sunday 07 February), third party contractors appointed by Council withdrew themselves from their work removing graffiti following intimidation.

Council officers liaised with the PSNI regarding sinister communications that had been received directly by the two contractors, warning them to stop removing graffiti. As a result, one contractor decided not to return to carry out these duties.

The other returned under a number of conditions, including a significantly increased cost to reflect the increased threat and risk, and required the presence of the PSNI for the duration of his company's works to remove graffiti.

The Chief Executive requested an updated PSNI formal written threat assessment based on this, which was received on Monday 08 February.

On that afternoon, an ACC came back to advise that the PSNI does not undertake risk assessments on behalf of partners, but advised that there was no change to the PSNI's current formal written threat assessment.

53. That weekend PSNI arrested and charged two males on eight counts of criminal damage (graffiti) in the Larne area.
54. Over the following 10 days, there were a number of further graffiti incidents across Mid and East Antrim directed at the Northern Ireland Protocol, some of which contained threats to staff.

Please see Appendix 8: Further sinister and threatening graffiti appearing in Mid and East Antrim, showing cross hairs, at the roundabout entering Larne.



55. Council continued to provide PSNI with updated information as it emerged and were assured that they would continue to update their threat assessment on an ongoing basis.
56. On Thursday 18 February, the Chief Executive was informed by elected representatives and staff that screenings were being erected at Larne Port by DAERA on the request of staff, in an apparent attempt to prevent vehicles and/or staff from being observed from outside of the site.

Please see Appendix 9: Screening being erected at Larne Port by DAERA



This, understandably, caused significant apprehension - particularly since Council had been reassured by the PSNI that there was minimal threat to Port staff.

The Chief Executive immediately contacted the DAERA Permanent Secretary to ask why this was done and why Council wasn't informed - yet again, disappointing that DAERA had not communicated directly with Council.

Council also contacted the local PSNI District Commander to ask why there continued to be such a delay to the requested updated PSNI written threat assessment. Our staff were due to travel to newly erected facilities at the Port, which sits alongside the DAERA facilities, the following Monday and noted the erection of the screening at DAERA sites but none at the new Council facilities.

57. A number of Elected Members and staff had also raised concerns at the continued 24/7, high-visibility police presence at Larne Port.

The Chief Executive was informed that two PSNI response cars had been static at Larne Port, and any additional cars not attending to other business, were asked to default to the Port. This had raised apprehension at local level and a local Port worker said "in all my years at the Port, I have never seen such a significant police presence."

This was reaffirmed at the PSCP meeting on Wednesday 24 March, when PSNI advised that 2,464 standard hours and 391 overtime hours had been allocated to Larne Port

over the previous two months. Such extensive PSNI resources and mitigations contradicted the PSNI's assurances that the threat to staff was minimal from the beginning.

Elected Members and Council Staff also noticed the erection of a security hut and the appointment of G4S and they were advised this was implemented by DEARA for the protection of their staff. It is understood that this service is 24/7.

58. On 28 February, North Antrim MLA Phillip McGuigan condemned separate "reckless and sectarian" graffiti aimed at a Sinn Fein Councillor for Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Ian Friary, in Ahoghill. The graffiti featured Mr Friary's name and Sinn Fein with the crosshairs of a gun beside them, along with the message "no Irish Sea border" and the sectarian slogan 'KAT'.

[See Appendix 10: Graffiti displaying cross hairs and the name of a Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Elected Representative](#)



Mr McGuigan said police had contacted Mr Friary on Sunday 28 February "to warn him of a threat against his life."

"The threat comes after reckless, despicable and sectarian graffiti appeared in Ahoghill Village targeting Councillor Friary over the weekend," the Sinn Fein MLA said.

Mr McGuigan said the threats and graffiti were *"clearly an attempt by loyalist gangs to stoke up sectarian tensions in the area and instil fear into the local community"*.

This graffiti was very similar in nature to the graffiti that had been directed towards Port staff previously.

Please see Appendix 11: The same cross hairs icon used to threaten staff as used against Elected Representative at Appendix 10.



59. On Wednesday 24 February, Council was made aware through an Elected Member of an allegation that a member of Port staff (not MEABC) had been informed of a threat to his personal safety over the weekend of Saturday 06 and 07 February. It was alleged that this Port worker and his family had been moved from their home during that weekend by the NI Housing Executive on the instruction of the PSNI.

This Port worker was allegedly working in Larne Port in the week leading up to this, Monday 01 - Friday 05 February - the period in which Council staff had been temporarily withdrawn from and returned to duties at Larne Port.

(This had never been discussed with Council at the Gold Command SKIE OPS meetings Council had been attending from 02 February onwards - which, again, led to Council concern that it was not being fully informed of all relevant information by the PSNI).

On the evening of Wednesday 24 February, Council's Director tried to contact the PSNI District Commander to inform him of this alleged information regarding the Port worker.

The District Commander came back the following morning (Thursday 25 February) to advise that PSNI had no knowledge of this alleged incident. He had escalated this to ACC level, who subsequently confirmed to the District Commander that the threat assessment had not changed.

That morning, Thursday 25 February, Council's Director emailed the Assistant Chief Constable on the matter and no response was, or since has, been received.

However, it subsequently transpired, through the media and political representatives, that this allegation, in their opinion was true: the member of staff concerned was removed from his home (please see point 64 below).

