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Beyond the Spark II: Crisis and Continuity

Dr Colm Walsh, July 2026



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Executive Summary

In June 2025, the large industrial town of Ballymena in Northern Ireland experienced several nights of serious disorder following allegations of a sexual assault involving two adolescent males. The violence attracted international media attention, resulted in significant injuries to police officers, extensive property damage, and the displacement of local families. While public debate largely focused on immigration and community safety, this study sought to move beyond the immediate spark and examine the wider conditions that made collective violence possible.

Building on the findings of Beyond the Spark (BTS1), which examined widespread disorder across Northern Ireland in 2021, this study explored the experiences and perspectives of young people living in the affected community, alongside interviews with senior police officers involved in the operational response. Focus groups were subsequently conducted to validate and refine emerging findings. The analysis was informed by Social Ecological Theory and the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), enabling consideration of individual, community, organisational, and structural influences on violence.

A central finding of the study is the striking continuity between the conditions identified in BTS1 and those present in Ballymena in 2025. Although the immediate triggers differed significantly, many of the underlying social and environmental conditions remained remarkably consistent. In both studies, young people described communities characterised by deprivation, limited opportunities, exposure to violence, low trust in institutions, strong but often insular identities, and a sense of being disconnected from wider society. In both contexts, collective violence emerged not as a spontaneous event but as the product of multiple vulnerabilities interacting over time.

Young people consistently described Ballymena as a place that was simultaneously supportive and unsafe. Strong family and community ties created a sense of belonging, yet these same environments were characterised by visible violence, substance misuse, intimidation, and fear. Participants described navigating daily risks, particularly young women, who reported ongoing experiences of harassment and concerns for their safety long before the riots occurred. Importantly, many young people felt less safe after the riots than before them.

The findings suggest that the violence cannot be understood solely through the lens of immigration. While concerns relating to demographic change, immigration, and the protection of women and girls featured prominently in local narratives, participants repeatedly situated these concerns within a wider context of longstanding frustrations, accumulated harm, and distrust. The research found little evidence that the riots were driven by a coherent political ideology. Instead, they reflected the convergence of fear, anger, perceived threat, community narratives, peer influences, and opportunities for mobilisation.

Social media emerged as a critical factor in the escalation of events. Participants described how online platforms amplified local concerns, circulated rumours, connected local grievances to wider national and international narratives, and attracted individuals from outside Ballymena into the disorder. Similar to BTS1, digital platforms functioned as both communication tools and accelerants, transforming existing frustrations into collective action. However, the scale and sophistication of online influence appeared significantly greater than that observed in 2021, reflecting wider international trends linked to misinformation, anti-immigration sentiment, and far-right mobilisation.

The study found limited evidence that paramilitary organisations directly orchestrated the violence. However, both young people and police officers described community environments where coercion, territoriality, and violence remained culturally embedded. Consistent with BTS1, the findings suggest that young people continue to be vulnerable to exploitation during periods of disorder. Emerging concerns regarding child criminal exploitation, coercive community dynamics, and the mobilisation of young people by older actors indicate that these vulnerabilities remain largely unresolved.

Alongside risk factors, the study identified important sources of protection. Most notably, the local youth centre emerged as one of the strongest protective influences within the community. Young people consistently described youth workers as trusted adults and the youth provision itself as a safe space offering support, belonging, practical assistance, and positive opportunities. Participants highlighted the role of youth workers in discouraging attendance at the riots, supporting young people during periods of heightened tension, and providing continuity in the aftermath of the violence.

Taken together, the findings reinforce a key conclusion from BTS1: collective violence is rarely caused by a single event. Rather, it is the visible manifestation of deeper social, economic, relational, and emotional conditions that accumulate over time. While the narratives used to justify violence may change, from constitutional tensions in 2021 to immigration and community safety concerns in 2025, the underlying ecology of vulnerability appears remarkably stable.

The report concludes that preventing future episodes of collective violence requires a shift away from reactive responses focused solely on immediate triggers. Instead, there is a need to strengthen the protective ecosystem surrounding children, young people, and communities. This includes sustained investment in universal youth provision, stronger community infrastructure, improved trust between communities and public services, greater resilience to misinformation and online harms, and earlier intervention to address the cumulative social disadvantages that create fertile ground for unrest.

The lessons from Ballymena extend far beyond a single town. Across Europe and the United Kingdom, communities are experiencing increasing social polarisation, demographic change, declining institutional trust, and digitally amplified tensions. The findings suggest that while the sparks that ignite unrest may differ, the conditions that allow violence to spread are often remarkably similar. The lived experience of these conditions may be observed in different ways, with ‘soft signals’ that conditions are becoming so problematic that any spark could ignite into violent unrest. Understanding and strengthening the factors that protect communities from violence is therefore not only a local priority, but an increasingly urgent societal challenge.

Introduction and Background

On 9th June 2025, two adolescent males appeared in Coleraine Magistrate’s Court, Northern Ireland (NI), charged with a serious sexual assault that was alleged to have taken place two days earlier. Appearing by video link from the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC), which serves as NI’s only custodial environment for children, the two young males denied the charges. What appeared to be a straightforward procedure masked the major violence that was imminent outside the Coleraine courtroom.

On the same day of the court appearance, a peaceful protest was called for by the family of the alleged victim. Consisting of community members, and those who expressed concern from outside of the town, the temperature did not take long to rise. Following a move away from the main protest, a large group headed towards the area of the town known to have a concentration of Roma families living there.

Sparked by the allegations against these two fourteen-year-old males, for the three nights that followed, there was serious violence in the large industrial town of Ballymena (Andall, 2025).

While not widely known outside of Northern Ireland, Ballymena became the subject of international media interest, with several outlets reporting from only a few hundred yards from the town centre. Images of serious violence, where masked (and unmasked) groups targeted the homes of those believed to house immigrants-particularly those from a Roma background, were depicted on television news, newspapers and across social media outlets.

Over the course of several nights, 60 police officers were injured-some seriously, there was an ‘exodus of largely Roma and some other Eastern European’ (McCann, 2025) from the area, and 53 people had been arrested, some of whom were as young as twelve years old.

In November of 2025, the two teenage boys were released following the withdrawal of the case by the public prosecution services, citing significant evidence developments (Carroll, 2025).

While the cause of the serious violence was overly simplified, it was widely reported (as it continues to be) that the spark of the violence was the alleged sexual assault of a young girl by two young males who were newcomers to the area. The root cause of the violence was thus framed in the context of immigration.

Given the scale of media attention, and almost ubiquitous coverage via social media, excerpts of conversations, claims and celebrations were reported by CAJ (2025), with the level of hate speech not only endemic across the nights but also being implicated by some of those as the catalyst. One person is heard saying “yo, F*ck the foreigners”, while another justifies violence against another property by saying “they’re probably p*ckis, that’s why the fuckin boy is running up the stairs. Put the windows in around them” (CAJ, 2025:6). With some, but not all, immigrants (e.g., Roma) being labelled as a risk to the community, particularly to females, while other immigrants (e.g., Filipinos) were made publicly exempt from these labels, these narratives were elevated (if not facilitated) by the communicative potential of social media.

Social media framing

An expert in the role of social media, Dr Paul Reilly from University of Glasgow, reported in the days that followed, that as with other examples, such as Southport, social media appeared to have contributed to the escalation in Ballymena. Facebook posts, he argued, shared details of the protests, and while the initial intention was broadly considered by those who took part to have been peaceful, Reilly suggests that the nature of the posts implicitly threatened an escalation.

In the run-up to the several nights of violence that was predominantly, but not exclusively, focussed on Ballymena, the narratives that were widely circulated included references to protecting women and girls from violence. ‘Her Loyal Voice’, a loyalist feminist group, referred to the hijacking of their central concern for the safety of women and girls by others (internal and external to the community) with their own agendas. They claimed that:

“IT’S NOT OUR MEN; IT’S NOT OUR COMMUNITY. WE’RE NOT THE PROBLEM.

IT’S THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO ARE COMING IN, AND THEY’RE THE ONES DOING IT” [THE VIOLENCE]

Ironically, this claim was challenged in the days that followed as widely publicised violence being facilitated by the local community circulated across media formats and in an interesting criminal justice development following those riots, the Detail (Butterly, 2025) published figures that illustrated that of the 53 individuals arrested as of September 2025, 36% had previous contact with the criminal justice system relating to domestic abuse.

This escalation driven by social media was also clear when the Communities Minister revealed publicly that a leisure centre was being made available for temporary accommodation for those fleeing violence (threatened or actual). That centre was later targeted by rioters. While this does not implicate the minister in having malicious intent, the fact is that the post contributed to the violence that followed-intentional or not.

The power of social media is not only to connect people locally, but to connect local experiences of much wider narratives. If any other example was needed as to how Ballymena was nested within wider immigration tensions, Tommy Robinson, leader of the extreme far right posted fourteen times on X about the issues in the town, reaching 1.3 million accounts, according to British broadcaster, Sky News.

In an analysis by CAJ, the authors found that among the top 5% of posts by performance, content that was sympathies towards the violence was the most frequently published by account holders living in Great Britain, with other social media accounts with an influential capacity, posted comments such as “foreigner raped granny and child in Ballymena, BURN THEM OUT” (CAJ, 2025: 12). Posts expressing solidarity with the protesters in the town and expressing sentiments that ‘other’ newcomer populations are dangerous, extended beyond NI. As one prominent social media user (@radiogenoa) was reported to have posted:

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

In only a few short lines, what would have been a minority and fringe opinion, coalesced with wider contextual factors to add new dimensions:

1. People are not who they say they are
2. You cannot trust public servants
3. There is an imminent threat

Analysis

In a report by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ, 2025), the authors proposed that unlike events taking place elsewhere, the incidents in NI, particularly in regard to the immigration issue are distinct. They are distinct, argued the report, due to the presence of paramilitary structures that enable violence to take place. It even goes as far as to suggest the involvement (tacit or otherwise) of paramilitary groups:

It is well documented that there is a particular problem of the involvement of elements of loyalist paramilitarism in racist violence and intimidation, whether sanctioned by the leaders of groups or factions or not, or involving persons with paramilitary connections. (CAJ, 2025: 5).

Insights from previous disorder

Beyond the Spark 1 (BTS 1)

The original Beyond the Spark (BTS1) (Walsh, 2021) study was commissioned by the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) in the aftermath of the widespread disorder that occurred across Northern Ireland during spring and summer 2021 following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. The study sought to understand the experiences, motivations, and perceptions of children and young people involved in, or affected by, the violence and unrest. Drawing upon interviews with young people, practitioners, community representatives, and statutory agencies, the report situated the disturbances within a broader context of social deprivation, community tension, paramilitary influence, trauma, and the long-term impacts of conflict.

A central finding of BTS 1 was that the disorder could not be understood simply as spontaneous “anti-social behaviour” or politically motivated rioting. Rather, the violence emerged from the interaction of multiple ecological stressors operating at individual, family, community, and structural levels. Many young people described feelings of boredom, frustration, disconnection, and emotional strain following prolonged pandemic restrictions. In areas already characterised by poverty, educational disengagement, limited opportunities, and weakened trust in institutions, the lifting of restrictions created conditions in which collective unrest could rapidly escalate.

The study highlighted how relationships, often at a local level, accelerated mobilisation, and normalised participation in violence in communities that had already experienced significant violence over decades. Online content functioned both as a mechanism for organising activity and as a source of symbolic status and entertainment.

Importantly, BTS 1 identified the continuing influence of coercive community dynamics and paramilitary-associated actors in some locations. While direct organisational control over the riots varied across areas, young people frequently described environments where violence had become culturally normalised and where intimidation, territoriality, and identity-based tensions remained embedded within local social ecologies. The report argued that these dynamics reflected unresolved legacies of conflict alongside contemporary experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

The study also emphasised that young people’s involvement was not uniform. Some participants were directly engaged in violence, others were peripheral observers, while many experienced fear, anxiety, or restrictions on movement because of the unrest. This complexity challenged simplistic binary distinctions between “offenders” and “victims.” The report instead advocated for a public health and trauma-informed understanding of youth violence that recognised children’s vulnerability alongside accountability.

Across interviews, practitioners repeatedly highlighted reductions in universal youth provision, fragmented support pathways, and difficulties engaging young people before crises emerged. BTS 1 therefore argued for earlier intervention, sustained relationship-based youth work, trauma-informed practice, and stronger community infrastructures capable of providing safe spaces, trusted adults, and meaningful opportunities for participation and belonging.

Methodologically, the BTS1 study developed a multi-level analytical framework that examined how structural inequalities, community environments, peer dynamics, online influences, and individual experiences interacted to shape young people’s perceptions and behaviours during periods of collective disorder. The report concluded that episodic riots should not be treated as isolated incidents, but rather as manifestations of deeper social, political, and emotional conditions affecting children and communities.

