



OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD?

Threats and violence against
journalists in Northern Ireland

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Executive summary

‘Given the scale and severity of threats and attacks against journalists and other media actors in Europe and their damaging effects on the functioning of democratic society, far-reaching measures are necessary at the international and national levels in order to strengthen the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists and other media actors, and to eradicate impunity.’

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers¹

Northern Ireland is the most dangerous place in the UK to work as a journalist.²

Journalists are sent death threats and rape threats. They have been told they will be shot, stabbed and attacked. They are warned of bomb threats, including under-car booby trap bombs. They are shouted at in the street and graffiti is painted on walls with their names beside gun crosshairs. They are given 48-hour ultimatums to leave the country or be killed.

Several journalists report that they are receiving more threats in recent years than ever before. It goes beyond threats: they are physically attacked. Their equipment is damaged. Petrol bombs are thrown at their cars and pipe bombs left close to their homes. One journalist was shot in the leg, and two journalists have been killed.

The threats come primarily from armed and dangerous paramilitaries as well as organised crime groups. This distinct level of threat sets Northern Ireland apart from the situation journalists face in other jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland.

One media company has spent tens of thousands of pounds on security measures to ensure journalists’ homes are protected by alarms linked up to police stations, and with reinforced doors and bulletproof windows.

Some reporters always look over their shoulder, use false names and will not go into certain areas. They worry about their families. A few fear they will ultimately be killed for doing their job.

Amnesty International’s research for this report has uncovered at least 71 incidents of threats or attacks on journalists in Northern Ireland since the start of 2019.

These threats and attacks were experienced by freelancers and journalists working for a wide range of media organisations. This includes the BBC, UTV, PA Media, the *Irish News*, Reach, Mediahuis and the *Impartial Reporter*.

However, we know this is not the full picture.

Not all incidents are officially reported. We did not have the opportunity to speak to every journalist in Northern Ireland, and some told us they were too fearful of the potential consequences to speak out. Worryingly, some journalists have received so many threats, even they have lost count. Often threats graded as ‘low risk’ by the

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) are not even communicated to the people the threat is aimed at. This policy is being reviewed.³

The PSNI only started keeping specific records for its Journalist Safety Group three years ago (June 2022) – including the number of threats received by journalists. Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service (PPS) does not routinely record the occupation of victims so could not provide specific data on cases involving journalists.⁴

According to data gathered by Amnesty International, journalists in Northern Ireland most at risk are mainly those who report on crime and security matters (including armed paramilitary and organised crime groups) and public order situations (including marches and riots).

International human rights law requires states to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right of everyone to freedom of expression and press freedom. Attacks and threats of violence towards journalists and other media workers undermine the rights of individuals and society at large, including the right to seek, receive and impart information. Their protection is essential for guaranteeing freedom of expression and press freedom.

As the Council of Europe has noted, journalism can only be exercised freely when those who carry out this work are not victims of threats or physical, mental or other attacks or harassment.⁵ The United Nations General Assembly has called on all member states to prevent violence against journalists, to secure accountability through proper and effective investigations, and to bring suspected perpetrators to justice.⁶

The seriousness of this issue was recognised by the UK government in setting up the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists in 2020. Its first meeting highlighted threats against journalists in Northern Ireland and attacks at protests.

The criminal justice system has an important role to play. However, this research shows that most threats against journalists in Northern Ireland go unpunished.

On the rare occasions that the authorities have brought prosecutions or secured convictions, they have been in 'non-typical' cases where the threat was not linked to paramilitary or organised crime groups.

There have been no prosecutions related to threats to journalists from paramilitaries, which make up the majority of such threats documented by Amnesty International.

The Northern Ireland Assembly's All-Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability is currently not operational.

For decades, some journalists have felt that dealing with threats was just part of their job; an 'occupational hazard' they have been forced to accept. But now, by coming together and sharing their stories, journalists in Northern Ireland are saying 'enough is enough'.

This report is based on 26 interviews, including 22 with journalists.

It outlines Northern Ireland's history, the role of journalism and international human rights obligations, and the key findings from the interviews.

We provide evidence of the many threats and attacks journalists have experienced. These include death threats, physical intimidation, online harassment, and in some cases they result in actual violence. Photographers face unique risks due to their visibility at events and direct contact with subjects.

