



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Withdrawal of DAERA and Local  
Authority Staff from Ports:  
Police Service of Northern Ireland

15 April 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority Staff from Ports:  
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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)  
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Clare Bailey  
Mrs Rosemary Barton  
Mr John Blair  
Mr Maurice Bradley  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Patsy McGlone

**Witnesses:**

ACC Bobby Singleton                      Police Service of Northern Ireland

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I welcome, by StarLeaf, Bobby Singleton, the temporary assistant chief constable (ACC) in the community safety department. I invite ACC Singleton to brief the Committee.

**Assistant Chief Constable Bobby Singleton (Police Service of Northern Ireland):** Chair, thank you. Obviously, members have received the written submission. Are you content to add that to the record, or would you like me to read it so that it is entered formally?

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Is it possible to have an overview or a synopsis of it?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** I will do my best for you.

Obviously, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been involved in extensive engagement with DAERA officials at both strategic and operational levels on matters pertaining to EU exit and the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. That engagement began in anticipation of the EU exit transition period; it continued during the transition; and it continues at the present time. The aim of this engagement is to provide reassurance and support in relation to DAERA's functions at Northern Ireland's designated points of entry (POEs).

The dissemination of regular threat assessment updates has been an important part of the engagement. The PSNI has also provided timely security and crime prevention advice to DAERA and other partner agencies in support of their protocol functions and in the construction and adaptation of

associated infrastructure. On 21 January 2021, Assistant Chief Constable Mark McEwan, who was my predecessor, convened a partners meeting in relation to the emergence of graffiti in Larne that stated that all border post staff were targets. Operational activity was increased by the PSNI at this time to provide support and reassurance to the staff working in those locations.

On 1 February 2021, ACC McEwan issued a statement outlining the PSNI's position. That statement said:

*“The safety of staff working at points of entry is of the utmost importance to us. Where we have any credible information we will share that with our partners and take appropriate action.*

*We have increased patrols at Larne Port and other points of entry in order to reassure staff and the local community.”*

ACC McEwan then chaired a partners meeting on 2 February at which he provided a verbal briefing about the PSNI's threat assessment in relation to staff working at border control points. An assurance was provided at this point to distribute this assessment in writing to participants, and that was done on 4 February.

On 2 February 2021, in a media facility after the partner agencies meeting, which included DAERA representatives, ACC Mark McEwan said:

*“Earlier today I held a productive meeting with key partner agencies including officials from ... DAERA, local councils, Department of Justice, Northern Ireland Office, Border Force and Belfast Harbour Police.*

*I am concerned about signs of tension within the community in recent weeks. We've seen graffiti at various sites and other forms of intimidation on social media. Our investigations into these incidents are ongoing.*

*In relation to an anonymous piece of information claiming paramilitary involvement in threats, I have briefed partners that we have no information to substantiate or corroborate these claims at this time. Keeping people safe is our priority and the safety of staff working at points of entry is of the utmost importance to us.*

*We will continue to work closely with our partners to provide them and their staff with support. We have increased patrols at the points of entry in order to reassure staff and the local community.”*

A written threat assessment was distributed by the PSNI to partner agencies, including DAERA, by email on 4 February 2021. The threat assessment has been the subject of regular reviews since then. An update to the threat assessment was provided by email to partner agencies, including DAERA, first on 8 February and again on 9 February. Since that period, it has been the subject of regular review, and updates have been provided to our partner agencies, either by email or verbally.

The safety of staff working at the points of entry and control points remains of the utmost importance to the PSNI. As of today, there is no change to our assessment. That assessment is that there is nothing to substantiate or corroborate any paramilitary involvement in threats to or intimidation of staff at points of entry or border control posts (BCPs).

As I have said, the threat assessment remains under constant review. An update is provided to our partners on a weekly basis through the partnership meeting that we have, and there are still a number of reassurance measures in place. We continue to retain officers in a dedicated EU exit team based at PSNI headquarters. In addition, we have dedicated officers in neighbourhood policing teams across the country who are co-located to these areas to ensure that we have people on the ground to liaise and engage with staff. We continue to provide security and crime prevention advice where required. Whilst we have concerns, of course — in particular, with the recent tensions that have been seen — we maintain a watching brief and continue to carry out that constant assessment to ensure that we are in the best place to provide accurate information to our partners to ensure the safety and security of their staff.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you very much for that, Bobby. A number of members have questions.