These findings provide an important foundation for the current study. While the social and political context surrounding the 2025 Ballymena unrest differs in important respects, particularly regarding the prominence of anti-immigration narratives and wider international influences linked to far-right mobilisation, many of the underlying vulnerabilities identified in BTS 1 remain highly relevant. In particular, the earlier study offers a useful framework for examining how social exclusion, identity tensions, trauma, online amplification, community mistrust, and weakened protective infrastructures, may continue to shape young people’s experiences and interpretations of contemporary unrest.

In summary, previous research has shown that collective violence is often symbolic of much deeper, more entrenched, and largely ignored social issues. In recent examples, the serious violence that has taken place in the NI context, has been viewed not as chaotic or as crazy, but as communicative of tensions that had festered in communities that feel ignored and forgotten. Youth participation is central to the most visible signs, with young people widely captured taking part in serious violence, and previous research, including BTS, illustrated the potential, within such contexts, for vulnerable children and young people to be exploited.

Wider Context

In 2024, riots were sparked in England, UK. Following the tragedy in Southport, where a 17-year-old male killed three children and injured several others, serious collective violence spread (Andall, 2025). Disinformation was an important feature of this contagion (Brey, 2026), with one report that it was helped to spread via the social media/messaging app, Telegram. These posts claimed that a Muslim asylum seeker was responsible for a knife attack. In fact, the perpetrator was a British-born Christian, but of Rwandan decent. This triggered serious violence across 27 towns (ISD, 2024) and moved several fringe far-right groups online from memberships that

grew in one case, from 44 to almost 15000 in the days after the attack (ISD, 2024). Indeed, there is a pattern that among those actively engaged online or offline, they do not often see themselves as far right; or extremist. Instead, they are concerned citizens-mothers, fathers, who need to protect those that they love (Andall, 2025). What is more, the perpetrator is characterised as a monster (Tyerman and van Isacker, 2025).

Friday 3rd May 2024, RTE News, the Irish state broadcasters, led with a headline, ‘unfolding chaos’, to characterise the scenes in the nation’s capital-Dublin. The scenes were concerning and curious, with one well-depicted image of a horse-drawn cart charging into riot police (McRedmond, 2025). Serious collective violence had moved from the fringes to the mainstream, becoming the central policy priority. It was estimated that millions of Euros in property damage was caused, however, the true impact was likely to be even greater. It was not an isolated event. At the end of 2023, and in the run-up to peak commercial season, the city centre was set alight as protesters engaged in serious violence and others, protesting the knife attack on children and creche workers by a foreign national, looted shops for high-value items (Dikwal-Bot et al., 2025). Indeed, it was this earlier event that illustrated the power of social media and where phrases such as ‘Ireland is full’, and ‘Irish lives matter’, were coined. It is also where influencers, such as MMA fighter, Conor McGregor, used his platform to stoke those tensions, using aggressive language such as, ‘Ireland-we are at war’ (Copestake, 2023). The morning after this violence, An Garda Siochana confirmed 34 arrests. This, however, precipitated months of anti-immigrant protests beyond the city centre of the capital. In February of the following year, while not nearly as violent, a major anti-immigration march took place in Dublin once again, illustrating the mobilisation power that remained, despite arrests. Into Spring of 2024, encampments within some central city communities escalated tensions once again, with AGS dismantling one camp in May 2024. Throughout May, this escalation was clear, with protests around plans to house asylum seekers in County Wicklow, arson attacks in Tallaght and the emergence of Coolock as a major flash point. Then, in June 2025, significant unrest in another small central Dublin community of Basin View, prompted by protesters against an immigration hostel, led to significant police engagement and the stabbing of a man outside a primary school (RTE, 2025).

In July 2025, only weeks following the Ballymena riots, serious violence also erupted in a relatively small but industrial town of Torre Pacheco in the Murcia region of Spain. In an eerily similar context, the violence also lasted for three nights (Forero, 2025). The trigger was the alleged assault of an elderly man by three younger males of north African descent. Following the circulation of a video of the incident on social media (Brey, 2026), the local council agreed to hold a (peaceful) demonstration in support of the victim and to condemn the attack. However, violence erupted. This was despite calls by the pensioner and the police that the video that was circulating was unrelated to the incident. During the riots, the mayor of the large town advised those of a migrant background not to leave their homes. Telegram was widely believed to have been used as a means of organising the violence, however, not all of the communication was encrypted or coded. Local politician from the far-right Vox party said that mass immigration had facilitated the entry of violent perpetrators and had stolen peace from communities (Walker, 2025). An analysis of the events by The Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (Garves, 2025) proposes that a cocktail of conditions, including deprivation and far-right agitation, are critical components of such riots, and in an eerily predictive analysis, Calles and Martinez (2025:1), only months before the Torre-Pacheco riots, observed that:

The weakening of any of these factors [political consensus, intergroup contact, ethnic segmentation], as illustrated by the case of Torre-Pacheco, could increase intergroup conflict in the coming years.

In a comparative analysis of both Southport and Torre-Pacheco, Brey (2026) suggested that both incidents were in response to an act of violence, but that it was not the act itself that sparked the violence, but the backgrounds of those who perpetrated it. She adds that beyond the spark, similar contexts were observed in the form of local mobilisation and mass disinformation. This reflects much wider shifts since 2015, when the media framing of refugees and asylum seekers has become increasingly wrapped up in negative terminology (Amores et al. 2020), and where the threat-perception has been amplified (Olea, 2023).

We see this also in other EU countries, including Sweden. While the global evidence between immigration and violent crime is low, concerns around immigration have become more common as demographics change rapidly. In their analysis of changes in Sweden, Sarnecki et al. (2025) observed a significant upward trend in violence nationally over a twenty-year period. Interestingly, contrary to popular opinion, this increase was not associated with population shifts. Using a case-control design, the authors observed that violence had increased across municipalities, not only those with increasing minority populations in them.

Key themes emerge from this analysis of the wider context. First, migration has become a more dominant focus of political discourse across the EU context. In our daily lives, the narratives consistent with anti-immigration have become more visible and the language has become increasingly volatile, elevating polarisation within societies. This language of population change and demographic shifts has also been conflated with perceptions of community safety, contributing, in part, to the rapid growth of populist and far right movements, changing entire political landscapes. Several commentators have observed that this has also been driven by algorithmic amplification-the potential for social media algorithms to exploit the fear in society by promoting posts, comments and contributions that only add to this, whether they are accurate or not. Indeed, the challenge of misinformation combined with rapid communicative potential and ‘click-bait’ cultures, have been associated with increasing levels of serious and collective violence.

As identified in the earlier Beyond the Spark study, participation in disorder was often less about coherent political ideology and more connected to identity, emotion, peer dynamics, excitement, fear, and community narratives.

While the vast majority of public concern regarding immigration does not translate into violence, a growing body of evidence suggests

that periods of rapid social change, perceived competition, political mistrust and online misinformation can create environments in which hostility becomes normalised and collective violence becomes more likely. In France, there have been multiple incidents of urban unrest that has been linked with issues of policing. In the UK, the well-publicised ‘Southport Riots’ were driven by significant misinformation on social media. In Spain, the riots in Torre Pacheco were linked to anti-immigration sentiment tied to issues of gender-based violence-particularly sexual violence. In Dublin too, serious unrest was linked to anti-immigration stances that combined with pre-existing national challenges with housing and in Sweden, a country once known for the very low levels of violence, had become synonymous with demographic changes, an increase in identity politics and more visible violence occurring in the country.

Summary

In summary, the Ballymena riots did not emerge in a vacuum. While rooted in local context and grievances, they also align with wider trends. These trends are characterised by increased polarised, greater acceptance of populism, anti-immigration/immigrant mobilisation, distrust in government and public bodies, and digitally amplified collective anger. This has manifested in different ways across different spaces, but with uncanny similarity- is observed as significant increases in civil unrest and an increase in serious collective violence. Similarly, the events in Ballymena in 2025 cannot be understood solely through the immediate incidents that preceded the violence. Rather, they must be examined within broader social, political and emotional landscapes shaped by insecurity, identity anxieties, economic pressures, online misinformation, and changing community dynamics.

In a report published by The Detail, outlining the result of a Freedom of Information Request, it was reported that multi-agency representatives had concerns that some of those children involved in the Ballymena riots could have been victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE), implying a level of coercion, threat and/or intimidation to participate in the violence. This confirms an earlier report published in the regional newspaper, the Belfast Telegraph, that all under 18s known to police for participating in the riots, had been ‘referred’ as suspected cases of CCE (Tunney, 2026). (It must be stressed, however, that the context of this word ‘referral’ is unclear as is the process that is implied by it).

Aims of the current study

Northern Ireland’s post-conflict landscape creates unique vulnerabilities in periods of heightened social tension. Existing divisions, historical narratives of threat and defence, and longstanding patterns of segregation can shape how communities interpret rapid demographic and cultural change. The Ballymena riots are not intended to isolate one specific community, but rather to use this example as a case study, in the context of broader transnational trends, on what could protect wider society from similar incidents of serious violence.

This requires moving away from oversimplified analyses of complex issues and avoiding the trap of quick but less well-informed responses that seek to address symptoms rather than causes. This report seeks to understand the 2025 Ballymena riots through the perspectives of young people themselves. Rather than focusing solely on criminal acts or political rhetoric, the study explores how young people interpreted the events, the meanings they attached to them, the fears and frustrations they experienced, and the wider social environments in which the disorder emerged.

Understanding collective violence requires moving beyond immediate triggers and asking deeper questions about belonging, insecurity, identity, trust, opportunity, and hope. This report is an attempt to contribute to that understanding.

Thus, the aims of this study are to:

1. Use Ballymena as a case study, describe the conditions that contributed to an escalation of violence
2. Explore the extent to which these conditions recur across multiple episodes of collective violence
3. Propose a protective ecosystem that could impede future incidents of collective violence in terms of frequency and impact

Methodology

Conceptual framing

This study draws on a number of frameworks to enhance the insights that can be derived from the data and to move beyond ‘what happened’ towards a preventative lens.

SET

Social Ecological Theory (SET) proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) has been instructive in the context of understanding complex social issues, including serious violence. Fundamentally, Bronfenbrenner argues that across the ecology of an individual are interpersonal influences that engage and interact in bi-directional ways. In the context of serious violence, individual factors interact with the home, school, community and wider state systems, facilitate or impede the occurrence of serious violence (Farrington, Gaffney & Ttofi, 2017). Fundamental to understanding issues, such as the violence that occurred in Ballymena, is understanding the relationship between the individuals, their local relationships (micro), the wider community (meso) and the state (macro) over time, and as communities shift and evolve (chrono). Ahlin and Atunes (2021) have extended this to directly and overtly align SET with youth violence prevention. Put simply, they state that ‘violence happens in context [with] different inputs shaping it at various levels of the environment’ (Ahlin and Atunes, 2021: 17).

The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR)

This study draws on this ecological appreciation and extends it to understand what actually occurred (or did not). As noted by Solomos (2011), truly understanding the causes of collective violence requires an appreciation of systemic context within which they emerge.

The CFIR initially conceptualised by Damschroder et al. (2009) and updated (Damschroder et al., 2022) is a widely used and comprehensive framework that helps identify the factors that facilitate or impede activities in real-world settings (Reardon et al., 2025), such as in communities (see Figure 1).

This framework is particularly useful for this study because the focus is not on understanding the ‘riot’ in isolation, but the characteristics of the social ecology that made serious violence possible. By understanding this, we can not only understand the emergence of serious violence retrospectively but achieve better and more protective ecosystems to prevent it occurring again in the future. The domains of relevance to the CFIR and to this study include:

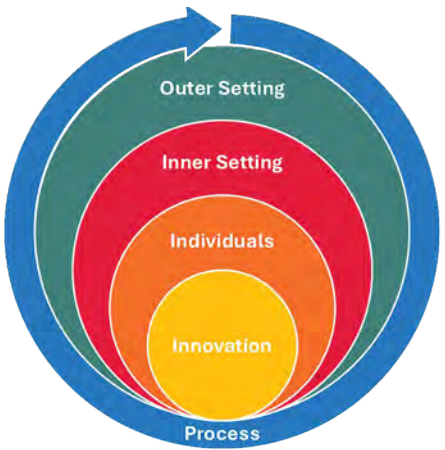


Table 1: CFIR Framework

Domain	Descriptor
Innovation/Intervention Characteristics	Existing prevention/diversion programmes, outreach capacity, digital engagement and crisis response capability
Outer Setting	Political climate, immigration narratives, deprivation, social media ecosystem
Inner Setting	Schools, youth services, community organisations
Individuals Involved	Youth perceptions, identity, fear, belonging, susceptibility to mobilisation
Process	Escalation pathways, communication failures, mobilisation dynamics, response coordination

Thus, the CFIR enables the findings to be analysed not only at an individual level (e.g., those who took part), but towards a wider systemic context (family, community, organisational and public body). The CFIR enables an examination of the wider environmental conditions that shape escalation, contribute to prevention and illustrate opportunities for future protection.