Speaking about the threats he has received, *Sunday World* northern editor **Richard Sullivan** said: ‘They range from giving me 48 hours to get out of the country, or I’d be shot, or to just being simply shot. Others threatened to put an explosive device under my car or firebomb my house.’⁷

The threats have had a serious impact on journalists’ personal and professional lives. Many who spoke to Amnesty International have installed security measures at their homes, and some have experienced significant psychological stress.

Sunday Life reporter **Ciaran Barnes** said: ‘I’ve got bulletproof windows front and back. I’ve got a bulletproof door. I’ve got cameras all around the house. I’ve got sensor activated lights and panic alarms.’⁸

Our research examined the official state responses to threats, including that of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. A key finding is that some journalists no longer report threats due to time-consuming processes and lack of action or positive outcome.

Despite a number of improvements since 2021 with the adoption of a new policing strategy, inconsistencies in the police response to threats, inadequate communication and lack of prosecutions have undermined confidence among journalists in the police response.

Trust has been further undermined by police covert surveillance of journalists and suspicions that the protection of informants may still sometimes be prioritised over the protection of journalists.

Journalists in Northern Ireland do not meet the government’s Home Protection Scheme’s admission criteria with respect to their occupation. This leaves media organisations bearing the cost of protecting freedom of expression, and leaves some freelance journalists unprotected at home.

Reporter **Paula Mackin** said: ‘The police just come to the house, you just get handed a leaflet, and then they’re away again. What’s the point?’⁹

Our report puts a spotlight on two significant cases: the murder of *Sunday World* journalist Martin O’Hagan and threats experienced by Patricia Devlin, whose case is an example of police investigative failings. We also remember journalist Lyra McKee who was shot and killed when she was observing rioting in 2019.

Threats made against journalists are having a chilling effect on the right to freedom of expression and other human rights in Northern Ireland. The research highlights that these threats remain a serious concern with inadequate responses from authorities – and create an environment where journalists operate under constant threat and press freedom is undermined.

Our recommendations are:

Co-ordination of state response

By the end of 2025, Northern Ireland's Minister for Justice should establish and chair a new Media Safety Group, with senior representation from the PSNI, PPS, media companies, NUJ and other partners to build on the work of the UK National Committee for the Safety of Journalists and to oversee the implementation of the recommendations in this report.

By the end of March 2026, this group should agree an adequately resourced journalist safety strategy for Northern Ireland and take responsibility for its implementation and monitoring.

The Northern Ireland Policing Board should build on this report by conducting and publishing a thematic human rights review of police practice in responding to acts and threats of violence against journalists. The board should provide oversight for the implementation of its recommendations.

Effective investigations and prosecutions

The police must conduct rigorous, thorough and timely investigations, in all cases where journalists are threatened or attacked. This should include identifying suspected perpetrators and evidential links between multiple case of threats to life, and ensuring effective prosecutions, including where acts and threats of violence emanate from paramilitary groups. Victims should be provided with access to justice and effective remedies.

Affected journalists must be regularly informed about progress in their cases, both in relation to the status of the investigation, and any further information on the source of the threats so that they may take appropriate security precautions.

The PSNI should review Service Instruction SI2317 on dealing with 'threats to life' in light of states' specific obligations to prevent attacks against journalists and ensure the effective protection and safety of journalists. This review should be conducted in consultation with journalists and others who have experienced threats to life.

In line with relevant international standards on the protection of journalists, the PSNI should publish new specific guidance on investigation and protection measures for journalists receiving threats, developed in consultation with the NUJ and affected journalists.

The chief constable should provide updates in reports to the Policing Board at least on an annual basis.

To ensure meaningful accountability, the guidance, including its implementation, should be regularly reviewed by the Policing Board and its human rights advisor.

The Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland must demonstrate the 'commitment to a robust prosecutorial approach in relation to crimes against journalists', which they affirmed in the UK National Plan for Journalist Safety. By end of March 2026, the PPS should establish a system to monitor cases of violence and threats against journalists and provide progress reports to the Media Safety Group.

Home protection

The Northern Ireland Office and Department of Justice should review the eligibility criteria and ensure appropriate funding for the Home Protection Scheme, or devise a new bespoke scheme, which can provide and fund appropriate security measures at the homes of journalists who are at significant risk of violent attack. They should commit to publishing the findings of that review and introduce the necessary changes no later than the end of 2026.