**Mr McGuigan:** I appreciate the briefing, ACC Singleton. I am a bit disappointed — maybe I am not disappointed at all; maybe there was no interaction — but the report says that the PSNI convened a partners meeting on 21 January that, I assume, included DAERA officials and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council officials. There is no detail in your report of any contact between 21 January and the decision being taken on 1 February. I can only conclude that there was no contact or wonder why it was not reported. Can you outline if there was any contact in that period and the nature of that contact?

I am just going to fire a couple of questions here. The report says that a meeting was convened on 21 February on the issue of graffiti. Was that convened by the PSNI, or was that meeting asked for by some of the partner agencies?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** For the sake of clarity, I think you mentioned a meeting on 21 February: the day that the graffiti that I mentioned became known to the PSNI was 21 January. It is my understanding that the partners meeting that took place then was effectively called by the PSNI in order to discuss this issue.

You specifically mentioned your disappointment that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council was not involved in that partnership meeting on 21 January. Until that point, local councils had not been part of our partners meeting. It was not until 2 February, when an exceptional meeting of the partnership group was called, that the local councils effectively became members of the group at that point, and they have remained so since. Prior to 2 February, local councils had not been part of the strategic partnership group that we had set up and were running with DAERA and other government partners.

**Mr McGuigan:** In the Committee, we are enquiring about why a decision was taken to remove staff, primarily Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs staff. That also had an impact on the withdrawal of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council staff. From your report, the PSNI had a meeting on 21 January and informed DAERA staff that the assessment was low. I have seen correspondence between Department officials in the media this week saying that PSNI said that the assessment was low. There was no contact between 21 January and 1 February to say that the assessment had changed. Basically, you dismissed any other information that was provided to you, such as the anonymous threat. We have seen stuff in the papers this week saying that it may well have been fuelled by drink. From 21 January, you provided an assessment that did not change. It seems strange that officials from councils and the Department seemed to ignore your threat assessment. Do you know why they would do that? Do you think that maybe they did not trust the PSNI or believe your assessment? Maybe they thought that they knew better about security issues than the PSNI.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** Ultimately, those are questions that may be better directed to them rather than me, but, certainly, I have not had any conversations with them specifically about the issue. You are right to say that the PSNI's assessment did not change during that period. The assessment was that the threats were unsubstantiated and uncorroborated. Again, questions about the individual decision-making that went on in other areas, like Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and such places, have to be directed to the senior figures in those areas to account for that.

**Mr McGuigan:** So the threat was low. It did not change. There was no organised loyalist paramilitary involvement.

There were allegations made at Mid and East Antrim Borough Council about the targeting of licence plates and things like that. The PSNI has no knowledge of any of that taking place.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** That is correct.

**Mr McGuigan:** Fair enough.

**Mr McGlone:** Thank you very much for attending today, ACC Singleton. I have two basic questions.

We have heard evidence from NIPSA officials and the likes about the potential risk that was perceived at that time and how that was relayed to the council. Can you advise me if any complaint was made directly to the police at any point, either by an individual, a council, a public body or DAERA, that there was, in fact, a risk or a threat to be investigated by the police?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** I am not aware of any specific complaint or concern having been raised by any of those bodies with the PSNI in respect of an individual during that period, beyond a reflection of general concern and apprehension from staff. It is fair to reflect that, from mid-January onwards, the very visible display of heightened tension, with graffiti and posters and such, has led to a higher level of vigilance and concern. People have certainly been on edge. It is that sort of thing that has been reported to us rather than specific detail. The only other issue during the period concerned a member of the Border Force who was the subject of anonymous information pertaining to some form of threat. I think there was some publicity about it. I am not aware of anything else.

**Mr McGlone:** You have answered that: there was, at no point, any complaint or case raised with the PSNI regarding a threat to an individual or a corporate body by either the individual or any corporate body, the Department or the council.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No.