Data Collection

Youth and police interviews

During Phase 1, in-depth interviews (see appendix x) allowed local lived experience to emerge. Rather than attempting to fit those narratives into themes developed a priori (e.g., using data from previous research), this facilitated a more authentic understanding of the issue to emerge. Interviews with police involved in-depth conversations with four senior police officers who had operational leadership during the riots. These interviews took place virtually and lasted on average 42 minutes.

Interviews with young people were facilitated through a local youth club nested within the area affected. All young people who were interviewed either live in the area and/or attend the youth club. All young people were affected by the several nights of violence and many were present during it.

Sense checking focus groups provided an opportunity following the first two phases of analyses to assess whether or not the details were adequately captured and sufficiently well-articulated so as to describe what local young people and professionals observed and experienced, as well as to explore the extent to which the framing of those local experiences in the wider empirical context, was helpful.

Data analysis

A hybrid thematic and framework analysis approach was used, employing initial inductive coding to then compare deductively with insights from previous research. This provided the basis for augmenting a community-informed analysis from those directly impacted by the riots alongside a thematic comparison with earlier findings from other riots.

Phase 1: Inductive in-depth interviews with policing leaders and young people affected by and/or involved in the violence were analysed using thematic analysis

Phase 2: Deductive framework analysis was used to compare interview data with previous insights

Phase 3: Sense checking focus groups were analysed thematically

Phase 4: Consolidation of data using: SET as primary conceptual lens; CFIR as systems analytical framework; PCE to identify protective factors

The focus is on understanding the lived experiences of those affected but with a view to maximising on these by combining with wider research to engaged in prevention-oriented learning.

Findings

Phase 1: Initial Themes Emerging from Interviews

Old Harm New Hands

Interviews were intentionally framed to capture less about what had happened during the actual riots (which were of course observed only across a particularly short period of time) and more about what the context was in the longer lead-up to those events and how (if at all), the context had appeared to change following the riots.

A number of themes emerged that appeared to capture the essence of the Ballymena context, in ways that also appeared to be indistinct from other areas and quite comparable to the previous study on the 2021 riots. These included: **layers of contextual harm; contradictions in context; and the importance of stories.**

Layers of contextual harm

Across interviews, most young people reported feeling connected to community. A very strong sense that this connection was driven mostly by familiarity. Many young people knew all of those around them and in fact, many of those around them were family. Extended often, but family, nonetheless.

I know my auntie lives behind me. My nanny lives one and then down. Loads of family. Then I'd always get somewhere to go. (YP3)

My mum was a, grew up, was a piper and my grandad was a Lambeg drummer. (YP2)

It's like everyone knows everyone. (YP7)

This sense of familiarity was described, at least initially, as providing a sense of security. It was implied if not made explicit. If you know who is around you, there's a chance you feel safer.

I think that's why I liked it so much. Because, you know that you're secured. You know what I mean? You know, you can just literally go out and somebody's there. (YP2)

Many of the young people referred not only to the people, but the resources. While limited, they made best use of what was available-moving between them on a very frequent basis.

But yeah, no, my childhood home here was like literally here we go up like he would come home from school and straight out here... I was just home school. Youth club. (YP2)

In fact, this was more than a routine, it appeared that the environments that these young people moved between, were chronic. The word chronic is used because it demonstrated more than a pattern of what did happen but illustrated what did not. As one young person noted, this movement reflected something akin to self-imposed isolation.

I see whenever I go places, I just feel out of place. I hate it. I'd rather be here, like, because everything's just nice. You just go up the street, everything's fine. You see? You go out like fancy places. They're all like this and that, and they're like, I don't like it at all. No, I don't like it. It doesn't sit just, you know...like you're gonna end up in big fancy places and they're big cold dinners and you're like, I mean, you have to do this and do that. Like, get the fuck. (YP3)

There might be an idea in here that there's a strong sense of community but that is juxtaposed against not feeling you belong anywhere else. It creates a contradiction

During one interview, I probed this a little further, interpreting the response of this one young person to mean that even when the limited resources available become unavailable, they would rather choose to remain there than seek similar outlets elsewhere.

THE CLUB SHUT FOR TWO WEEKS, TWO WEEKS THIS YEAR OVER EASTER AND THEN BOTH OF THEM TWO WEEKS, NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN WE ALL STOOD OUTSIDE THE FRONT OF THE CLUB (YP1)

As a later participant told me:

Because we don't feel safe anywhere else... Yeah. Literally, like as soon as the club's shut. That's what we do is we sit outside the club. (YP4)

This illustrated something important. While young people describe themselves as feeling connected, this connection appears to be driven by the disconnection they simultaneously feel from those outside of the local estate. Later interviews explored the idea further to understand if these participants observed any harm that can arise (unintentionally) from being isolated. While comfortable, familiar and maybe even protective, it was worth exploring whether isolation could induce other forms of harm.

Low academic motivation

A persistent theme across most interviews was a discontent with school-particularly during the primary to post-primary transition. Many spoke about their general dislike of school, the lack of positive relationships with teaching staff, and the perception that within formal school settings, they were unlikely to achieve very much. In a logical enough link, perceptions of education appeared to influence engagement, which in turn influenced outcomes.

I wasn't really in school. (YP2)

I wasn't bad in school, but no, didn't like it. But I was always getting told off (YP3)

My attendance last year hit rock bottom and actually dropped 15%. 15, 15. And then this year it's currently sitting on 83. And we're only like a few weeks in 83. (YP1)

A persistent theme across most interviews was a discontent with school-particularly during the primary to post-primary transition. Many spoke about their general dislike of school, the lack of positive relationships with teaching staff, and the perception that within formal school settings, they were unlikely to achieve very much. In a logical enough link, perceptions of education appeared to influence engagement, which in turn influenced outcomes.

The participants also implied that these challenges were not limited to them, or to this sample, but reflected a wider challenge-at least among their peers.

Nobody from my primary school went to college (YP1)

Interestingly, many young people who I had spoken with during this phase, saw alternatives to formal education via non-formal education. Specifically, youth work. While the sample was of course bias (being in a youth centre), it was interesting to note that they saw this environment about being more than a venue or a place to go when formal education had stopped, but some saw it as a platform for further education and even employment.

I'm doing youth work. Yeah. Level two work with young people. Children, youth work. And then level three next year. And then go to Ulster. It's all been supported through the club. (YP2)

In this sense, youth work, delivered in context, provides an alternative basis for applied study-one that has not been fully appreciated-especially in contexts that can be harmful.

Whether or not they wanted to engage as a means of continued engaged and/or employment, however, there were other motivating factors. For some, their ongoing engagement created a community infrastructure that provided opportunities to take part and to volunteer.

I would volunteer. Yeah. Like, when did the proper thing, like. And then just do it like at nights or something. (YP4)

For others, however, the significant use of this community resource, which I had observed myself each night I was on site), was not only because of the activities available, or the pathways to progression, but sometimes because it provided something more fundamental- food.

And that's the thing too, like my mum and dad brought me up or you don't judge. Like I would say, I come from a working-class background.

I come from poverty. Most-most people in this estate, most people in this town, come from poverty... Well, it means that they would come in [to the club] and would be serving toast in the background- a lot of toast. Do you know what I mean? They're hungry (YP2)

And [the estate] always been in trouble for it too, has it? Yeah. Like there's [the estate] would be probably one of the worst, like back in the day. Whereas now there's nothing. Well, there is, but there isn't if you get me like what? (YP5)

This one excerpt, while framed in a particular way, using a specific example, did reflect a wider sense across the sample that many of those using these resources lived in a context where there was not an abundance of very much. Within homes, many families were known to struggle. As a community, there was a sense that the few resources available were precious. This also contributed to a separate but important area of disconnection. Because what united many of this sample, was the lens of limitations. They had limited assets but others outside of this local area neither appreciated nor cared. It helped to bond them internally but also facilitated exclusion externally.

This was most evident in school. While it was the norm for many young people to leave the area to go to school-one of the few ways that facilitates external contact routinely-for those experiencing difficulties, these opportunities become less common, more fragmented and increasingly bound with difficulties.

Yeah. What, what age were you when you first got suspended? (Researcher)

My first year of suspension was 11. (YP8)

It was an argument over the phone. I was sitting in class, and my teacher won't take that down to the office. And I was like, no. She's like, yeah. I was like, no, I'm not. No, it's my problem, not yours. You're not taking it. You could have asked me to put it in my pocket. Take it out. No. Fuck off, fuck off... It's got to the point where I've got over, I would say 90 to 150 suspensions. I spent more time at home (YP1)

And yet, aside from the initial rose-coloured coating, with all the sentiments relating to belonging, it was evident, across all interviews, that very few of the young people actually feel safe. Yes, they knew the community well-the landscape, the built environment and indeed, many of the people in it, however, when it came to risk, harm and experiences of violence, the community had another set of characteristics.

IT'S THE TYPE OF PLACE IT IS. IT'S YOU WOULDN'T FEEL SAFE WALKING LIKE IF YOU WERE A TEENAGER, LIKE A CHILD (YP3)

I NEVER FEEL COMPLETELY SAFE. IT'S BALLYMENA. I DON'T KNOW WHO'S OUT THERE, WHAT TYPE OF GUYS- I DON'T KNOW, COKED UP. ARE HIGH OR JUST DRUNK OUT OF HIS MIND. HE MIGHT ATTACK ME OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT... I'LL NEVER WANT TO PUT MY GUARD DOWN IN CASE ANYTHING HAPPENS. (YP5)

What was evident that this sense of safety (and threat) was nested within social relations. It was not specific to any one domain, but spread across family, school and community.

... like my mom's an alcoholic. My dad smoked and all the stuff that got there. I hate it despises me. Like I see someone drinking around. I can't like I can't hate it, but I've seen what it... but see my uncle, on my mum's side of him, he, he like, was that heavily [addicted] that you put anything in front of him, he just snorted or smoked or anything. Like he got diagnosed with schizophrenia. (YP3)

At a community level, two indicators were most common. On one hand drug availability, the visible signs of individuals under the influence and the presence of organised individuals providing the community with drugs, all contributed to a problem. Drug availability and widespread use as an indicator of harm

It's not it's not- it's, it's not hard to get a hold of in a sort of way. (YP3)

In this context, even as young children, participants understood that parents were concerned for their safety. Whether real or perceived, this concern was communicated and understood.

Down there you don't feel there's too many people could just. You could go in your back garden and feel safe because anybody could have walked up an alleyway. Or is it my mum? My mum? I left her like six. My mum never really let me out in the back garden because she didn't feel it was safe. (YP4)

But it was not because of unknowns. It an environment that is both close physically and close genetically, conflict can also arise between family members.

There's too much family history, so it's hard to keep up with all of it. (YP6)

My brother was very similar. Yeah. Always punched and stuff. Taking his anger out. (YP1)

However, most physical and sexual violence appeared to be observed in the context of non-familial relationships. This ranged in severity from serious bullying and weapon-enabled violence, through to what had characteristics of paramilitary crime.

One time I think about eight of them ganged up on me and had, I don't really know what you call it, a gang fight. Anyway, they wrestled me to the ground, and the rest just kicked me while I was down fighting him. (YP5)

Someone got stabbed in the tunnel. Like the tunnel down there. No way. And then one of my dad's friends got stabbed and in, like, a couple of years ago. And then obviously, the Mitchell case was, like, down the road from my dad's house as well. (YP7)

Like last week there was a pipe bomb, but in front of a pipe bomb through your car at the front of one shops last week?...Yeah, my dad sent it was the UDA because I said to him because he's over in [the estate], so he didn't know anything about it. So, my mum rang me and was like, there's been a car parked out in front, like burnt out in front of our house. And I was like, what? (YP2)

Despite the apparent links with paramilitarism (symbolic and anecdotal), most of the participants were reticent about linking paramilitary activity with wider community challenges.

I wouldn't say [there's a lot of paramilitaries]. There's not a lot. It used to be worse. (YP7)

Whether this was because of a genuine shift or a genuine blindness, it is not clear. Another possibility is that it was neither. That the serious violence, potentially involving individuals connected with paramilitary groups, reflected a wider set of community norms and expectations. It was in fact quite evident that violence was commonly tolerated, even endorsed as a way of responding to difficulties, at least within certain parameters.

You're not really brought up to be soft... That's just the way this place is. You just. That's it. There's nothing to do about it. (YP3)

And in this context, where threats were perceived and violence was a legitimate tool, using existing community structures to exert influence appeared to be taking place. As one young person noted, a group that emerged out of a local band had been then intimidating this young person.