Police training

New PSNI guidance should be developed on the protection of journalists during public order situations no later than the end of March 2026. PSNI officers should receive specific training in how to ensure appropriate access for, as well as the safety of, the media during protests and public order situations. This training should be developed in consultation with the NUJ and affected journalists.

PSNI officers should receive specific training on delivering notices of threats to life to journalists. This should include how to accurately complete TM1 forms, the delivery of the forms, consideration of security measures, next steps by police, and ensuring ongoing communication with affected journalists.

Investigation of the murder of Martin O'Hagan

The PSNI should pursue new evidential opportunities in its investigation of the 2001 murder of Martin O'Hagan with a view to securing prosecutions against all those suspected to be responsible.

The Police Ombudsman should publish its review into the police investigation of the murder of Martin O'Hagan.

Should the Police Ombudsman's investigation find serious failings or wrongdoing by the police amounting to possible violations of the European Convention on Human Rights, the UK government should establish an independent public inquiry into the circumstances of the case.

Crimestoppers

Crimestoppers should review the operation of their telephone and online reporting mechanisms to ensure they are not being abused as a means of making threats.

Full detail on the recommendations can be found on page 88.

Methodology

This report is based on research carried out between November 2024 and May 2025 that documented the extent and impact of, and the state response to, acts and threats of violence against journalists in Northern Ireland.

A note on language

In this report, Amnesty International uses the term ‘journalist’ to cover a range of actors, including professional reporters, photographers and television camera personnel, news editors and newspaper management.

The term ‘threat’ is used to mean a communication of intent to inflict violence or harm on another person; generally meaning threats to life, fatal attack, serious injury, sexual or other violent assault. It excludes abusive communications which do not also contain specific threats. The term ‘acts of violence’ is used to mean physical attacks or assaults on the person or destruction of property, as reported by journalists or through official sources.

Amnesty International’s delegates held meetings and conducted interviews between 7 November 2024 and 31 March 2025. The research primarily focused on threats and acts of violence against journalists during the period 2019 – 2025, but where appropriate also included discussion of threats and acts of violence in preceding years, including the 2001 murder of Martin O’Hagan.

Amnesty International interviewed 26 people, including 22 journalists (6 women and 16 men), about their experiences living with the threat of armed violence, representatives of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and a relative and lawyer of a murdered journalist.

Most of the journalists Amnesty International interviewed had directly experienced threats and acts of violence. Amnesty International identified journalists to interview through speaking to their editors and other journalists, as well as the NUJ, public sources like media reports and personal contacts.

Amnesty International reached out to a majority of the region-wide media outlets in Northern Ireland. Most responded positively and assisted by sharing details with individual journalists and providing us with background information on their experiences and how they seek to keep staff safe.

The BBC declined to participate, with BBC management requesting us not to approach their journalists. They cited concerns about possible disclosure of ‘our modus operandi on how we protect staff or BBC premises’, and a desire not to make ‘any individual personally identifiable and potentially increase risk’.¹⁰ Amnesty International respects this position and did not reach out to any journalists employed by the BBC.

Three journalists who have been subjected to threats or acts of violence in the course of their professional work declined to participate in the research for personal safety or privacy concerns.

Interviews were mostly conducted in person, at a location of the interviewee's choice, including their places of work and the Amnesty International office in Belfast. A small number were conducted online.

Before each interview, Amnesty International informed interviewees about the nature and purpose of the research and on how their information could be used. Written and/or oral informed consent was obtained in all cases. Interviewees were told they could change their mind about consent at any time, including about being identified.

Anonymity was offered to all journalists who agreed to be interviewed. Where requested, Amnesty International has withheld interviewee names and identifying details to ensure privacy and safety from reprisals. Where requested, Amnesty International has also withheld information about affected family members and home security measures.

Amnesty International took precautions to avoid re-traumatisation including, where appropriate, checking if interviewees wanted to continue, and pausing when there were visible signs of distress. No incentive was offered for speaking.

Amnesty International's researchers obtained official documents and reviewed relevant laws and international human rights standards and mechanisms. Amnesty International also corresponded with the Office of the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service in relation to specific cases and their statutory responsibilities. Their responses have been incorporated in this report where relevant.