**Mr McGlone:** Thank you. That is all I needed to know.

**Mr Blair:** I thank ACC Singleton for his presentation and congratulate him on his appointment. It is my first opportunity to do so publicly, and I am sure there will be further opportunities.

We were given a briefing previously about a sequence of events around 31 January to 1 February and conversations between the Minister and DAERA, which is obviously our specific interest. It is publicly recorded that the Minister at one point said that he did not believe that the police fully understood the level of threat. I think his wording was "full understanding of the threats". Can you provide clarification? Were police updated immediately prior to the Minister's decision on 1 February to withdraw staff, and were they updated at the same time by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council when the council took a similar decision? Were police updated, given the relevance of that decision to threat assessments and given that they should have been informed of actions taken by both the Department, on that occasion, and by the council?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** John, my apologies: I lost you temporarily during that. Can you repeat the question?

**Mr Blair:** We have been told — it is a matter of public record — that the Minister, prior to his withdrawal of staff from the ports, informed the permanent secretary on 1 February that he was not convinced that the PSNI had full understanding of the threat. That is what has been reported to the Committee. I am keen to establish what information was given to police on 1 February either by the Department or by the Minister directly or by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, which was taking a similar decision around the same time, given the relevance of their actions to any assessment of the level of threat. I am keen to know if police were informed, how they were informed and how often they were informed.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** My understanding is that the permanent secretary reflected the Minister's assessment and concerns regarding the PSNI's assessment, if that makes sense. As far as I am aware, there was no information forthcoming that provided any richer detail relating to that, beyond the simple statement that there was a concern that the PSNI did not fully understand the threat.

**Mr Blair:** To be slightly more specific, was any attempt made at that point by the Department, the Minister or the council to have an urgent reassessment of the threat prior to the action that they took? Was any reconsideration of the level of threat assessment sought by either the council or the Department before they took that action?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** Not that I am aware of. I believe that, in the subsequent meeting that took place on 2 February, there was a request for PSNI to revisit the threat assessment. We provided a verbal update to that meeting and subsequently followed it up in writing, restating that the position had not changed following the verbal update. I am not aware of anything outside that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** William, can you hear?

We are having technical difficulties. OK, we will come back to William.

Maurice, can you hear us?

**Mr M Bradley:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much, ACC Singleton, for taking the time out of duty this morning to give this presentation.

I only have one question, and it surrounds the movement of a Larne port worker for his own safety. I am reading it from the 'Belfast Telegraph':

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

It goes on to say that the move took place during the time that sinister graffiti appeared all over Northern Ireland. The newspaper report highlights the fact that the worker contacted the PSNI, who found it to be a credible threat. As far as the newspaper is concerned, if you can believe newspapers — sometimes I wonder — both the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State were informed of the development. Did any Larne port worker contact the PSNI with regard to a threat, and was any Larne port officer moved because of such a threat?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** It is the long-standing position of PSNI that we do not comment on threats against named individuals. With regard to that article, I can say that no member of staff who works at Larne port has been the subject of any threat. There are issues with that press article that are potentially misleading; I can say that much without, unfortunately, going into any further detail, because, as I say, we do not comment on threats to individuals.

**Mr M Bradley:** That is a fair enough answer. It highlights the problem that we have to endure in Northern Ireland with social media, the media and newspaper outlets that seem to delight in sending out false information or information that is not correct and accurate. Thank you very much for that answer, Assistant Chief Constable.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you for your briefing, Assistant Chief Constable. I was cut off and did not hear the previous question in total. Was anyone moved under the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme? It has been clearly circulated that there was someone — irrespective of who it was; I have no idea — a member of staff from Larne port who was moved under the SPED scheme. Are you aware of that?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** I mentioned that, whilst we cannot comment on individual threats, this can be related back to the overall assessment. It was suggested that the 'Belfast Telegraph' had certainly reported that there had been a credible threat. Our assessment is still that there is no evidence of any corroboration or substantiation for paramilitary involvement in any threats up until this point.

With regard to Larne port, no member of staff from Larne port has been the subject of a threat or, indeed, a SPED move.