It's not just with the adults I'm talking about like, I don't know if you've heard of it. I don't know if they [the others] mentioned it, but the [gang name]?... for a while there, there was like-it was gone like really bad. They were like starting with the juniors and stuff like that... But that was one of our main worries last few weeks has been like that... Like I get scared of like you've got and they're all still in the grip and I'm standing in the corner (YP4)

It was also observed among adults, who engaged in aggression towards young people perceived to be from an immigrant background.

Young people seeing the aggression of adults towards younger incomers (YP5)

Like the there's some, there's adults that's like, they would ask them where they're from and they'll go up over, up on the kid.

Yeah. (YP2)

Expectations that there are threats everywhere and high acceptance of violence as the normal way to deal with things. Why? Maybe because it's one of the few resources available? While not used as a first resort, it becomes not only likely but probable when perceived as a last resort. This is particularly the case with regard to gender-based violence that was perceived to be and discussed as endemic.

Perceptions of gender-based violence

Given the theme of the study, and the highly publicised motivations for the serious violence, it was no surprise that when participants were asked about violence against women and girls, the initial responses aligned with the social media rhetoric implying predatory and sexualised behaviour of mostly non-national males.

Like there were times that there was once sitting, shouting at me around town, like during the day as well. Like it was me and my friends. And there was a big group of men shouting stuff at us, but it wasn't in our language. We didn't know what they were shouting. And that like that happened every time I was in town, and I got followed by them before them shouting stuff at me. (YP7)

This excerpt could indeed provide support to this rhetoric; in part confirming what many had believed to be behind the kinds of frustrations that sparked the Ballymena riots, but at the same person went on to say only a minute later:

Like there's always a lot of men that talk to me, but I always play it off as friendly. So then nothing comes from it and I'll always make sure my friends there, it's just, I think for teenage girls, it's a wee bit scarier because you don't know what's going to happen. (YP7)

It was not an isolated comment. As interviews moved between various young people, the same kind of sentiments were shared.

They were talking about my mum. They're saying I had a great bum, but like, obviously more vulgar than that and all that. And I was just like, when I'm a teenage girl walking by myself, say, I was a wee bit nervous. So, I just because I took a there was like, when you're walking past Sainsbury's, there's a bridge you can go over. (YP 8)

But there was other like men from here that said it as well. It's not just the Roma men. Yeah, but walking down the street that most of the riots were most of them. You couldn't walk them straight like that, basically. Yeah. And they'd be like, shouting at you, spitting at you, asking you for your Snapchat and all. Yeah, they spit like they actually hit you. We were- it was the 12th day, and my friend was walking through, and she got hit in the ass by one of like. That's how bad it was. (YP9)

Because if you look, there's multiple stories of them kind of men. We girls around here...Can't walk through certain parts of town without feeling creeped on by them. And it's genuinely disgusting. You can see them. You, you get they turn around and they're just like watching. (YP1)

This was more than about expressing who was at fault for feeling unsafe-rather-the young people were communicating something about the frustration with their own experiences-lived as harm but portrayed as being caused by others. Their frustration lay in local men, as they framed it, taking no accountability for the sense of fear and threat that girls and young women had because of them.

Well, me and my friend, we're sitting at the bar again, but this was a couple of years ago when I was still in school. Like in our school uniforms. Yeah. This grown man came up to us and said, just, you're beautiful. If only I was 20 years younger. Yeah. And we're like, I don't think that's what kind of saying like this man's nearly 60. And he said to two girls. (YP7)

No... the majority of them would not take one bit of accountability. Like, genuinely. That's the way I see it, anyway. (YP2)

Collectively, these accounts implied that things did not deteriorate in the months before the riots, nor are not any safer than they were before. The cause of girls and women feeling unsafe and the victimisation that comes from any female experiencing violence, is not, it appears, ethnically determined but a wider social challenge that is gender constructed. It is in the daily, the routine and even in the familiar, that threat existed before the riots and continues to exist after.

However, this is not to say that young people were obvious to, ignored the fact or underestimated the changes that have taken place in the town. Each interview acknowledged demographic shift, perceiving that changes have occurred rapidly, with the most obvious changes taking place over only a small number of years. What is important, however, is that they held this observation about changes in demographics, and simultaneously, held views that there no observable increase in harmful situations.

A connected point is what happens if and when young people did find themselves in harmful situations. While it was common for the sample to report feeling safe at home, there was a sense that recognising the victimisation of one person was elevated above the victimisation of another. In one, quite personal reflection on this, a young person outlined how their own family ignored them when she spoke up about familial abuse, but were later observed on the streets-along with the alleged perpetrator-violently and aggressively taking part in actions that were being portrayed as defending the safety of girls and women.

They all turned their backs on me because what? Because I spoke up my abuse. (YP2)

Everyone's quite close to have each other's backs, but they also can like turn quite easily that way. Like if you could be quite close one day, and then they do one thing and you have a whole straight on you like really? (YP7)

Indeed, many of the account contained contradictions. Starting with the safety, but in contexts that were not safe.

I had, like, me and another girl who's also in here. We were sitting like, by ourselves, and this man came up to us, and we had a junkie shouting at us across the road. I don't know who he was

Mum doesn't really like me being out at night because of everything that happens. It's not just, like run here. It was bad for a while. Like someone got stabbed (YP7)

A contradiction in the harm that was hidden until it exploded to become visible to those outside. In the sense of closeness, but in. way that is highly fragile and dynamic.

If you felt unsafe, you could have just went to anybody. They're all nice people. (YP3)

I knew if I took that bridge, I'd have someone's house I could go to because I knew like down that road. So, if they were following me and I didn't feel comfortable, I could go to their houses. (YP7)

But I would say it's really tight knit community. But at the same time, it's really not. Do you know what I mean? (YP2)

The implication of these excerpts being then, there is risk, but the availability of support is reassuring. Thus, a sense of safety is not a metric of perception of risk or likelihood of harm, but access to protection even in the presence of harm

Probably the most obvious and most commonly cited contradiction, was the stance that males were taking publicly, while being directly engaged in, or tacitly approving of, similar behaviours that reduce the sense of safety among girls and young women.

IT'S SUCH A HYPOCRITICAL FUCKING WORLD. THEY ALL. THEY ALL LIVE IN LIKE MY GRANNY. THIS IS WHAT MAKES ME SO ANGRY, TOO, ABOUT PEOPLE LIKE THAT, BECAUSE I WROTE THE WHOLE THING. BECAUSE I WENT THROUGH IT. DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? MY OWN FAMILY TURNED THEIR BACKS ON ME AND THEN WENT AND STOOD BECAUSE IT WAS SOMEBODY ELSE'S CHILD. IT WAS SOMEBODY ELSE'S PROBLEM. DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? (YP2)

I THINK I'M MORE I'M SCARED IN MY OWN TOWN WITH THE OLD WHITE MAN STUFF BECAUSE OF THE SHIT I WENT THROUGH TO DO, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? LIKE MY GRANDDAD, HE'S STANDING ACROSS THE ROAD AND I'D START RUNNING UP. AND EVEN THOUGH I HAVE A RESTRAINING ORDER ON HIM. (WP3)

In sum, the excerpts point towards not a new form of harm underpinning the context just prior to the riots that took place in Ballymena, but what appears to be layered and systemic harms that are not only experienced directly but vicariously among young people who navigate these spaces with due consideration of threat and anticipation of risk. What appears to be different, however, is the changes taking place demographically and while the harm itself has not appeared to change in form or increase in frequency, the hands that cause this harm has developed. Rather than being frustrated at the harm itself, the voices of young people imply it is the hands by which the harm is caused is of greatest concern.

Motivated by Converging Frustrations

At the heart of this study was understanding how young people experienced and made sense of the serious violence. While some preferred to dive straight into the peak escalation, most young people were keen to bring me back, as an outsider, to understand what has motivated people onto the streets. Only one young person actually nested the issues in Ballymena squarely in the context of immigration and wider challenges perceived to be affecting many parts of the EU. For them, people were motivated to come out, not because of violence or victimisation, or a need to protect any group, but because of immigration itself. Interestingly, this was connected to wider sentiments outside of this specific town.

THEY'RE GETTING THEM BOATS BECAUSE THATS WHAT THEY'RE ALL TRYING TO SAY, 'STOP THE BOATS' AND ALL BECAUSE IT WASN'T...ITS JUST IMMIGRANTS JUST COMING IN AND COMING IN (YP4)

THEY'RE NOT TRYING TO STOP THEM. SO THAT'S WHY THEY HAD THE WHOLE THING AND STOPPED THE BOATS. BUT THE POLICE ARE JUST TRYING TO LURE THE BOATS IN. THEY WERE THEY WERE GIVING THEM ESCAPE ROUTES TO GET OUT. (YP4)

Fuelled by longstanding frustrations but sparked by single incident-the riots were not necessarily about the allegation of a sexual assault, or the desire to protect women, but presented an opportunity to be visible-to be heard.

They're just I think they seen it happened too many times in a row, and people got fed up with it. And then they did get targeted. Yeah. Because there's like rumour out all over town, like everywhere. Spray painted on walls. (YP8)

This was an analysis reinforced by one of the policing participants. As they described, the town had gone through considerable changes and there had been a fear, connected to wider concerns, that the pace of change could be maintained, the implication of which would be total transformation of what had been familiar.

They are panicking and don't know what its [the town] is going to look like in 5- or 10-year's time. (PSNI)

A broader consensus, however, was that it was facilitated by a frustration with women and girls being victimised at the hands of foreign nationals. In this context, 'the men just want to protect the women' (YP4). This was a consistent theme. Women victims. White men protectors. Foreign men predators.

And then when that girl was, you know, assaulted, it just sparked that flare where people couldn't keep their heads down. So that simple protest, which was meant to be peaceful, just sprung up like that...you know, it's like putting air or even the wood into a small spark that lights right up if you give it enough. (YP5)

It also appeared to be fuelled by the counter factual, with several young people talking not only about what had happened, but what could have happened. What might have happened to them, their friends, their mothers. Thus, if it could happen to these (quiet, innocent, vulnerable) girls, there was every likelihood-even probability that given the same conditions, it could happen to other girls.

I don't really know, because I know the two girls that it happened to. Like, I just didn't see them growing up and all. And one of the places was like, really one of the girls? You wouldn't even realize because she's just so nice. She's so quiet. She doesn't really speak to many people. And she I actually knew that she was away. I didn't know she walked by me that night and I didn't even realize. But she was going and she was with her friends. And then next minute I found out she had went. And it was actually the same night I was going to stay around the same place she was gonna stay. And my mom was like, I'm so glad you didn't go to that direction... I don't know, I think I was going to go the same way home. What does that make you think? That could have been me? (YP4)

But, this sense of threat of potential and the likely counter-factual was not only driven by a single event, but by the rumours and stories that had been circulating in the recent past. As one young woman recalled from a story about another incident:

That actually nearly got him. I know her, I know her very well. And then my roommate, one of them, offered her money to go with him, and she said no. And then they kept offering more and more and more and more. And it's just like I gave you money. Come. And then you know, I don't want to go more money. You know, go away. More money. Fuck off. Yeah. And I just got to the point where they don't listen. Right there. You have to scream at them for them to kind of just understand it. (YP1)

And I've heard about someone saying there's an [foreigner] down there watching them in the park and watching them round the place, taking photos. And I was like, that's not safe for a young child. Never mind a teenager who just wants to go out and spend time with friends (YP2)

The policing participants similarly referred to the rumours that had fuelled concern and implied few methods (or desire) to test them.

There had been a few incidents five to seven years ago with buses coming in from Romania. This caused issues because people were concerned who they were and how they were getting there...There are rumours bandied about gang master's and mafiosi, but I cannot get any evidence... There is a lot of myth. They say 'I reported this ten times'. I then looked at reports and there were none. There was no evidence. They weren't being reported for what they were saying was happening. There were no dog reports, rubbish reports, ASB. If a report came in and it wasn't a crime, I would report to the vulnerability hub. That was not there. The evidence of reports wasn't there. (PSNI)

But this seems to be part of a wider culture of storytelling and of the expectation that when people are painted with a particular colour-that sticks. As another young person said, the community has been well used to the names and identities of people being sprayed on to walls. This is usually not a good thing. It could label someone from inside the community as a thief. As a rapist. As a 'tout'. Or in this case, as a paedophile.

I mean, you can't be told if you don't be told by the neighbours or the estate, be told by the right side of the wall. And do you trust it? Yeah, because like there was a [name] and his name was put up on the wall and there was nothing done about it...And I mean. Done about it [by the police]. And the next minute he was out. But who puts the names up on the wall? I don't know that part. But whenever you see the name on the wall, do you believe it's true? Yeah, (YP1)

Comments such as these (and it was not isolated) say something about dynamics, tools and rules. Rules that if you breach the code, someone will decide your fate and that usually excuses violence. Not only can violence be used as a legitimate tool for the most serious 'breaches', but application of those rules starts early. There is a threshold of toleration. As the young person above implied-there was a frustration that despite pointing towards someone who was believed to be involved in a serious crime-the spray-paint was enough and the lack of response from public bodies was then sufficient for another form of punishment to be dispensed.