60. Following this incident, the PSNI requested Council to escalate all correspondence relating to Larne Port to Assistant Chief Constable level, and Council subsequently included the ACC in all communications with PSNI from 25 February onwards.
61. However, on Friday 05 March, Council was then asked not to escalate information to ACC level and, instead, direct any communications to the PSNI local District Commander, who could then flag them with senior officers if required.
62. On this same date (Friday 05 March) and prior to the PSNI notifying us of this decision, Council was advised that the erection of a banner in Larne, which the PSNI clarified was being treated as a “hate incident”. This categorisation was met with an angry response by Elected Members and the wider unionist community, who expressed their disagreement on social media channels with the PSNI statement.
63. The Chief Executive emailed the Gold Command ACC at 11.48am on Friday 19 March regarding a query received by Council from a journalist in relation to the aforementioned Port worker (who had allegedly been removed from their home on the weekend of 06/07 February).

The Chief Executive asked if this could be substantiated and, if so, requested written assurances that this matter had been given due consideration by the PSNI and reflected within its most recent threat assessment.

Disappointingly, a direct response to this email was not received until 10 days later, on Tuesday 30 March (see below, at point 67.) relating to the claim from a journalist about a port worker being removed from their home.

Later that day, at 4.19pm, Gold Command emailed all partners to advise that the original formal written threat assessment that had been shared by email on Thursday 04 February remained unchanged.

64. The alleged incident concerning the personal safety of this member of Port staff (not a Council employee) was featured on the front page of the *News Letter* on Saturday 20 March, detailing how this individual had in fact been “put out of his home”. This same article contained quotes from senior elected representatives who voiced their serious concerns around these allegations and the safety of staff at Larne Port.

[Please see Appendix 12: Article from the Belfast News Letter of 20th March, detailing how and individual and their family was put out of their Home.](#)

65. On Saturday 27 March, the *Belfast Telegraph* published an in-depth analysis of the situation surrounding the Irish Sea Border by its Crime Correspondent, Allison Morris. Entitled “Anger is growing...the real danger is no one is listening”, the article’s subheading read: “The Irish Sea border has led to a ratcheting-up of tensions in loyalist communities. But how big a threat do the main paramilitary organisations pose?”

Ms Morris explained how the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando - represented by the Loyalist Communities Council - had withdrawn support for the Good Friday Agreement earlier in March, in a protest letter sent to PM Boris Johnston over the Irish Sea border.

The article then went on to quote Reverend Mervyn Gibson - a former member of the RUC and senior member of the Orange Order, whom Ms Morris described as “a man known to have an ear to the ground in working-class loyalist communities.” Reverend Gibson was quoted as saying: “I think things are getting worse by the day as people realise the reality of what the Protocol means. Anger is growing, but the real danger is that no one is listening.”

Having referred to “an escalation in activity” by facets of the UDA, the article went on to quote a senior UDA member, who said: “If the Protocol doesn’t go, if politics fails us again, what will we do? New targets being talked about are EU and Irish Nationalist targets.”

Also quoted was a senior UVF source, who said that “if it was necessary” they would take the organisation back onto “a more militant footing.”

Another senior UVF source referred to growing frustration across the organisation in relation to the Irish Sea border, saying that “low level violent actions are almost inevitable” and that “there is a real danger that this could then spiral.”

66. Over the weekend of Saturday 20 and Sunday 21 March, the Chief Executive heard reports from a number of sources that flags and posters had been erected at Belfast Port and were causing some disruption to services.

The matter was discussed at the SKIES Ops meeting on 22 March and it was confirmed that flags and posters were erected at the outer boundary of the Port, and that there were some slow car passes and cars stopping, with individuals taking photos/videos on the Friday evening and Saturday afternoon. At this meeting the PSNI also advised that there was no change to the written threat assessment.

Subsequent to this meeting on the 22 March, the Chief Executive received reports from staff and political representatives that physical inspections and identity checks

were stood down at Belfast Port for a 24-hour period (20/21 March) because of security concerns.

A further clarification was sought by Council from the PSNI on this matter to enable Council to consider if any additional mitigations needed to be put in place for Port staff in Larne. Gold Command advised that the matter was not a PSNI issue, but an independent decision taken by one of the partners and suggested that Council raise their query with them.

Subsequently, a senior Council officer contacted DAERA and the official advised that, as a result of the activity, the Harbour Police and PSNI increased their presence in Belfast Port over that weekend.

The DAERA official updated that some staff at Belfast Port decided to withdraw temporarily from visible frontline duties from the Saturday night until the Monday morning, and that DAERA were working on a security review of Belfast Duncrue Street to ensure that they are prepared for a range of security scenarios.

The Chief Superintendent again confirmed in writing that there had been no change to the PSNI's formal written threat assessment during its review.

67. Later that day (Tuesday 30 March), Council received a second correspondence from the same PSNI Chief Superintendent, responding to Council's email to an Assistant Chief Constable on Friday 19 March in relation to a member of Port Staff being forced to leave their home (see above, at point 63).

The Chief Superintendent advised that the PSNI could not comment on specific issues on an individual's personal security but reaffirmed that keeping people safe is its priority.

The Chief Superintendent stressed that the safety and confidence of staff working at points of entry is of utmost importance to the PSNI. He said that the PSNI continued to work with and listen to partners to assist them in supporting and reassuring their staff. He encouraged Council and its staff to report anything of concern to the PSNI immediately.