Amnesty International collected and reviewed a range of documentary evidence, including official TM1 (threat management) forms issued to journalists, threat data compiled by employers, PSNI and the NUJ, photographs, social media posts and videos showing threats or acts of violence against journalists, as well as media reports, Freedom of Information responses, evidence to Westminster committees, court documents and lawyer-supplied witness statements to the Police Ombudsman.

Amnesty International wrote to the PSNI and PPS on 8 May 2025 with research findings as part of its 'right to reply' process, received responses from both bodies on 20 May 2025 and has reflected these responses in the report.

In the report, certain incidents are attributed to specific paramilitary or organised crime groups based on testimonies of interviewees in cases where they know the perpetrators, as well as based on court documents and media reports.

Acknowledgements

Amnesty International would like to thank all those individuals and organisations who agreed to share their stories for this report and who provided expert insight and inspiration.

Special thanks to journalist Kathryn Torney, who carried out the interviews with Amnesty International and significantly contributed to writing this report; and to the NUJ, which supported this research project from inception to publication.

The report is dedicated to the memory of Martin O'Hagan and Lyra McKee.



Martin O'Hagan © Sunday World



Lyra McKee © Shutterstock

1. Background

More than 3,500 people were killed and thousands injured during what is commonly, and euphemistically, known as ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland.

The central conflict lay between those who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK and those who supported a united Ireland. From the late 1960s to the late 1990s, republican¹¹ and loyalist¹² paramilitary groups engaged in violence including regular bombings and shootings.¹³ The Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) and main loyalist paramilitary groups, the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and Red Hand Commando, declared ceasefires in 1994, paving the way for political talks which aimed to secure peace.

Multi-party negotiations, chaired by United States Senator George Mitchell, resulted in the landmark Belfast/Good Friday Agreement peace deal being signed on 10 April 1998.¹⁴

Paramilitary violence has significantly reduced – but it does continue. The Independent Reporting Commission was established to monitor progress towards ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. Its latest report, published in February 2025, states:

While it is without doubt that there has been real transformation in Northern Ireland over the last three decades, paramilitary groups continue to exist and exert coercive control over some communities. This coercive control can take many forms, including intimidation, financial extortion, sexual exploitation, creating communities where people are afraid to speak out, and stifling alternative voices and leadership.¹⁵

During the period under review in this report, 2019-2025, the UK government has assigned ‘the threat level’ from ‘Northern Ireland Related Terrorism’ to have moved back and forth between ‘substantial’ and ‘severe’.¹⁶ The Police Service of Northern Ireland published Security Situation Statistics on 15 May 2025 and an accompanying spreadsheet gives a historical breakdown of the data. This shows that shooting incidents, bombings, and paramilitary-style assaults still occur.¹⁷ Since the start of January 2019, the PSNI has recorded 190 shooting incidents, 61 bombing incidents and eight deaths due to the security situation.

1.1 Journalism matters

The two main local broadcasters are BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI) and Ulster Television (UTV), whose dedicated local news and current affairs programming makes up most of their local output. The national broadcaster of Ireland, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), has a northern editor and a reporter based in Belfast, with regular news reports on Northern Ireland. RTÉ also has dedicated programmes that cover election results in Northern Ireland for assembly and general elections. Outlets such as Sky News typically have a dedicated Ireland correspondent based locally who reports on political events in Northern Ireland, explaining them to a wider UK and international audience. There is a broad range of local newspaper titles and radio

stations, and the Sunday newspaper market is dominated by two tabloids, the *Sunday World* and *Sunday Life*.¹⁸

The media in Northern Ireland plays a key role in scrutinising human rights violations and holding government to account. From the worst days of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' through to the post-conflict reporting of today, journalists have created the first important record of the region's complicated history.

The importance of journalism in this context cannot be over-stated. Journalists continue to report on the activities of paramilitaries and criminal gangs, even when this leads to threats on their own lives.

Martin Breen, deputy editor-in-chief at the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life*, describes journalism as 'the lifeblood of democracy':

It is ludicrous that 30 years after this country was supposed to be at peace, journalists are still having to live behind bulletproof windows with cameras on their homes, for doing their job, for exposing criminality, for holding these guys to account, for exposing the gangland underbelly that is in Northern Ireland and that is a cancer in this society.