The Call to Congregate (but who is calling?)

Paramilitary influence or not?

Early in the study, it was my assumption that like other incidents, paramilitary influences would have been central to the escalation in tensions. I was working on the assumption that the area had elements of paramilitarism within it (as evidenced by the landmarks and graphics mapped onto gable walls) and within that context, would have been likely to be involved. This was partly confirmed:

And obviously it was heavily to do with the paramilitaries, obviously. Yeah. They just said to them, here, come down right this place. You've gone down the street. You see UDA signs everywhere. There's houses everywhere. Like it's not, you know what I mean? It's not stupid... Nobody wants to talk about it? I don't really care. Like people just saying, oh, why? Why is he asking me that? But I don't care. It doesn't affect me in any way. (YP3)

However, what was also interesting was that the role of paramilitaries appeared to be limited and appeared to be coherently thought through. In trying to mobilise people, there was some evidence of attempts to lever the control of paramilitaries to increase numbers. However, others were concerned about involving them.

They said they wanted to get the paramilitary down and all to see if it would help, but it seemed to escalate problems. Yeah, because everyone was thinking like, what if they do come? What happens? Like what's going to happen? (YP4)

Thus, it seems that there was an intentional objective to not include paramilitaries in the protest for a fear of what could result. This 'use' of paramilitary was not limited to the community. There was evidence from police that they had access to, engaged with and were reassured by paramilitary actors that they would not become involved and that no violence would take place.

We didn't expect it, but I've worked in Ballymena for 20 years. I'm now inspector and in all that time I've never felt so disillusioned. I felt really let down. I spoke to the main organiser for the Monday and assured him that I was there for the safety of everyone. I rugged him not to bring people on to the street. He said it was going to be lawful, but who comes to a peaceful protest with a balaclava. (PSNI)

Indeed, it was the observation of police that the role of known paramilitary linked individuals, that on the first night, they had sought to move people away when violence began to escalate. This was, however, unsuccessful.

I have regular contact with paramilitary leaders here and they were trying to get everyone home. At one point they openly said, 'we don't have a handle here'. (PSNI)

What was also very evident across these interviews was that the majority of the sample assumed it would be peaceful. If this appears naïve in hindsight, senior police responsible for the area had similar expectations.

I was commander on the night, and the numbers took us by surprise. A well-intended vigil was hijacked by a much bigger group who piggy-backed on to this protest, and it developed into a march and then into something else. (PSNI)

This expectation from police came from an engagement between police and community leaders with sufficient reputation as to engage in meaningful dialogue about the paramilitary group in the area would do or not do during the protest.

What was more common, however, without the specific probing, was that a network of communication (digital and in-person), contributed to the quick mobilisation of people on that first night of violence.

I got there like one person had done it, and then his mate would have said to his mate and his mate would have said, said, said, said. And it just goes off at about three. Yeah. Just like, you know, like the roots of the tree just goes down. Yeah. Because everybody comes out like that. (YP3)

So, what I found out was I, I like I only found out, obviously we all found out about protests that were supposed to happen... So you're supposed to meet there and we were going to do talks and stuff like that. And then all of a sudden, we were standing and then we were told that it was going to be like peaceful protest. And then we went down and that's when it [the violence] just started. We'll I thought we were just going to start doing like speeches. (YP9)

This surprise appears to have stemmed from several coalescing events. First, the range of motivations converging on to the streets combined with the capacity for those frustrations to be communicated widely and with speed. In reality, it seems that the mobilisation of people onto the streets was in part driven by concerned residents but was later hijacked by those living outside of the town as the vectors, using social media as the tools.

THE ONES THAT WERE LIKE MAKING IT LIKE LIVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ALL TO LET THEM KNOW THIS IS LIKE GOING THERE WILL BE PROBLEMS, ESCALATE IT... AYE, IT WAS JUST TIKTOKS WITH VIDEOS OF WHAT'S CALLED CARS, WINDOWS ON FIRE. (YP4)

BECAUSE WHAT'S GOT MOST TO SOCIAL MEDIA WAS SWAMPED WITH JUST PEOPLE LIVE STREAMING WHAT WAS HAPPENING, THE PROTESTS AND SEE IF YOU I DID, I DID NOTICE A VIDEO TO IT. IT'S CALLED GETTING JUSTICE TONIGHT (YP5)

AND THERE'S LIVES OF TIKTOK. LIKE EVERY NIGHT THERE WAS A LIVE. AND THAT'S WHY PEOPLE'S GETTING CAUGHT OUT BECAUSE OF THEIR LIVES. (YP7)

While there is no sufficient evidence of coordination, the combination proved enough to turn motivation and those congregated into something that few had set out to achieve-an escalation.

I think. What annoyed me about it was the fact that the amount of young people that came up to me and was like, oh, what's going on? What's going on? And I was standing there and I was like, how am I doing? But then they're like, say 13, 14. Like, how are they supposed to know? (YP2)

Unclear Pathways to Escalation

One of the more interesting features of the events, at least on the first night, was the general consensus among all of those involved in the study that the protest was intended to be peaceful. This aligns with much of the reporting at the time. As already noted, it was the policing view that they had been offered reassurances by those deemed to be in sufficient control of unrest, that no violence would be taking place. However, it did.

I DIDN'T THINK WE HAD ENOUGH POLICE IN THE GROUND. WE DIDN'T HAVE AN INTELLIGENCE PICTURE THAT SAID THIS WAS GOING TO BE VIOLENT. WE DIDN'T SEE IT COMING. (PSNI)

Understanding how the protest moved from beyond assurance to unrest is critical, particularly when the dynamics do not appear to match our traditional understanding. It was, and remains the view of police, that on the first night of escalation, there was no observable paramilitary influence, and among those arrested for their involvement, there were no known links to paramilitary groups.

Adults coercing the younger people was not organised-at least in terms of paramilitarism. (PSNI)

What is clear, however, is that a disproportionate of young males were involved. As noted by the senior police officer interviewed in the weeks that followed, twelve juveniles under seventeen years old had been arrested. For some, this surprise escalation came quickly and caused some alarm. As one young person described, they found themselves unintentionally stuck in the middle of the violence and unable to remove themselves.

So, then I remember my mum was standing in front of me, but then there was a guy from the estate standing in front of her, and we were literally like a trio like, like all the way in, like just behind us. Well, me and my mom would be in the way and like literally being dragged out of the whole thing. I was like, no, I can't. Because there were too many people. (Young person 3)

By this stage, the crowd had converged on the area where several immigrant families were living, and the violence had become increasingly more serious. Lives were now at risk.

[the address where the alleged sexual assault took place]. That was one of the houses that were burnt out. On that street, you maybe had 15 houses that were attacked-set alight or burgled. One was a British army veteran. There was no consistency to the attacks. There was a mob mentality. I watched them on screen setting the house on fire. Little did they know that there were people hiding in the attic. (PSNI)

The reason for the escalation is muddy and unclear. The key question is whether it was sporadic or whether there was an element of planning. Several young people believed that there was some inevitability even if the planning was limited.

I think a bit of both. I think some just wanted to destroy stuff, and I think some were actually just sort and saw what's called unbridled, released from their inhibitions and just full of rage...(YP2)

It might be different in other areas, but over here, since we're a smaller, more cramped town, a lot of people know each other because the place likes to stay connected, and we're a community that faced a lot. So, one, one domino fell. The rest fell. (YP5)

As with the mobilisation, for these young people, it is the outworking of embedded strain that the community had experienced over time and strains that were perceived to be being experienced alone. The escalation was a continuation of being heard. It served a functional as well as cathartic purpose.

I just don't think that the riots maybe should have got as bad as they did. I don't think I shouldn't start, but I think they just need it. They want it to be heard, and they want something done about it. (YP7)

It's an outpouring of frustration. (PSNI)

A much more vocal explanation for the escalation was placed in ways that policing policed the event. First, the police represented the state who had allowed (or done little to prevent) maintain community safety and/or to respond when that safety was compromised.

It's more fear, anger and what's it called? I don't know how to describe it. Just like stewing, just a combination of fear and anger that just whenever it explodes, it's just pure rage. I wouldn't say it's just pure anger. It's more like, I can't I guess I could say injustice, but it's more like just a feeling of like betrayal in your own government and just causing the rage in you, wanting to get back and take back the innocence, the judge, the injustice that they've happened to them. (YP5)

Not so much the presence of the police but the perception that punishment was required and the police were not engaging in punishing the right people (YP9)

For others, it was less about the historical relationship with police and more about how they actually policed that event on the first night.

The police more or less stood by the They didn't. They were like, oh, get off this road. Get away from here! Get away from here! But they didn't want to go. They wanted to just stand their ground and protest. The fact of this shouldn't have happened. That's not right. But you don't. You should be punished. And the police just forced them and kept them. And that's why things escalated, because they were they felt unsafe with the police being as they were guarding the attackers more than the victims. (YP4)

Obviously, the police were expecting something to happen, but I think if the police didn't, if they would have let them free a little bit and let them do what they want to do, I don't think it as bad as it did. (YP8)

Once this initial outburst of violence was observed, there was a sense that the response from police was an overreaction, with some referring to the use of pepper spray on people trying to leave.

As an observer during the riots, I had been aware of speculation that those taking part could have been incentivised to do so by sharing content that was resulting in financial gain, either through content engagement or through gifting. While I asked all participants about this, there was no clear sense that this had actually happened to them or people that they knew.

YOU CAN MAKE MONEY IF YOU'RE GETTING GIFTED AND THE MORE VIEWS YOU GET, YOU DO GET MONEY OFF THEIR LIVES. (YP9)

AND EVERYONE, THEY GOT POSTED ABOUT THE PEACEFUL PROTEST AND THEN IT'S ALL KICKED OFF AND THEN EVERYONE'S SEEN IT. SO THERE PROBABLY WAS A COUPLE IN IT, BUT I'M NOT SURE. (YP7)

While this might imply that the actual commercialisation of harm in this instance was not strong, it does serve as a wakeup call for the potential to monetise serious violence in the future. If there is potential, there will be some individual(s) who could take advantage of this either to escalate or to benefit from the escalation.

An interesting set of responses during discussions around the most serious violence centered on the idea of tolerance. Most young people described the escalation in graded terms, with certain actions being more violent than others and some aggression being more tolerable than others. It seemed, that until a certain point, the violence was acceptable. When a threshold was reached, however, the young people were able to decide for themselves that the violence at that point was not acceptable, and they could remove themselves from the environment.

And then [on the second night of riots] we went down and stayed at the top of the wall like at like McDonald's. And then that's whenever the boat was put in through the house. That's it. No, I can't stand here like. (YP4)

I think I mean, he was young ones. There was a couple of other ones that were there, but it was more younger ones that were doing them. And then they took, they all took a bit too far. Like there's no point to scare people out of their homes if they weren't doing anything wrong (YP7)

This appears to provide an insight into the cognitive appraisals during escalation and the decision making that comes with it. Rather than being coerced, it did appear from these interviews that many young people were present (even involved) in the escalation for all of the reasons mentioned previously. They were also able to re-appraise dynamically, and rather than feeling trapped in the unrest, decided to stay or leave depending on how much they could rationalise the violence at any particular point in the sequence and neutralise the harm being caused to the individual victims and the town as a whole. This is another potentially important insight for future prevention. Rather than focussing exclusively on coercion, manipulation, incitement into violence (As had been the case in previous riots), this case example shows the value of challenging the tolerance of violence more generally as a target for intervention and providing safer spaces for young people to have their frustrations aired.

While it was assumed it was locals that would attend the community protest, the study allowed some exploration of the perception that there was outside influences engaged in the escalation. Commonly, the young people referred to quite a number of those who were not known to the local community, with social media playing a role in amplifying frustration and mobilising people into the community.

I definitely saw people I didn't know. People from Belfast and Coleraine. They probably just came to support us (YP 9)

I think it was just a whole big mix. Yeah. I don't think the people on the platforms like Facebook and TikTok and all the rest of it helped. (YP2)

This was confirmed by PSNI who observed that not only did some people from outside the town come, but they came on a scale that overwhelmed the response.

There was an extra 4000 people on the Monday. They were from all over. I was standing in the middle of it and saw t-shirts from different bands and different football teams from all over the province. There was an appeal put out. This was the catalyst to 'have a go'...the biggest director of this is social media and not the paramilitaries. (PSNI)

Limited Protective Ecosystem

An interesting observation from police was that from a criminal justice perspective, they can bring evidence and seek prosecution to achieve better criminal justice outcomes, however, that on its own is not going to prevent similar harm from occurring.