The Chief Superintendent advised Council that the PSNI recognised the current level of community tension regarding the implications of EU Exit and continued to monitor the situation. He assured Council that the threat assessment recently shared with Council remained current, and that the PSNI were keeping this under "continual review" and would notify partners of any change to this situation.

68. On Thursday 01 April, the BBC published an analysis by its Ireland correspondent, Emma Vardy entitled "Brexit: Counting the cost of the Irish Sea border". The managing director of a local haulage firm was quoted as commending staff at the

Ports for “working with transport companies to try to minimise inspection times on arrival when they can, saying that they “must be commended for their time and effort.”

However, Ms Vardy went on to refer to border control posts at the Ports as being “one of the most contentious focal points of all”, referring to “resentment scrawled in graffiti on walls” and “placards spelling out loyalists’ opposition” being cable-tied to lamp posts outside Northern Ireland’s ports.

In the same article, we heard how a lorry was directed to a border post which turned out to be too small and nearly became wedged. This was a result of a halt in the building of new border posts “amid political opposition”.

69. Elected Members advised - having heard from grass roots contacts - that protests in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol were being planned for the Friday 09 and Saturday 10 April.

The Director contacted the PSNI to ask if they had any information on this. They advised there was to be a planned protest and a SKIES Ops meeting was scheduled for the 09 April to update on this.

Prior to this meeting, at 3.00 pm on 09 April, the Department for Communities informed Council that it was closing the Offices in Larne from 4pm on 09 April until 6am Sunday 11 April due to “civil disturbances”.

This meant that Council Port Staff had to work from home during this closure period where they continued to carry out documentation checks until the day shift started at 8am on Sunday 11 April. Therefore it was not possible for any identification or seal checks could be carried out for fifty hours, which was a similar situation and had similar implications to the temporary withdrawal of Larne Port staff on 01 February.

70. The current position (as at the date of submission of this written evidence, 12noon on Friday 16 April 2021) is:

- In terms of staffing at the Ports, there is no confirmation of funding beyond the end of the year and there is an expectation of an increased staffing model;
- Arrangements for the permanent facilities at Larne Port are delayed to 2023;
- The details around charging or not for SPS checks have not been bottomed out;
- Governance arrangements remain unclear in terms of the Lead Competent Authority on accountability and performance.

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?

71. The information was gathered from a wide range of stakeholders, including political representatives via grass roots contacts, staff and neighbourhood policing contacts, Council and port staff and DAERA. All information was forwarded to the PSNI to be considered in the formulation of its formal written threat assessment.
72. As such, during the period 22 January 2021- 01 February 2021, Council Officers had seven calls with the PSNI, to discuss the ongoing situation and raise concerns about the safety of Council staff working at Larne Port.

[Please see Appendix 13 for a detailed log of these calls.](#)

There were six calls with the PSNI Local District Commander and one with a Regional PSNI Officer. In addition to this, Elected Members questioned the District Commander on the threatening graffiti at Larne Port at the monthly Mid and East Antrim PCSP meeting on the 27 January.

73. The decision to withdraw staff was made by the Elected Members of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, with unanimous, cross-party support at the full Council meeting on Monday 01 February.
74. The decision to return the staff was taken by the Chief Executive on Friday 05 February, following confirmation from Council's Director that Council's own risk assessment had been completed, taking into consideration feedback from staff, Trade Unions and Council's health and safety section.

This risk assessment had given due consideration to the PSNI's formal written threat assessment which meant that Council's risk assessment also assessed the risk to staff at the Port to be minimal. This decision was based on the fact that all mitigations had been identified and put in place, as instructed by the Elected Members on Monday 01 February.

75. Group Party Leaders were kept regularly updated on the progress of the requested PSNI formal written threat assessment. Group Party Leaders had requested that they be issued with a copy of the PSNI's formal written threat assessment. However, the PSNI made it clear in writing when sending the document that it was restricted and not for further sharing.
- It was therefore incumbent on the Chief Executive to implement the decision of Council and consider Council's risk assessment on the basis of the information provided by the PSNI's restricted formal written threat assessment.

Although the Chief Executive could not share the PSNI's formal written threat assessment, Council had clearly directed at the Council meeting that staff would be returned as soon as the PSNI's formal threat assessment was received, and Council had considered this in developing its own risk assessment to give the necessary reassurances that it was safe to return. On this basis, when Council's risk assessment was completed, the priority was to immediately return staff to their working location.

The decision to return staff was made on this basis as directed by the Full Council and subsequently endorsed by Group Party Leaders on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

This was communicated by email to the Mayor and Group Party Leaders at 4.59pm on Friday 05 February and subsequently the trade unions, the FSA and the Minister - all prior to the staff returning to their duties at Larne Port later that evening.

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

76. Northern Ireland's 11 Councils sit within 11 very different geographical areas - within which there are many different communities and neighbourhoods, each with their own unique demographic, socio-economic and political environments.

It is incumbent upon each Council to consider these unique factors and circumstances when making important decisions within their own respective boroughs and to act in the best interests of the staff, citizens, communities and businesses involved. Each Council must also conduct and act upon its own individual risk assessments.

Larne Port and the surrounding area is unique in its set up and differs greatly from Belfast Port and the surrounding area - the overriding difference being that Larne Port benefits from just one point of access and egress, whereas there are multiple routes in and out of Belfast Port.