We are exposing people who are destroying communities, whether it's through extortion, drugs, racketeering, shooting, whatever. The people that are threatening us are trying to stop that. They're trying to silence our journalists because they don't want people knowing what they do. In many cases, they hide behind a veneer of respectability, whether a respectable businessman or woman, and we are exposing that, and we are showing that we know who they really are, and that is what is leading to the threats. We are hitting these guys in the pocket by exposing their criminality and that is why they're coming after journalists.

What our journalists are doing is a public service. There are people who have been convicted, and crimes exposed, on the basis of journalism in this country.¹⁹

Ed McCann, director of publishing operations for Mediahuis Ireland, said some people think Northern Ireland has moved on, but there is a residual level of paramilitarism which does not get covered well in other media.

The *Sunday World* and the *Sunday Life*, week in, week out, are covering stories in working class areas that other people don't necessarily cover. I think that performs a really important role in society, and obviously it results in threats, because it shows you how impactful it is that it is leading to threats.²⁰

Former *Irish News* editor **Noel Doran** said this type of journalism is vital:

Just because we're dealing with a changing environment doesn't push it down the agenda. People have a right to know what's going on and experienced, capable journalists are uniquely placed to analyse it and put it in its context.²¹

The *Sunday World's* northern editor, **Richard Sullivan** said:

Journalism matters more now than ever. If it wasn't for the media, we wouldn't be exposing the criminality of organisations like the UDA, the UVF and the IRA. You wouldn't be talking about MPs' election or expenses scandals. People forget what journalists do and if we let that drown, then we're in big trouble.²²

Matthew O'Toole MLA, Chair of the former All-Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability within the Northern Ireland Assembly, told Amnesty International:

It is clear that journalists operating in Northern Ireland face unique and acute threats. These arise in part due to the persistent presence of paramilitary actors in our post-conflict society.²³

1.2 The unions' view

In August 2024, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) issued a statement saying violence against journalists must not to be tolerated.

It joined with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) to condemn attacks on reporters and press photographers covering protests across the UK, including Belfast, and referenced attacks on freelance journalist Amanda Ferguson and on the car of *Belfast Telegraph* photographer Kevin Scott. The statement called on employers to ensure the safety of their staff, including freelance journalists, and demanded the authorities prosecute the perpetrators.²⁴

At a time when untrue information is rife, the work of journalists is all the more crucial, and is dependent on the ability of reporters and photographers to do their work. Those who attack journalists are attacking democracy, and undermining everyone's right to know. They must be protected and safeguarded – just as should be the vulnerable communities who are targeted.²⁵

A month before this, the NUJ had warned against 'a creeping culture of complacency' regarding threats to journalists in Northern Ireland. NUJ Irish organiser **Ian McGuinness** said:

We have noted a sharp increase in reported threats and know that many members do not even report threats to the PSNI or their employer. We should never allow threats to become 'normal' and society should not become complacent.²⁶

Anne Hailes, chair of the Belfast and District Branch of the National Union of Journalists, told Amnesty International: 'If any journalist is threatened or attacked, action must be taken swiftly to hold people to account and send out the message that it will not be tolerated.'

In November 2024, the NUJ launched its Journalists' Safety Tracker to capture incidents of harassment and abuse and build an evidence base. It has already recorded incidents from Northern Ireland journalists. The NUJ also has a Journalists' Safety Toolkit which provides advice for reporters, photographers and videographers reporting on disturbances.²⁷

2. Threats and attacks on journalists in Northern Ireland

Amnesty International's research has identified 71 incidents of threats or attacks on journalists in Northern Ireland since the start of 2019. This number is based on a range of information sources, including the journalists themselves, media outlets, the NUJ, PSNI data, official records and public reports, making it the most comprehensive record yet compiled of the extent of violence and threats against journalists in Northern Ireland.

However, this is still not a complete picture, and the true number of threats and attacks is likely higher.

Not all incidents or threats are recorded and not all are reported to the police by journalists. This can be due to the sheer number of threats, and the time it can take to make official statements and engage in police interviews.

Several journalists reported that they have received more threats in recent years than ever before. *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life* deputy editor-in-chief Martin Breen said there are probably more threats to journalists now than in the early days of the ceasefires.²⁸ A number of journalists said they had received around 20 threats during their careers.

The PSNI said its records show that it has delivered 10 threat management (TM1) forms to journalists since June 2022. This is the date it started keeping specific records for its Journalist Safety Group. Media reports and Amnesty International's interviews with journalists identified at least 17 TM1 forms delivered to journalists since June 2022.