We continue at a local level. You can get good criminal justice outcomes but that doesn't prevent it. The broader societal issue isn't being tackled and we're going to go around in loops. The tensions have not gone away... I was watching in a command room and have to say it was one of the most difficult things I've ever done, but what happens next. Locking people up is ok, but what next? (PSNI)

Understanding the factors that protect can thus reduce the chances of a similar escalation. While it was not assumed to a-priori to have been a feature of the unrest, most young people offered insights into the role that youth work played in protecting some young people from attending the riot as well as its role in de-escalation over the nights that followed that initial escalation. It was evident from descriptions that some young people who didn't want to make their way to the riot were able to articulate those concerns and importantly, had an alternative. Unlike other examples, the availability of a local space that was so embedded into the community and that so many young people attended routinely, provided an 'out' for those less interested in making their way to the epicentre.

I mean, there's loads of people ask me all the way down, do this. And I said, no, I'm doing nothing. I'm not taking anywhere near it. Like, I know, like the boy I work with, his name is [name]. He went down to the riot...They all get caught for rioting like. (YP3)

For others, being able to make their own decision required some persuasion. It seems that from the perspective of these young people that the youth workers' pro-active and responsive actions no doubt added to the protection of young people. While this would have been totally unobservable from the perspective of police or the international media a few hundred yards away, their actions are likely to have prevented much wider harm.

Like [the youth worker], had blocked off, had the other [youth workers], come up here and block off the tunnel just so the younger ones couldn't go down? (YP3)

Did you, you see most young people coming in here. Then instead of going down into the town, or did young people still go into the town? No, there was most of them stayed up here.

Did they? And so do you think it might have been worse if this hadn't been open? Yeah, 100%. (YP2)

[The club] was open every night for the whole week. We were. When we do, our normal days are four days a week and we don't. The whole week onwards we run a Monday or Tuesday, a Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday (YP4)

It is a good example of the invisibility of prevention work cooccurring alongside escalation, but importantly, build upon a protective foundation rather than simply becoming active during an escalation.

Limited Post Riot Transformation

Unsurprisingly, some young people talked about the immediate and longer-term effects of the riot. In sum, it appears that if the goal was to affect demographics, that seems to have been facilitated-at least temporarily. As one young person said, despite the temporary rush to leave the area, soon after the riots ended, many of those who had left, had since returned.

But there was really quiet for a while when the riots were starting. It started, it was quiet, and then they just came back and the numbers were doubled again. So, it's like...(YP4)

If the goal, however, was to increase sense of safety, that does not appear to have been achieved.

Like, if you think the time's gonna get that bad again and let the town like I even I even said to my mum the other day, but I was actually speaking to her. To it. All right. So I was like, look at the time now compared to six months ago. I think people are scared to walk still. Like it's just weird. I just don't like the town in general anymore. (YP2)

there is another part of it where Roma being overly blamed for this, as if they are the only people that are doing this [violence] (YP8)

In fact, if anything, the sense of threat, particularly among women and girls, appears higher after than before the riot. There is the elevated sense of risk, lower confidence in police and the formation of groups of local residents (mostly men) who undertake patrols, with the implied readiness to react (violently) to any perceived threat-particularly from those who appear to be foreign nationals.

And how do you how do you feel now as a young woman walking about, like, do you feel safer now than you did before? Would you would you not go to certain places? No, I would try and avoid places if I don't have anybody with me. And like, I'm making sure my phone's always charged. I'm watching my surroundings and being cautious of where I am. Are you doing that more now than before, or less? More because I'm scared in case like somebody just comes out of somewhere and anything else. Like I actually started, I was doing a self-defence class for a few weeks there with [name] to try and bring up my safety. (YP4)

As this young person said, the sense of fear has not only not reduced, but has become elevated. Partly because of the perception of risk has increased, but also because the most significant violence that young people were actually exposed to, was the violence on the streets

It's kind of always been like this. Like it just I don't think it's ever going to change. Something needs to change because it's not okay for like she was. She's a wee girl and she's literally she begged me to walk her home because she didn't want to walk home. She was crying. And I like for a good bit because she, she was scared because of everything that has happened... because kids have phones now and everything gets posted. They see everything and then it all gets into their head and then they're all overthinking. Then they get scared. (YP8)

It is also because in the wake of the unrest, community members have enhanced that initial mobilisation to form more structured groups that move around the community. While it was difficult to fully understand the membership of this group and what their core aims are, implied, was that they existed to keep out foreign national individuals rather than to address the wider and more systemic and embedded presence of violence.

Men really mainly men. There's some women, but it's mainly men trying to show that they are trying to look out for these ones. (YP4)

I would say I know, I would like if it was me, I'd be scared. Okay. Yes, that has all of like that for the foreigners have like obviously left...but what about a white man walking by me? Do you know what I mean? Like our own. (YP9)

Tolerable-To a Point: Rationalising the Riots

An important point during each interview came when participants were asked to think about their post-hoc analysis of the serious violence that took place. Young people, with the benefit of hindsight and some additional information, constructed narratives that at times differed from their earlier accounts of what mobilised people during the initial stages.

A minority of young people maintained that the violence related to the presence of foreign nationals in the town.

But if you come over to if you come over from a different country, right, and you're say, if you're going through an accommodation or you're going through housing, there's mum, say a single mum sitting with like three wins waiting for a house and she's in a one bedroom flat, whereas that one person gets a house. Yeah. Do you know what I mean? And it's, it's just the whole benefits and stuff like that there. (YP2)

However, this was not the most common reflection. Conversely, most believed that the build-up included many things, and while many young people did refer to demographic shifts, they also referred to the history of serious violence, including the murder of a specific young woman, Chloe Mitchell. While this case did not involve perpetrators from a foreign national background, the case represented a horrific attack that the community appeared to have not been able to process and move on from.

But then obviously the thing with Chloe happened a few years ago and now it's they're all in and it's... Chloe's who lost her life... I think that's what they were now thinking of it, as in, if then girls didn't leave when they did, could they have been murdered the way she had happened? So, I think that's the way they liked it so bad was because they knew the impact of something that happened already. (YP4)

Linked to this more objective reflection was a sense of rationalisation-being able to articulate why the events took place while simultaneously accepting that the violence was unnecessary and harmful.

BUT I UNDERSTAND WHY THEY DID IT AND I THINK THAT THEY SHOULD HAVE DID IT, BUT I DON'T THINK THEY SHOULD HAVE DONE WHAT THEY'VE DONE. THERE'S NO WAY THEY SHOULD HAVE WRECKED THE PLACE LIKE THAT. YEAH, BECAUSE IT WAS LIKE BUSINESSES THAT SIT HERE OR SOMETHING LIKE THIS. THERE'S A PLACE DOWN [THE TOWN] THAT SELLS FURNITURE [THAT WAS BURNT]. AND [ANOTHER PLACE WHERE] IT WAS JUST A GIRL- AND SHE'S LIKE 70. SHE'S LIVED HER WHOLE LIFE. SHE JUST GOT DONE FOR JUST FOR THE CRAIC. (YP3)

Interestingly, there were frequent references to the role of men and how it was somehow more acceptable for men to deal with legitimate frustrations with violence than might be expected or tolerated from women.

Men would be more outraged and angry, where girls would be more worried and fearful (YP5)

A theme that remained strong was the role of police and how they managed that initial build up.

People were being squeezed into the most volatile area and being prevented from leaving by the police who were containing the crowd (YP4)

Maybe if the police didn't come on the way to did. I don't think the whole writing would have happened as bad as it did. (YP7)

Some of the more astute realised that on reflection that given the circumstances, participants in the protest should have known that there would have been few options available to police. There were a large crowd, small space, potential victims and increasingly volatile atmosphere.

There were people saying that they were supposed to. They were supposed to be allowed to go down and come home. And. But we all said from the very start, there's no way that we're allowed to go home whenever everything's going on. That just happened. So, I just remember... But did you kind of feel, 'oh, this is not going to be good'? Now I do! (YP2)

Indeed, following more critical perspectives on policing earlier in the interviews, I was curious to understand what the counterfactual

would have been. What, if any alternative could the police have taken and what would have been the outcome?
What would have happened if the police weren't there. There was there would have been more peaceful. There wouldn't have been as much problems because the police were pushing it and the police were telling them all to go away. Just leave them be. Let them live, be fine. They don't do protests or nothing. And that's the thing that has affected it, because now, there's peaceful protests still happening and the police aren't there. There's no been no violence because the police aren't there. (YP6)

What the young person failed to see in this analysis is that there was another dimension missing from these ongoing protests-men. Unlike the initial protests where many men were visible and where it was largely males taking part in the most serious violence, they were absent from these ongoing protests.

There were people I didn't like. They came from all over. (YP2)

But the ones that started the riot weren't the ones from Ballymena. They were ones just coming up. There's like ones from Coleraine and in Belfast. Like ones were travelling up. (YP7)

THERE'S BOYS FROM BELFAST CAME DOWN-ALL STUFF LIKE LISBURN AND BANGOR AND ALL, AND THEY ALL COME DOWN AND THEY JUST COME DOWN TO WRECK THE PLACE. THEY DIDN'T GIVE A FUCK, I GOT TOLD BY LOADS OF ONES CAME DOWN FROM BELFAST... BUT SEE THE PEOPLE THAT ARE INSIDE THE TOWN, LIKE THEY OBVIOUSLY THEY WERE RIOTING, BUT THEY WEREN'T MISSING THE PLACE UP. LIKE I PROBABLY, I GET TOLD ALL THE MEN WRITING DAMAGE WAS ALL PEOPLE FROM THERE. YEAH, IT'S ALL MAD STUFF LIKE THAT. (YP3)

This was also confirmed by the police commander on the scene during the first night.

We saw individuals with scarves and hoods up-and that is never a good sign. We had to start to think about what way this was going to go... there were groups and individuals there who were not from Ballymena. There was a really interesting mix -and it's not just confined to local people. (PSNI)

A characteristic of the wider events was the association with alcohol. Most of the sample referred to widespread alcohol use across the nights of violence. Both spectators and perpetrators were observed drinking considerable amount implying that this potentially fuelled the violence (severity and duration) but also added a recreational element. As one young person recalled, it was no coincidence to them that when the alcohol disappeared, the numbers plummeted.

But I think the big thing as well was the riots that happened in Birmingham was the fact that as soon as everyone ran out of money for drink, they didn't come back. Do you know what I mean? They got to Wednesday night. There was no there was no riots after. (YP9).

Table 2: Summary of Findings

SET Level (where conditions emerged)	CFIR Domain (Why mechanisms succeeded or failed)	Theme	Application to Ballymena riots	Transcript Example
State	Outer Setting	Immigration and threat narratives	National and transnational narratives framed newcomers as a threat to community safety and particularly to women	“Stop the boats”
		Misinformation ecosystem	Social media accelerated rumours, fear and mobilisation before facts could be established	References to Tik Tok, Facebook posts and Telegram-like sharing
		Distrust in public bodies-especially the police	Perception that the government-given a face by police-were failing to protect the community. This contributed to fear and anger	“Betrayal in your own government”
		Algorithmic amplification	Local grievances tapping into wider anti-immigration movements and external actors	References to Tommy Robinson and outside support
Community	Inner Setting	Contextual harm	Existing exposure to violence, drugs, low academic attainment, and poverty created a backdrop	Accounts of a stabbing, pipe bomb and educational engagement
		Violence as a legitimate tool	Violence often seen as understandable and acceptable under certain circumstances	“You’re not really brought up to be soft”
		Community contradiction	Strong sense of belonging cooccurring with exclusion, fear and isolation	“It’s a tight-knit community but at the same time, it’s really not”
		Weak protective infrastructure	Few community assets outside of local youth provision	Reliance on youth club as primary safe space
		Rapid mobilisation	Information spreads quickly and by various means	“One person told his mate...”
		Escalation dynamics	Various stages of the riot with different actors (e.g., paramilitaries) observed in some stages but not others	Young people expecting speeches but getting violence
Family	Inner Setting	Exposure to adversity	Substance misuse, mental health, conflict, violence, family dynamics	Accounts of addiction and parental mental health
		Protective relationships	Family and kinship networks that offer protection	“My nanny livewws there...my auntie lives behind me”
Individual	Characteristics of Individuals	Fear and vulnerability	Concerns about safety, particularly among girls and young women	Accounts of harassment and decision making
		Anger and frustration	Longstanding frustration converging around a single incident	“People got fed up with it”
		Identity and belonging	Strong local identity influenced perceptions of threat and protection	References to knowing everyone and defending the community
		Rationalisation	Participants condemned violence while at the same time explaining it	“I understand why they did what they did, but...?”
		Dynamic tolerance	Young people appraising the situation multiple times and demonstrating tolerance levels	Leaving after houses were attacked

Phase 2: Comparative analysis with BTS1

Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of the conditions identified in the Ballymena riots through the lens of Social Ecological Theory (SET) and the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR). Rather than viewing the unrest as the product of a single event, the findings suggest that the riots emerged from the interaction of multiple conditions operating simultaneously across individual, family, community and societal levels. Consistent with the original Beyond the Spark study, the violence appears less of an isolated outbreak of disorder and more as the visible manifestation of deeper and more enduring vulnerabilities.