Unlike Larne, Council staff at Belfast Port are also based in a compound, which brings an added layer of security. From January to the present, Larne Port staff are not within the confines of Larne Harbour and do not benefit from the reassurance brought by the infrastructure and security measures found within a harbour environment.

The makeup of the communities and hinterlands surrounding both Ports are very different also, in terms of challenges and tensions on the ground.

77. Furthermore - and as clarified by the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council at our joint meeting with the DAERA Minister on Monday 01 February - the graffiti in Belfast was directed at political parties. In Larne, on the other hand, it was targeted directly at Port staff - saying that "All Port Staff are targets" - and was clearly positioned to be visible by staff on their way to and from work at the Port.

78. In summary, the circumstances surrounding Larne Port were unique, requiring bespoke and targeted action by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Whilst Mid and East Antrim strongly advocates for collaborative working relationships with the 10 other Councils in Northern Ireland, a 'one size fits all' approach in this instance simply would not have been acceptable.

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.

79. Council's first priority is and always will be the safety of staff, and it was vital given the concerns being communicated from a range of stakeholders that the level, credibility and source of any threat be determined by the relevant expert authority, i.e. the PSNI.

Given what was at stake - and in line with good governance and our legal and regulatory obligations concerning the health and safety of staff - verbal assurances alone would not suffice. Therefore, Council rightly requested a formal written threat assessment by the PSNI on the situation. This would be key for Council's decision-making process when completing its own risk assessment.

Council was incredibly disappointed to have to wait for such a long period of time for the formal written threat assessment to be completed by the PSNI, despite having assurances that this was already in place and would be issued within a few hours of being told verbally that the risk was minimal.

The Chief Executive eventually had to escalate this to the PSNI Chief Constable's office, twice, to have this delivered, after three days had passed.

In total, Council made five requests over the three days in order to receive the PSNI formal written threat assessment. Mixed messages were being communicated by the PSNI when Council were informed at the Gold Command meeting of 02 February, and that "the threat assessment was already in place and there was no threat". They agreed to provide a formal written threat assessment "within the next few hours".

On Wednesday 03 February at a further Gold SKIES Ops meeting, Council again asked for the formal written threat assessment and was told by PSNI that they were "working on it and would send it out within the next few hours". The urgent request for the formal written threat assessment was reiterated at every Gold Command meeting - not only by MEABC, but by other stakeholders as well.

When this was eventually received, the Chief Executive immediately instructed Council's Director responsible to review and consult this in the completion of Council's own risk assessment, which would require engagement with Port staff, trade unions and Council's Health and Safety section.

On receipt of an email from the Director recommending the return of staff, the Chief Executive gave the instruction that this should happen with immediate effect, given that she was unable to share the restricted documentation from the PSNI. Ms Donaghy then emailed the Group Party Leaders and all relevant partners to advise them of this.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: “All Border post staff are targets”.



APPENDIX 2: PSNI probing sinister threat made to employees working at Border Control Port.

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Police in Northern Ireland probe sinister graffiti threat aimed at Brexit port workers warning 'all border post staff are targets'

- 'All border post staff are targets' spray painted on a wall in Larne, County Antrim
- Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Government are investigating
- Brexit Operational Readiness bosses urged port workers to report suspicions
- MPs warned political violence could increase on the border as a result of Brexit

By [DAVID O'DORNAN](#) and [JEMMA CARR FOR MAILONLINE](#)
 PUBLISHED: 10:05, 23 January 2021 | UPDATED: 13:00, 24 January 2021

Police in Northern Ireland are probing a sinister graffiti threat made to Brexit port workers.

The investigation was launched after the words 'all border post staff are targets' appeared spray painted on a wall in Larne, County Antrim, on Thursday.

It is not known who was behind the threat, but MPs have warned that dissident republican groups would see security checkpoints and customs bases in Northern Ireland as targets after Brexit.

And, as checks at the newly-installed Border Control Post (BCP) facilities spark fresh produce shortages at supermarkets, anti-Brexit sentiment is mounting in the region.

Brexit Operational Readiness bosses sent out an internal memo reassuring port staff that both the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Stormont's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) were investigating.

They urged port workers to report suspicious activity - but said it does appear to be an isolated incident.

The memo - which was shared with a picture of the graffiti - read: 'To be aware, the below appeared overnight near Larne Port.

'There is nothing to suggest at this time that this is anything other than an isolated incident.

'However, this may understandably cause you or your teams concern but be assured that DAERA have engaged with the PSNI, who are dealing with the matter appropriately.

'DAERA will continue to liaise with the PSNI to ensure that your health, safety and welfare, and that of our delivery partners, remains our utmost priority.

'I would be grateful if you could ask your relevant staff to report anything suspicious in the area of the Port to either ourselves, PSNI or Port Security.'

Border Control Post (BCP) facilities came into operation from January 1, effectively creating a de facto Irish Sea border for goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland.

It's primary purpose was to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - but new checks on goods have hindered the flow of food products into the country from Britain sparking outrage.

Belfast Telegraph

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Premium

Border control posts on alert as sinister graffiti appears in Larne



Sinister graffiti warning that "all border post staff are targets" has appeared near Larne Port.

David O'Dornan

January 22 2021 07:40 PM



Police are probing a sinister threat made to employees working at Northern Ireland's Border Control Ports.

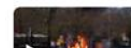
The investigation was launched after graffiti warning that "all border post staff are targets" appeared in Larne.

It prompted officials at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to alert the operators of the facilities at Larne, Belfast and Warrenpoint.