**Mr Irwin:** OK. Was there any information that came to you via Crimestoppers in relation to threats?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** Again, without being drawn on individual incidents, which we do not comment on, we receive information, on occasion, from Crimestoppers, the independent charity. One of the challenges with Crimestoppers information is that, when it arrives, it is often uncorroborated and unsubstantiated, so one of the first things that we will try to do is establish whether there is any information that can potentially corroborate or substantiate it. That is part of the process that we go through.

**Mr Irwin:** Of course, the police encourage people to contact Crimestoppers if they have any suspicion in relation to any threat or danger in any walk of life in Northern Ireland: is that right?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** Yes, we do. In the first instance, we encourage people to talk to us about it and to have a conversation with their neighbourhood officer or to call us on 101 — 999 in an emergency — but we recognise that sometimes, because of fear for their personal safety, people do not feel comfortable doing that. In that respect, Crimestoppers offers a great means through which people can provide information anonymously.

**Mr Irwin:** What you are saying is that there may have been some information obtained by that route: is that right?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** Certainly, throughout this period, information has been received both through local police officers and through the likes of Crimestoppers and other mediums. Everybody will have seen the escalation in tensions from around mid-January onwards. To use an expression, we have very much had our ear to the ground to try to understand the sentiment in communities and to bring it all in and synthesise it in order to arrive at our threat assessment. As I said at the start of the meeting, the assessment remains unchanged: there is no substance or corroboration to indicate at this point that loyalist paramilitaries have been involved in targeting port staff.

**Mr Irwin:** What level of risk do you think is acceptable?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** As I said at the start of the meeting, the safety and security of everybody is a priority for us, particularly, in this instance, of staff working at the border. With regard to levels, ultimately it is up to Departments and agencies to carry out a risk assessment based on the threat assessment that we provide to them. It will be up to them to determine the proportionate response to that threat.

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks, ACC Singleton, for your time this morning. I want to go back to the media reports. There was a recent media report relating to papers from officials at the Department that said that this supposed threat had come —. First, I want to ask, around 1 February, when all this was happening and staff were being removed, had the PSNI received any direct threats? I am not asking for detail of the threats, but did the PSNI receive any direct communications that threatened staff?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** I think that there had been an anonymous call to the 'Sunday World' around 27 January, which, I think, coincided with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. That anonymous call was possibly the only information we had at that point. Was there a direct referral from any of the agencies? No.

**Ms Bailey:** And no direct communication with you about a threat from an individual.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No.

**Ms Bailey:** There was a recent report — I think it was on the back of an FOI request — in which departmental officials said that the threat had been received following the discovery of threatening graffiti opposing the Irish Sea border checks but it was claimed that the threat may have been fuelled by alcohol. Did anybody report that threat to you? Is the PSNI aware of a drunk person making any sort of threats?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No, I am not aware of that specifically. I do not know whether the officials were referring to the call to the 'Sunday World'. I am not privy to that or to what they were specifically referring to.

**Ms Bailey:** You do not know the detail of the threat relating to the call that was made to the 'Sunday World'.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No. I will try to get the detail of that. I do not have it to hand at the minute.

**Ms Bailey:** OK. Apart from that one, is that the only direct verbal threat that the PSNI is aware of having been made?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** I do not know that I would describe it as a "direct verbal threat" because, once again, it came through a newspaper, but the number of potential threats has been small. There is that one and the one about the Border Force personnel, the second issue. That was in February.

**Ms Bailey:** So nobody in the Department reported any drunken calls or further threats directly to the PSNI.

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No, not that I am aware of, Clare.

**Ms Bailey:** Did the Minister or Mid and East Antrim Borough Council report any threats that they had received or were aware of to the PSNI?

**Assistant Chief Constable Singleton:** No, not to people working at border posts.

**Ms Bailey:** Grand. I echo the sentiments expressed by Maurice when he warned about misinformation spreading via the media and social media, in particular. That is exactly why we need to rely on the expertise and professionalism of the PSNI in such matters. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** William, did you want back in?

**Mr Irwin:** No. I am OK, thanks.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I thank ACC Singleton for his attendance this morning and for answering all our questions. I wish you a good day, ACC Singleton.