At the societal level, the most distinctive feature of the Ballymena riots was the prominence of immigration-related narratives. Participants repeatedly described a social environment in which local concerns became connected to wider national and international debates around migration, identity and community safety. Importantly, however, these narratives did not emerge in isolation. Rather, they interacted with a broader information ecosystem characterised by misinformation, distrust and algorithmic amplification. Social media platforms accelerated the circulation of rumours, emotional content and perceived threats long before facts could be established. As a result, local grievances became embedded within wider transnational narratives that extended far beyond Ballymena itself. This represents one of the most significant departures from the original BTS study. While online communication featured in the 2021 disorder, participants in the current study described a much more sophisticated and immediate digital environment in which mobilisation could occur rapidly, organically and at scale.

Alongside these developments, there was strong evidence of continuing distrust in public institutions. Participants frequently described feelings that government, policing and wider public systems had failed to protect communities or respond adequately to their concerns. Importantly, this distrust was not necessarily linked to a single incident or decision. Rather, it reflected a broader perception that communities were unheard, overlooked and disconnected from decision-making processes. Similar findings were observed in BTS1, suggesting that institutional mistrust remains a recurring feature of environments vulnerable to collective violence.

At the community level, the findings reveal striking continuity with earlier episodes of disorder. Participants described communities characterised by longstanding exposure to violence, substance misuse, intimidation and socio-economic disadvantage. These experiences formed what might be described as a backdrop of contextual harm within which more acute episodes of unrest could emerge. Violence itself was frequently discussed, not as exceptional, but as a familiar, and, in some circumstances, legitimate response to frustrations and perceived injustice. Young people did not necessarily endorse violence, but many understood it as a predictable outcome when frustrations accumulated and alternative avenues for expression appeared ineffective.

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings was the contradiction embedded within young people’s descriptions of community life. Participants simultaneously described their communities as supportive, connected and protective, while also portraying them as places where violence, fear, and exclusion were common. This apparent contradiction mirrors findings from BTS1 and suggests that feelings of safety may be less about the absence of risk and more about the availability of support when risk occurs. Young people frequently referred to trusted adults, neighbours and youth workers who could provide protection, even within environments they recognised as potentially harmful.

At the family level, participants described a complex mixture of adversity and protection. Exposure to substance misuse, conflict, mental health challenges and family stress was common across interviews. Yet these same family networks frequently provided emotional support, practical assistance and a sense of belonging. Similar patterns were identified in BTS1, where family environments often functioned simultaneously as sources of both vulnerability and resilience. This highlights the importance of understanding family influence not as inherently protective or harmful, but as dynamic and context dependent.

The importance of community infrastructure was particularly evident. Unlike many formal systems that were perceived as distant and reactive, local youth provision emerged as the significant most important protective factor. Participants described youth workers and youth centres as providing safe spaces, trusted relationships and meaningful alternatives to involvement in unrest. Several young people explicitly reflected that the availability of youth provision during the riots reduced participation and provided an alternative destination for those who did not wish to become involved. This finding reinforces a central conclusion of BTS1: that protective community infrastructure is often most visible when it is absent, but most effective when it is embedded long before a crisis emerges.

At the individual level, the findings demonstrate how broader structural and community conditions are ultimately experienced emotionally and psychologically. Fear, uncertainty, frustration, and anger were common themes across interviews. Young people frequently described concerns about safety, feelings of injustice, and perceptions that their communities were under threat. However, these emotions did not automatically translate into participation in violence. Instead, participants often engaged in complex processes of rationalisation and appraisal. Many condemned the riots while simultaneously explaining why they believed others had become involved. Others described reassessing the violence as events unfolded, withdrawing once it exceeded what they considered acceptable. This suggests that involvement in collective violence is not simply a consequence of grievance or exposure but is mediated by ongoing cognitive and moral evaluations.

Taken together, the findings support a central conclusion of this report: the Ballymena riots were not solely the product of immigration-related tensions, nor can they be explained through individual motivations alone. Rather, they emerged through the convergence of longstanding vulnerabilities identified in previous episodes of unrest with newer influences arising from contemporary information environments. Many of the underlying conditions identified in BTS, including deprivation, mistrust, violence normalisation, social exclusion and weak protective infrastructures, remain evident here. This is reassuring, because stronger alignment reinforces our understanding of the kinds of conditions that create the risk for violence in the future. In fact, this confirmation implies that rather than focus on reducing violence, we should become more focussed on the contexts that characterise healthy communities.

What appears to have changed, however, is the speed, scale and reach through which these conditions can be activated, amplified and mobilised. This reinforces the need to move beyond reactive responses towards a preventative model that strengthens protective ecosystems across all levels of the social ecology.

Table 3: Observed Conditions in Ballymena and Continuity with BTS1

SET Domain	Observed Conditions in Ballymena	BTS Continuity	System Responses	Implementation Gaps
Individual	Anger and frustration linked to perceived injustice, threat and lack of voice	Strong continuity	Reactive policing and crisis management	Few preventative mechanisms for channelling grievances before escalation
	Uncertainty about safety, social change and future prospects	Strong continuity	Community reassurance and public messaging	Lack of trusted sources of information during periods of tension
	Deprivation and perceived lack of opportunity	Strong continuity	Existing youth and community provision	Structural inequalities remain largely unaddressed
	Confusion caused by rumour, misinformation and competing narratives	Strong Continuity	Public information campaigns	Limited capacity to counter misinformation in real time
	Exploitation	Weak Continuity	Youth services recognise exploitation more effectively	Multi-disciplinary hub to identify and respond to criminal exploitation
Peer	Online mobilisation and social media amplification	Weak continuity	CCE referrals and safeguarding discussions	Lack of clear identification and intervention pathways during collective violence
	Normalisation of violence via peer networks	Strong continuity	Youth engagement in the youth club during escalation and diversionary referrals after the escalation	Few mechanisms to pro-actively challenge harmful peer norms pre-escalation
Community	Distrust of the government, police and institutions	Strong continuity	Community engagement and reassurance activity	Trust deficits remain unresolved
	Deprivation concentrated in relatively small area	Strong continuity	Area based regeneration and support programmes	Persistent socio-economic disadvantage
	Role of paramilitaries in escalation of serious violence	Weak continuity	Ongoing PSNI communication with paramilitaries	Limited anticipatory planning for context where those who traditionally controlled violence, no longer do-thus leaving a space for others to control
	Low Coordination between agencies during escalation	Weak continuity	Multi-agency responses emerged after the unrest	Limited anticipatory planning, making best use of data/research to make predictions about where the conditions for violence are elevated
	Contradictory perceptions of safety (high support but high risk)	Strong continuity	Youth work and informal support networks	Protective factors remain fragmented, fragile and too few
	Strong territoriality	Strong continuity	Community relations initiatives	Limited progress in addressing exclusionary narratives (us/them)
Societal	Feelings of being ignored and disconnected from decision makers	Strong continuity	Political statements and crisis communication	Lack of meaningful participation for young people in the most vulnerable areas of NI
	Immigration Narratives	Limited Continuity	Public debate and policy responses	Failure to address underlying fear, perceptions and misinformation
	Social media and algorithmic amplification	New condition	Community moderation	Prevention systems not designed to address this risk or the risk of future commodification of serious violence

Phase 3: Sense check

Two focus groups (N = 12) were conducted with young people attending the same youth provision. One focus group comprised older participants, while the second involved younger participants. The purpose of these discussions was to assess the extent to which the key findings and themes emerging from the interview phase resonated with the wider experiences and perspectives of local young people. Consequently, it was not necessary for focus group participants to have taken part in the interviews. Indeed, a mixture of interview and non-interview participants was considered advantageous, as it enabled broader validation of the findings.

Both focus groups followed the same format. Participants were identified and invited by the youth work lead, and discussions took place in a quiet room adjacent to the main youth centre space. At the outset, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and invited participants to reflect on the events that occurred in June 2025. All participants recalled the events clearly, and in both groups this initial discussion served as a natural entry point into the broader conversation.

While the focus groups were semi-structured and allowed participants to introduce unanticipated reflections and experiences, discussion centred on several themes that had emerged from the interview phase and required further exploration and validation:

1. The complex and often contradictory nature of life in the local area, whereby young people reported feeling safe because of strong family and community ties, while simultaneously feeling unsafe due to the prevalence of violence, drug-related activity, and anti-social behaviour.
2. The perception that concerns about protecting women and girls from violence provided the initial rationale for the protests and subsequent disorder, but that this justification was often viewed as a pretext for some individuals to engage in violence.
3. Low levels of trust between the community and the police, and the potential contribution of this mistrust to the escalation of events.
4. Perceptions regarding the possible involvement of paramilitary actors in encouraging participation in the protests, although their role in the escalation of violence was viewed as less clear.
5. The view that young people feel less safe in the aftermath of the disorder than they did beforehand.
6. The role of the youth centre as a protective factor for local young people during and after the disturbances.
7. The increasing influence of social media in shaping perceptions, amplifying tensions, and mobilising participation.

Key Findings from the Focus Groups

Overall, participants expressed a high degree of agreement with the themes identified during the interview phase.

Experiences of safety, violence, and community change

Participants agreed that violence and anti-social behaviour are common features of local life. While many described strong family connections and a sense of belonging within the area, they also highlighted significant risks associated with violence, substance misuse, and criminal activity. Across both groups, young people discussed what they perceived to be the emergence of a new group of young males who had become increasingly visible within the community. Participants described this group as engaging in violence, drug dealing, and presenting themselves as protectors of the area. Although opinions differed regarding the seriousness of the threat posed by the group, there was a shared perception that its influence had grown in recent years, particularly as traditional paramilitary influence was perceived to have diminished.

Perceptions of safety following the riots

Participants consistently reported feeling less safe following the disturbances than they had previously. This issue was particularly prominent among young women. Young people discussed the presence of two adult males who had regularly patrolled the area in high-visibility clothing following the riots. Participants reported that these individuals appeared to monitor activity within the community but did not explain their role when questioned. Several young people described feeling uncomfortable or intimidated by their presence, with one participant referring to them as “creeps.” Participants reported that concerns had been raised with youth workers, although the individuals remained in public spaces outside the boundaries of the youth centre. Across both focus groups, there was a strong consensus that such activities did not contribute to feelings of safety and, in some cases, had the opposite effect.

Police-community relations and escalation

There was considerable agreement among participants that policing tactics contributed to the escalation of disorder, despite recognising that police were attempting to manage risk and maintain public safety. Only one participant explicitly suggested that the absence of police intervention may have resulted in greater harm to newcomer families. More commonly, participants argued that police actions, particularly those perceived as restricting movement or preventing people from leaving the area, heightened tensions and contributed to escalation. Some participants contrasted these events with more recent protests that had involved less visible police presence and had proceeded peacefully, reinforcing their belief that policing approaches had influenced the trajectory of the disorder.

The role of social media and external influences

Despite criticism of policing responses, participants were unanimous in their view that external actors played a significant role in the violence. Young people believed that individuals from outside Ballymena, particularly young males from neighbouring towns, had travelled to the area with the intention of engaging in disorder. Participants generally did not believe these individuals were motivated by concern for the alleged victims or by wider issues relating to violence against women and girls. Rather, they were perceived as seeking opportunities for confrontation and violence. Across both focus groups, participants emphasised the role of social media in amplifying local concerns and attracting wider attention to events. While some acknowledged that online support was initially welcomed by local residents, there was broad agreement that social media also facilitated the mobilisation of individuals who contributed to the escalation of violence.

The protective role of the youth centre

There was unanimous agreement that the youth centre represented a critical protective resource within the community. Participants described the centre as playing an important role both during and after the disturbances. Young people highlighted the efforts of youth workers to discourage attendance at the riots, particularly on the first evening of disorder, and emphasised the centre’s ongoing role in providing safety, support, and stability in the aftermath of the events. Participants consistently identified the youth centre as one of the few trusted spaces available to young people in the area and regarded it as an important component of the local prevention response.

Phase 4: Consolidation of Insights: From Crisis to Prevention

The purpose of this study was not to explain why violence occurred in Ballymena in June 2025 alone, but to use Ballymena as a case study through which to understand the conditions that make collective violence possible and the factors that may protect communities from similar events in the future. Across the interviews, comparative analysis and sense-checking exercises, a consistent picture emerged. The riots were neither spontaneous nor inevitable. Rather, they reflected the convergence of long-standing vulnerabilities, community frustrations, contemporary information dynamics, and insufficient protective infrastructures.