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- 5 Loyalists planning more unnotified parades in act of 'civil disobedience' as summer of disruption looms

Top Videos



Bus set on fire and press photographer

APPENDIX 3: Screenshot of video footage taken of cars at Larne Port, which subsequently appeared on social media.



APPENDIX 4: Anti-border graffiti sprayed near home of female worker.

February 5, 2017

BREXIT: INSPECTION STAFF

SEA BORDER RIDGE

NO IRISH SEA BORDER

LOYALIST PORT GUARDS WILL NEVER ACCEPT BORDER IN THE IRISH SEA

TARGETED: Belfast Port

SCARE PORT

Anti-border graffiti sprayed near home of female worker

EXCLUSIVE
by **PATRICIA DEVLIN**

THREATENING graffiti targeting Brexit inspection staff was "strategically" placed close to the home of a female port worker, it's learned.

The bombing, which understands that the always-painted slogan on a wall in Belfast was just metres away from the woman's property with claims loyalists threatened to target her.

Senior socialist sources say the incident was among a number of attacks by agricultural Minister Edwin Poots since last week's election. Poots, who has temporarily stood down from ministerial duties as he recovers from life-threatening cancer surgery, was "most concerned the PSNI had a full understanding of the risk."

RISKS

Dr. Donal McManus, the department's top senior civil servant, also said Mr Poots did have his "very concerned" about the risk posed to staff, and "emphasised the sort of care of officials for their staff and said that that and East Antrim (Borough) would be already taking action."

The police has said by its statements that the police is not a group, not loyalist or republican, were as possible.

However, senior loyalists have told this newspaper that paramilitaries are involved in the increasing campaign which they need "without a doubt, will escalate."

"I have seen conversations going on between various groups in south east Antrim at Belfast and they are working together," it said the Sunday World newspaper.

It can also be revealed how loyalists are planning a rally in Larne which they say will show the "people's response to the Irish Sea border."

Plans are in the early stages, however it is expected to take place before the end of this month.

Sources say details of the rally - organised by an "amalgamation" of unionists and loyalists - should be announced this week.

Yesterday, more threatening graffiti appeared in north Belfast, it read: "No Irish Sea Border BHD" alongside an image of a gun crosshair.

MULTIPLE

BHD is understood to be a sinister reference to the bomber killing gang the Red Hand Defenders, which carried out multiple attacks and murders following the ceasefire.

Sources say that Mr Poots stands by his decision to withdraw departmental workers and remains "extremely concerned" for staff safety after speaking with public representatives and political colleagues.

On Friday, Mid and East Antrim Council gave the go-ahead for its local authority staff to return to work at Larne port after receiving a PSNI assessment of the threat. A spokesperson said a council risk assessment had also been completed.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, now being led by Mr Poots' party colleague Gordon Lyons, has not yet made a decision on the return of its staff.

IDA/UVF USE ROW TO RECRUIT TEENS

EXCLUSIVE
by **PAULA MACKIN**

The Sunday World was contacted by another exasperated and terrified member of the Shankill community.

"My son stood in the kitchen the other night in front of me and his dad and told us they (loyalist paramilitaries) are getting ready for war and the Good Friday Agreement is over, like he knew everything, was worriedly wise or something," a man of four revealed.

"My son doesn't even know where the Good Friday Agreement was signed, he thinks he is spouting this stuff about community is under threat."

"The only threat he was under was from me, God forgive me but I could have slapped the head off him."

because it is frightening to hear your child speak like that especially after he had no interest in anything paramilitary all his life. He wasn't scared like that," she said, "punished by parents concerned by reports of paramilitaries fueling the fire of discontent."

WEAKENED

"People are worried, people are talking about it, the effect of the Irish Sea border and about how it has weakened the Union. But to be honest, we have told our so-called community representatives that, the safety of our children."

"Our sons in particular, there are plenty of examples of what happens to the kids who breathe in the paramilitaries. It never ends well for any of them and it will be the same these kids who listen to the lies of the UDA," another added.

Assistant Chief Constable Simon Byrne has said the public need to "step back from the tensions around the Northern Ireland Protocol, and that a solution "is a political one".

Mr. Byrne was speaking at a meeting of the Policing Board on Thursday after staff and Belfast were temporarily stood down over safety concerns.

Some of the threatening graffiti appeared near ports, however police said there was no suggestion of involvement by loyalist paramilitaries.

"If the PSNI are saying loyalist paramilitaries are not involved then they should happen in us here. There is no smoke about."

APPENDIX 5: SOLACE EU Exit Task & Finish Working Group, relevant extract from Minutes

SOLACE NI EU EXIT TASK & FINISH WORKING GROUP MEETING MEETING No. 5

28th January 2021
Held Virtually at 12.00 noon

In attendance:

Chair: Anne Donaghy; Chief Executive; Mid & East Antrim Borough Council

Also in Attendance:

- *Name Redacted*: Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Ards & North Down Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Ards & North Down Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Belfast City Council
- *Name Redacted*: Belfast City Council
- *Name Redacted*: Derry City & Strabane District Council
- *Name Redacted*: Fermanagh & Omagh District Council
- *Name Redacted*: Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council
- *Name Redacted*: Local Government Liaison Officer
- *Name Redacted*: Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Mid Ulster District Council
- *Name Redacted*: Newry, Mourne & Down District Council
- *Name Redacted*: Regional Officer: Local Government Civil Contingencies

Apologies:

- *Name Redacted*: Belfast City Council
- *Name Redacted*: Causeway Coast & Glens District Council
- *Name Redacted*: Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council
- *Name Redacted*: Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
- *Name Redacted*: Newry, Mourne & Down District Council

4.0	Ongoing Discussions with FSA (NI) & DAERA	
4.1	<p>Dr. Huey raised the issue of graffiti that had been posted close to the port of Larne. This was of interest to DAERA, although his information was that it was young people who were responsible and it was not directed. There was a need to work together to counteract it and those behind it.</p> <p>The Chair noted that talks at grass roots level were ongoing in relation to this. She felt this issue was concerning generally, and she had concerns for Port Health staff more specifically.</p> <p>The Chair thanked Dr. Huey for attending the meeting as it had proved very useful to both sides. It was agreed that Dr. Huey would be invited to future meetings as a means of allowing DAERA and local government to appraise each other. Dr. Huey noted that the DAERA Working Group would begin work shortly and that the Chair would receive an invitation to the first meeting in the near future.</p>	

APPENDIX 6: Mid and East Antrim Full Council Minutes of 01st February 2021; relevant extract from Minutes.

“The Mayor advised Members that he had called the meeting into Closed Council as there was a very urgent and important issue that dealt directly with the ongoing safety of Council staff at the Port of Larne.

He informed that earlier that Group Party Leaders had discussed serious concerns in relation to staff at the Port. He reported that at the earlier meeting there was unanimous support right across the parties to withdraw Council staff with immediate effect until a full and formal PSNI threat assessment and Council risk assessment could be completed.

At the request of the Mayor, the Chief Executive provided Members with an overview of the situation and advised that Group Party Leaders had recommended withdrawing Council staff from the Port of Larne until a full threat and risk assessment with the PSNI, Food Standards Agency and DAERA could be completed.

She provided a summary of the allegations as follows:

- Graffiti over the previous fortnight indicating the border post staff were targets;
- Further graffiti stating that “The Good Friday Agreement was over” and that “It’s time for war”, “Irish Out”, “No Irish Sea border” and that, when combined, conveyed a serious message to staff;
- The level of involvement of the PSNI in discussions;
- Concerns in relation to unconfirmed reports of threatening and intimidating actions including the recording of number plates;
- The reported escalation of tensions since it had been discussed at the PCSP the previous week;
- The need for political leaders to ensure that the rhetoric they used did not inflame the situation;
- Whether there was evidence as to who was behind this activity; and
- The implications of the action on the operation of the Port of Larne.

She advised that she was very unclear as to the exact position of all of the above information.

When it was raised with the Minister, DAERA officials had subsequently been advised that if they could work from home they didn’t have to go to the Port to work.

The Chief Executive informed that a major union had requested a renewed risk assessment and commented that, as the head of the staff, she considered that a revised risk assessment was essential to review and clarify the situation. She advised that she had requested a formal threat assessment from the PSNI.

She advised on the staffing profile at the Port of Larne and reiterated that staff safety had to be paramount and Council had to be content that it had done all it could to ensure that position.

The Chief Executive said that she was seeking assurance through the PSNI as to the level of threat, who would be behind any threat and the credibility of any threat.

The Chief Executive advised that this was all she knew and the fact that she did not know everything was part of the reason why the threat assessment and subsequent risk assessment were so critical.

She advised Members of the recommendation from the Group Party Leaders to withdraw Council staff with immediate effect from the Port of Larne until full threat and risk assessments could be carried out with the PSNI, Food Standards Agency and DAERA.

She said a better safe than sorry approach was important in relation to staff as she had a low threshold for risk when it came to staff safety.

The Mayor thanked the Chief Executive for the update and the Group Party Leaders for their support in the matter earlier that day and sought a proposer and seconder for the recommendation.

Cllr McKeen recalled the past when Council had pulled staff out of other roles where there was a threat or a perceived threat against them.

He stated that Council had to stand over the staff and do likewise in the situation. He accordingly proposed withdrawing staff until such time it was deemed safe for them to return or for other ways to be found for the work to be carried out.

Cllr Donnelly agreed that it was wise to assess the level of the threat and that Council must do all it could to keep its staff safe.

He commented that the graffiti that had appeared the previous week was very sinister and advised that he had spoken to a number of other Elected Representatives on the PCSP at the time and all were in agreement about it.

He commended all political representatives who quickly condemned the graffiti publically. He noted that the graffiti was quickly removed but that it must have been very frightening for people in the area. He seconded Cllr McKeen's proposal.

Ald Ms Mulvenna commended the Chief Executive for acting proactively to call the Group Party Leaders' meeting earlier that day which reflected the seriousness of the situation which was, without doubt, sinister and very worrying, she said.

She stated her opinion that it was excellent that Council were taking this action immediately instead of sitting around and discussing it and re-iterated her support for the recommendation.

Cllr Gaston stated that the safety of Council's staff was paramount and referred to the previous week's PCSP where he questioned the PSNI Chief Superintendent directly on the issue. He expressed his discomfort at putting any Council staff in a position to become a target and that it was unacceptable in this day and age that the threat existed and that it should not be Council's employees being put at risk. In closing he stated that Council should take a stand and say that they would not put their employees at risk over the Irish Sea Border and that the Minister and DAERA and the Prime Minister should sort it out.