Viewed through a Social Ecological Theory (SET) lens, the violence was not located at any single level of the social ecology. Individual fears and frustrations interacted with family experiences of adversity, community environments characterised by deprivation and violence normalisation, and wider societal narratives concerning identity, immigration, safety and belonging. The riots therefore cannot be reduced to a question of individual motivation or criminality. Nor can they be understood solely through the immediate events that preceded them. Instead, they emerged from a broader ecology of risk.

Importantly, many of these conditions are not new. The comparison with the original Beyond the Spark study demonstrates remarkable continuity across episodes of collective violence. It is also unlikely that the unrest in Ballymena occurred at around the same time that serious violence was also taking place in other areas, including the Republic of Ireland (Copestake, 2023), England (Andall, 2025), and Spain (Forero, 2025). Distrust in institutions, perceptions of exclusion, territorial identities, violence normalisation, limited opportunities, and fragmented protective infrastructures were evident in both the original Beyond the Spark study as well as the current investigation, despite the different political and social contexts. This consistency strengthens confidence that these conditions represent genuine risk factors for collective violence rather than features unique to any one event. In this sense, the Ballymena riots do not represent a new phenomenon, but rather a new manifestation of the same vulnerabilities. While we cannot predict nor prevent any specific spark, what we can begin to do, is address the factors that elevate vulnerability in the presence of harmful events.

However, not everything is perfectly aligned. While many of the conditions observed in Ballymena map onto the original study, there are some differences. One is the mechanism through which these vulnerabilities become activated. The most significant development identified in this study was the role of the contemporary information ecosystem. Participants repeatedly described how social media accelerated mobilisation, amplified fear, connected local grievances to wider transnational narratives, and enabled the rapid circulation of rumours and emotionally charged content. Unlike earlier periods of unrest, where mobilisation relied heavily on local social networks and established community structures, contemporary unrest can emerge through a hybrid ecosystem where digital and physical spaces interact continuously.

Algorithmic pathways (Andall, 2025) introduced new mechanisms to induce violence but also challenged the centralised influence traditionally held by paramilitaries. Just as Shin and Jitkajornwanich (2024) propose that new online platforms that generate user content by matching initial content access to each subsequent, this creates pipelines in which, for example, short-form video on platforms such as TikTok can act as entry points into ideologically extreme and more harmful content (Andell, 2025). This is worrying, however, it also provides a short window of opportunity. For now, it appears that the algorithm has total control, but that control lack coherence and remains fragmented. If individuals and/or groups are able to combine their more traditional top-down influence and dominance over criminality, including serious violence, but augment it with social media, that coordination combined with motivation, could be devastating.

This finding has important implications. Historically, considerable attention has focused on the role of paramilitary organisations as mobilisers, influencers and regulators of violence. While elements of paramilitary influence were evident in Ballymena, participants generally described a more fragmented environment in which traditional forms of authority appeared less capable of controlling events. Instead, algorithmic amplification and social media dissemination created new pathways through which escalation could occur. This implies two things. First, we need to appreciate the factors at play at different points in the sequence (see Figure 2). In this case, paramilitaries are likely to have been involved during mobilisation but not the escalation. Second, it illustrates the significance of the shift in power. (And the apparent power gap). While historically it was assumed that when paramilitaries committed to non-violence-there would have been no violence. This was not the case. The significance of this shift should not be underestimated. Digital platforms now possess the capacity to amplify fear, anger and grievance at a speed and scale previously unavailable to traditional actors. While this influence currently appears fragmented and opportunistic, the potential combination of established coercive structures with algorithmically amplified mobilisation represents a significant future risk.

At the same time, the findings challenge simplistic narratives that attribute collective violence solely to immigration or demographic change. Young people clearly recognised that their communities had changed and many expressed concerns about those changes. However, when discussing everyday experiences of harm, violence and insecurity, participants consistently referred to challenges that pre-dated the riots and often had little direct relationship to immigration. Gender-based violence, substance misuse, educational disengagement, intimidation, mental health difficulties and poverty were all identified as longstanding features of community

life. In many respects, the riots appeared to provide a focal point through which wider frustrations could be expressed rather than representing a direct response to a single issue.

One of the most striking findings was the contradiction embedded within young people’s descriptions of safety. Participants frequently described their communities as both safe and unsafe. At first glance, these accounts appeared irreconcilable. However, closer analysis suggests that young people were referring to two distinct concepts. When describing their communities as unsafe, they referred to the presence of risk, violence and harm. When describing them as safe, they referred to the availability of support, familiarity and protection. Safety, therefore, was not understood as the absence of danger but as confidence that support would be available when danger emerged. This distinction is important because it shifts attention away from risk reduction alone and towards the strengthening of protective relationships and infrastructures.

Perhaps the clearest example of this protective capacity was the role of local youth provision. Across interviews, participants consistently described the youth centre as a trusted space, a source of belonging, a pathway to opportunity and, during the riots themselves, a practical mechanism of prevention. While the violence occurring in Ballymena attracted international media attention, far less visible were the actions of youth workers who opened facilities, engaged young people, created alternatives to participation and provided safe environments during periods of heightened tension. The findings suggest that these interventions were not effective because they occurred during the riots, but because they were embedded within relationships that had been established long before the crisis emerged.

This observation has wider implications for policy and practice. Prevention is often evaluated through visible outcomes such as arrests, incidents or reductions in violence. Yet the most important protective factors identified in this study were largely invisible. Young people who chose not to attend the riots, who left when violence escalated, or who sought support through trusted adults rarely appear in official statistics. The absence of harm is difficult to measure, but it may represent the most significant achievement of all. Taken together, the findings suggest that future responses to serious and collective violence should focus less on the management of riots and more on the creation of conditions that make riots less likely. This requires a shift from reactive intervention towards proactive prevention. Efforts to address misinformation, strengthen trust, support meaningful participation, reduce deprivation, and to invest in universal youth provision, are not peripheral to violence prevention; they are violence prevention.

The central lesson from Ballymena is therefore not that communities need stronger responses after violence occurs. Rather, they need stronger protective ecosystems before violence emerges. Such ecosystems would be characterised by trusted relationships, meaningful opportunities, responsive institutions, accessible community spaces, positive identities, and mechanisms through which fears and frustrations can be addressed before they become mobilised into anger. There are, however, lessons for escalation. The availability of safe spaces and role of youth workers complements the duty to protect implemented by police. However, this case shows few signs that this was coordinated. The role of alcohol appeared to be influential in the severity and duration of the riots. Approaches that impede alcohol use could enhance de-escalation efforts.

Ultimately, the Ballymena riots serve as a reminder that collective violence is rarely about a single event. More often, it reflects what happens when longstanding vulnerabilities collide with a triggering incident in the absence of sufficient protective factors. If the goal is to prevent future unrest, attention must move beyond the spark itself and towards the conditions that determine whether that spark ignites or fades. The challenge for policymakers, practitioners and communities is therefore not simply to understand why the fire started, but to build environments in which fewer fires can take hold.

Summary

Key Findings

This study examined the experiences and perspectives of young people and policing leaders following the Ballymena riots of June 2025. While the disorder was widely framed through debates about immigration and community safety, the findings suggest that the violence emerged from a much broader set of social, community, and structural conditions.

A central finding is the strong similarity between the conditions identified during the 2025 Ballymena riots and those documented in the original Beyond the Spark study following disorder in Northern Ireland during 2021. Although the immediate triggers differed, the underlying vulnerabilities remained remarkably consistent.

Young people described communities characterised by strong local identity and belonging, but also by deprivation, violence, limited opportunities, low trust in institutions, and concerns about safety. Many reported feeling connected to their community while simultaneously feeling isolated from wider society. The findings suggest that these tensions create environments that are vulnerable to mobilisation during periods of heightened community concern.

Participants identified social media as a major factor in amplifying local grievances, accelerating mobilisation, spreading rumours, and connecting local events to wider national and international narratives. The findings also indicate that young people remain vulnerable to exploitation during periods of disorder, including potential forms of child criminal exploitation.

Importantly, the study identified significant protective factors. Universal youth provision, trusted adult relationships, community infrastructure, and opportunities for meaningful participation were repeatedly identified as critical safeguards. Young people consistently described youth workers and youth centres as among the few trusted resources available to them during and after the riots.

The findings support a broader conclusion: collective violence is rarely the product of a single event. Rather, it reflects the interaction of accumulated social harms, community tensions, perceived threats, weak protective infrastructures, and opportunities for mobilisation.



Figure 2: Approach to Understanding Civil Unrest

Implications for Policy and Practice

1. Move Beyond the Trigger Event

Public and policy responses often focus on the issue that immediately precedes disorder. However, the findings suggest that preventing future violence requires attention to the deeper social conditions that make communities vulnerable to escalation. Responses should therefore focus not only on what happened, but on why particular communities become susceptible to mobilisation. Further, this study illustrates that researching a riot as an event misses the more nuanced sequence of events that contribute. Specifically, these data show that a sequence of events is equally important. They are proposed to commence with the context (the wider environment that the serious violence occurs within), the mobilisation (the factors that sufficeitnly frustrate people enough that they are motivated to come on to the street), the congregation (the proceses that facilitate that coming together at a particular palce and time), the escalation (the factors that contribute to serious violence and the absent factors that could impede it), rationalisation (how those affected make sense of the violence in its wake).

2. Recognise Youth Violence as an Ecological Issue

The study reinforces the need to understand youth involvement in collective violence through a social ecological lens. Individual behaviour is shaped by family circumstances, peer networks, community dynamics, online environments, and wider structural factors. Effective prevention therefore requires coordinated action across multiple systems rather than isolated interventions.

3. Strengthen Universal Youth Provision

One of the clearest findings of the study is the protective role of universal youth services. Youth centres provided safe spaces, trusted relationships, practical support, positive identity formation, and alternatives to involvement in disorder. Investment in universal youth provision should be regarded as a violence prevention strategy rather than simply a recreational service.

4. Develop Community Resilience to Online Harms

Social media now plays a central role in the escalation of collective violence. Prevention strategies should include digital literacy, misinformation resilience, community communication plans, and mechanisms for responding rapidly to harmful online narratives during periods of heightened tension.

5. Improve Community Trust and Legitimacy

Low trust in public institutions emerged as a recurring theme. Building legitimacy and trust between communities, public services, and statutory agencies should be considered a core component of violence prevention. This includes meaningful engagement during periods of stability rather than only during crises.

6. Recognise Child Criminal Exploitation Risks During Disorder

The findings support growing concerns that some young people involved in collective violence may themselves be vulnerable to exploitation, coercion, intimidation, or manipulation by older actors. While the role of paramilitaries in this case was unclear, the conditions that enable CE to occur remain present. Further, the role of social media could elevate risks of CCE. Rather than providing evidence for this, this data provides a wake up call to emerging risks. Future responses to disorder should incorporate safeguarding and child protection perspectives alongside criminal justice approaches.

7. Build Protective Ecosystems Rather Than Crisis Responses

Perhaps the most important implication is that communities require strong protective ecosystems before periods of unrest occur. This includes trusted adults, positive opportunities, accessible support services, safe community spaces, effective communication networks,

and mechanisms that strengthen belonging without fostering exclusion. These protective factors reduce the likelihood that grievances, fears, or misinformation will escalate into violence. Data from this study also illustrate the potential utility of ‘soft signals’. Taken together, there is considerable evidence that the frustration within the community were so significant, that alternatives were so absent and that norms so favoured violence, that any spark could have contributed to an escalation. This remains the case in Ballymena, as it does in other areas. Recognising these soft and latent signals could provide the basis for investment to mitigate the risk of escalation.

8. Recognise and acknowledge the complex and contradictory relationship between police and paramilitaries

There is evidence in this data that illustrates the reality of policing on the ground. Despite several decades since the Good Friday Agreement, there remain organised criminal structures and a variety of paramilitary groups operating across NI. This includes Ballymena. While the perception is that those structures in Ballymena remain intact, but that their operational intent has changed, police maintain communication with them. This was evident in seeking assurances for a peaceful protest-which they got. This has implications. We must acknowledge the strategic position of police that maintains that there is no direct contact with paramilitary groups and the simultaneous operational reality that local community police take a more pragmatic view. Acknowledging this could be a useful step in addressing it. This may be even more important given the fact that despite assurances, violence occurred. This implies another transition, one in which the opportunity for taking control could be shifting away from structures that we have become accustomed to.

Conclusion

While the specific narratives surrounding immigration and community safety were distinctive, the underlying vulnerabilities closely resembled those identified in previous episodes of unrest. The evidence suggests that while the sparks that ignite violence may change, the conditions that allow violence to spread remain strikingly consistent. Long-term prevention therefore depends less on responding to the issue of the day and more on strengthening the social, community, and institutional conditions that protect young people and communities from harm. It also raises several questions about prevention. How we observe and recognise soft signals. How we build in protective ecosystems. How we continue to transition towards peace and acknowledge the muddy relationship that continues to exist between police and paramilitaries. In sum, the Ballymena riots provide an important case study of contemporary collective violence and its prevention.

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