Cllr McKeown condemned the threats and noted that a similar discussion would be taking place at Belfast City Council that evening in relations to threats made at Belfast Port. He echoed Cllr Donnelly's sentiments that public representatives needed to be responsible in any comments made about the ongoing situation in relation to the Ports. He stated that it also highlighted the lack of action from the PSNI over the last number of years in relation to gangs in East Antrim. He wondered if the issue had been brought up with the Secretary of State and representatives of the UDA at the meeting the previous week.

The Mayor appreciated Cllr McKeown's question but said that it was not fair to ask the last one of Chief Executive as she would not have been privy to that meeting.

Cllr E Reid concurred with Cllrs Donnelly and McKeown and stated that it was beholden on political leaders to ensure that the rhetoric they used moving forward did not inflame the situation any further. He commented that the language used in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol had raised tensions and whipped up fear and that it should be the role of all leaders to extract the poison from public dialogue. He challenged all Members to do that. He also asked political leaders to unequivocally condemn those behind the threats and their tactics and they should be left in no doubt that they stood alone with no support.

Cllr Armstrong concurred that the welfare of staff had to be of paramount importance and that until the threat assessment had been carried out by the PSNI there was no other option.

Cllr Quigley condemned the threats to Council staff and asked the Chief Executive if paramilitaries were involved and if this had been confirmed by the PSNI.

Cllr Henry stated that like any rightminded person he condemned the threats and asked if withdrawing the officers would effectively close the Port of Larne.

The Chief Executive answered Members' questions as follows:

- She was aware that the situation had been escalated up through the ranks of the PSNI.
- She clarified that she was not privy to the Secretary of State's meeting.
- In reference to paramilitaries, she informed that she did not know the source of the threat. She reiterated that the reason why a formal PSNI threat assessment was being requested was that she did not know and had no way of finding out other than through the PSNI. She advised that she did know that the situation had initially been accredited to young people but that had changed and the messages received were extremely mixed.

In addition, she informed that she knew that the PSNI were examining where the threat was coming from. She explained that she was reflecting the current situation, and it was for the PSNI to determine where the threat was coming from and the level and credibility of threat. As she did not have the answers, she believed that a better safe than sorry approach should be taken. The questions around risk could only be satisfied following the threat and risk assessments.

She advised that the meeting the following day (with the PSNI and partners) would be very much about what the position was. She informed that the PSNI had added two extra patrol cars over the previous weekend and ensured that there were additional cameras at the port.

- She advised of the legal requirement from the EU and the implications of temporarily suspending physical attendance.

Ald Ashe urged Council to contact the Chief Constable to ensure the issue was being dealt with at the highest level.

Further to Cllr McKeown's question in relation to when the Group Party Leaders would receive a further update, the Chief Executive undertook to update the Group Party leaders at their meeting the following day and hoped to have the threat assessment by then.

On the proposal of Cllr McKeen, seconded by Cllr Donnelly, it was

Agreed:

- (i) that staff employed by Council to be withdrawn from the Port of Larne, pending the completion of a Threat Assessment and a Risk Assessment with PSNI, FSA and DAERA, until a time it is safe for them to return or other ways of working can be implemented; and
- (ii) to inform the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, DAERA, to advise of Council's decision to withdraw staff from the Port.

The Mayor commended Members on the unity displayed in relation to the 12 Officers and other Senior Officers' safety.

He advised that, as suggested at the Group Party Leaders' meeting, he would make a very brief statement in the public domain once the meeting returned to Open Council.

APPENDIX 7: Incidents of graffiti appeared elsewhere in Northern Ireland, claiming that Port staff in Belfast and Larne were targets.



APPENDIX 8: Further sinister and threatening Graffiti appearing in Mid and East Antrim, showing cross hairs, at the roundabout entering Larne.



APPENDIX 9: Screening being erected at Larne Port, by DAERA



APPENDIX 10: Graffiti displaying cross hairs and the name of Elected Representative



APPENDIX 11: The same cross hairs icon used to threaten Staff as used against Elected Representative at Appendix 10.



APPENDIX 12: Article from the *News Letter* on 20 March, and *Belfast Telegraph* article of 31 March 2021: Detailing how an individual and their family was put out of their home.

Larne Port official manning Irish Sea border ‘put out of home after threat’ (*News Letter* 200321)

An official at Larne Port involved in administering the Irish Sea border checks has been forced out of their home after receiving serious threats, two senior politicians have said.

Several sources said that the individual, who is understood to have lived in an overwhelmingly Protestant area in the east of Northern Ireland, is believed to have been contacted by the PSNI more than a month ago and warned about their safety.

Police last night would not confirm or deny that the individual had been forced out. Nor would the PSNI explain why Chief Constable Simon Byrne, pictured, publicly said there were no credible threats to port staff.

On Wednesday, North Antrim MP Ian Paisley Jr briefly referred to the incident during an appearance on RT. Mr Paisley told the Moscow-based broadcaster: “There was a person who worked in the customs office had to be forcibly moved from their home to be protected.”

The DUP MP said he wanted to see an end to threats, describing them as “sinister”, but said the best resolution would be by removing the protocol.

The *News Letter* asked Mid and East Antrim Council, which also has staff at the port, if it was aware of the issue. In response, the council said: “This would be a matter for the PSNI and we have not been informed of this matter by the PSNI.

“We continue to receive updated threat assessments from the PSNI and consider these alongside council’s own risk assessments, regarding the safety of staff at Larne Port.”

Last night the council’s mayor, Peter Johnson, said it was “disappointing because something as sinister and as serious as someone having to leave their home for their safety was not fed back to council” by the police.

Mr Johnston, a DUP councillor, said: “We found out about this incident after the case. Probably what’s most disappointing is that the information wasn’t coming from the police.”

He said that the threat is believed to have been around the time six weeks ago that the council and DUP minister Edwin Poots controversially pulled staff out of the port because of threats painted on walls.

He said: “It’s now starting to appear - and the reason I’m saying it like this is because to my knowledge this has not yet been confirmed by the PSNI - but we’re currently under the understanding that on either the Saturday or Sunday one of the Border Force port officials was contacted by the PSNI they delivered the threat to him which then led to him having to move out of his house.”

Mr Johnston said it was “a really serious piece of information” which ought to have been shared with the council so that it could decide whether its staff should stay at the port.

When asked about the issue, and about Mr Johnson’s criticism, the PSNI issued a standard response: “We do not discuss the security of individuals and no inference should be drawn from this. However, if we receive information that a person’s life may be at risk we will inform them accordingly. We never ignore anything which may put an individual at risk.”

The Housing Executive operates the Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) which buys houses from owner-occupiers who are forced to leave their home due to intimidation or threats. Such intimidation was once commonplace in many parts of Northern Ireland but in the 2019-20 financial year just two homes were purchased under the scheme.

A spokesman said: “We cannot comment on individual cases who have applied to the scheme. Applicants for SPED may have a property acquired by us if they meet the criteria for the scheme and have a certificate from the PSNI confirming the intimidation or threat.”

The Home Office said: “We don’t comment on an individual’s security arrangements.”

David Campbell, the chairman of the Loyalist Communities Council, said that he was “totally unaware” of the issue.

Mr Campbell, whose organisation represents the UDA, UVF and Red Hand Commando but not some smaller dissident factions, told the *News Letter*: “We deplore any activity that forces people out of their homes.

“One’s home should be sacrosanct and should be respected by everyone, regardless of your beliefs or who you are.

“I have no hesitation in condemning that and in sympathising with the family affected.”

Larne Port worker and family relocated after loyalist threat (*Belfast Telegraph* 310321)
The threat came amid rising tensions over the Northern Ireland Protocol



Threats: Graffiti in Larne sparked by the Irish sea border and the NI Protocol

A port of Larne worker and his family have been relocated to a secure location following a threat to his life from a loyalist paramilitary group.

It is understood the threat to the customs officer was made last month, around the same time graffiti threatening port staff began to appear across Northern Ireland.

The worker and his family were moved to secure housing in recent weeks amid rising tensions due to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

As part of the Withdrawal Agreement, the protocol sees checks on goods coming into Northern Ireland from Great Britain, creating a de facto Irish Sea border - something which has angered unionists.

I News reported that this was the first time the relocation of a terrorist target has occurred since 2011.

The UK Government has been made aware of the relocation of the port worker. The customs officer reported the threat to the PSNI, who found it to be credible, and it is understood both Secretary of State Brandon Lewis and Home Secretary Priti Patel were informed of the situation in late February before unilaterally extending the Brexit grace period to October just a week later.

The Cabinet Office told i that the extension, which led to accusations from the European Union that the UK was breaking the terms of the Brexit deal, was not influenced by a rise in terror threats in Northern Ireland.

The Scheme for the Emergency Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) is run by the NI Housing Executive and is only used in exceptional

circumstances where a threat to life is credible and imminent.

Once verified by the PSNI and security services, the Housing Executive will buy the home of person under threat at full market value and help them buy a new home in an area considered to be safe.

East Belfast DUP MP Gavin Robinson, said it was “very alarming” that the port worker moved home under SPED.

“That suggests the PSNI has verified the level of threat is significant enough that a port employee and their family had to be moved from their home,” he continued.

“It is outrageous that anyone was forced to move from their home because of the threat of violence. I condemn outrightly any form of intimidation or threat being issued against anyone.”

Lord Hain, who served as Secretary of State from 2005 to 2007, added: “This confirmation is extremely worrying and highlights the neglect and disregard this Government sadly has for Northern Ireland.

“Boris Johnson and Lord David Frost claimed to have ‘got Brexit done’ but left so much ‘undone’ that Northern Ireland businesses have sudden huge costs and complexities, and loyalists have been destabilised.”

A spokesperson for PSNI said: “We do not discuss the security of individuals and no inference should be drawn from this. However, if we receive information that a person’s life may be at risk we will inform them accordingly. We never ignore anything which may put an individual at risk.

APPENDIX 13 - Council Communications with PSNI from 22 Jan - 01 Feb

Date	PSNI	MEABC	Content
22 Jan	District Commander	Council Director	Graffiti at the Port
27 Jan	PSCP meeting	Council Director	Number of Elected Members questioned District Commander on the threatening graffiti at Larne Port.
29 Jan	District Commander	Council Chief Executive	Update on graffiti incident
29 Jan	Senior PSNI Officer (DOJ)	Council Chief Executive	Concerns regarding safety of Port Staff
30 Jan	District Commander	Council Chief Executive	Concerns regarding safety of Port Staff
30 Jan	District Commander	Council Chief Executive	Second call on issues regarding Port
01 Feb	District Commander	Council Chief Executive	Update on safety concerns for Port Staff
01 Feb	District Commander	Council Chief Executive	Further update on safety concerns for Port Staff