Since 2022, the PSNI has recorded 46 occasions when a journalist brought a concern to PSNI. Of these reports, 13 were treated as threats, 11 were treated as crimes and the remaining 22 did not meet the threshold for threat or crime so were logged as 'incidents'.

In cases recorded as incidents, the PSNI said 'formal crime prevention advice or overt passing attention is often provided by way of reassurance.' This can include additional police patrols close to journalists' homes.

2.1 Source of threats

It is not always clear who is behind the threats of violence. However, in most of the 59 instances of threats to journalists that Amnesty International learned about during this research, the affected journalists reported that they had come from a range of proscribed paramilitary groups, loyalist and republican.²⁹ Other threats came from armed organised crime groups, some with links to paramilitaries, or from individuals associated with racist and 'anti-immigration groups', while a small number came from individuals with an apparent grudge against or obsession with a journalist.

The police visited *Belfast Telegraph* crime correspondent Allison Morris' house nine times between December 2023 and October 2024 to inform her of threats from paramilitary or criminal groups.

Ed McCann, director of publishing operations for Mediahuis Ireland, said:

In Northern Ireland, the specific threat that you get is paramilitary-related threats, particularly for the *Sunday World* and *Sunday Life*. Much of their journalism focuses on paramilitary groups' criminal activities. These groups are organised, they're armed, they're willing and have a propensity to use violence. So, they would tend to be the most worrying ones you would get.³⁰

In May 2020 loyalist paramilitaries threatened all journalists working at the *Sunday Life* and *Sunday World* newspapers. On another occasion, Amnesty International was told, two men wearing balaclavas arrived at the *Belfast Telegraph* building with a notepad and appeared to record the registration plates in the car park.³¹

Eoin Brannigan, editor-in-chief of the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life*, said at least six of their journalists have been threatened in the four and a half years he has been in his current role. He said it would help if they had clarity on how serious a particular threat is.³²

Martin Breen shares this concern:

We've had threats where I still don't know the source of them, and I am sure the police do. 'Criminal elements' could be anything from paramilitary gangland figures to one threat I suspected came from a paedophile we had exposed. A problem I have as an editor, is that without giving us the proper information, it's very difficult to protect your staff from encountering those people that are threatening them.³³

Photographers often have to deal with face-to-face threats when they are out covering events, as Press Association photographer **Niall Carson** explained: 'We do get threatened, and we do get told to go away. There are verbal threats and threats to kill but we don't take them seriously.'³⁴

Organised crime groups – as opposed to proscribed paramilitary groups which are also involved in organised crime – are an emerging source of threats against journalists.

A BBC Panorama team led by BBC journalists in Northern Ireland was threatened in 2021 following a programme about the involvement in world boxing of an individual named in the Irish courts as the head of one of Europe's most prominent drug cartels.³⁵

The NUJ reported that four days after the programme was aired on 1 February 2021, the PSNI warned a BBC journalist in Northern Ireland about an unspecified threat against him.³⁶

Media reports at the time said the journalist and his family were forced to move out of their home to a secure location and were being provided security by the PSNI.³⁷

Several of the journalists who spoke to Amnesty International reported receiving threats from a drugs gang known as The Firm, based in County Armagh and which the police has linked to two murders in recent years.³⁸

Allison Morris believes they have been behind some of the threats against her:

We're now talking about organised crime gangs with maybe dozens of members, and they're often more heavily armed than paramilitary groups would be. So that scares me more than anything, because that is the unknown that we're now going into. To this date, The Firm have killed two people, both with guns. So, you're dealing with people who are armed and they're dangerous.³⁹

The *Sunday Life's* **Ciaran Barnes** also thinks that organised crime groups may now pose an even greater threat to life for journalists than paramilitary organisations:

I think that journalists are more at risk of being shot by a criminal gang than they are by paramilitary gangs, because there are structures with paramilitary gangs.

The most serious death threat I had was in 2019 and it was a criminal gang in West Belfast. They were loosely connected to dissidents. The cops came to my house and said, 'You need to take this seriously. They will not think twice about shooting you.'⁴⁰

This research also uncovered evidence of violence and threats emanating from individuals associated with racist and 'anti-immigration' groups and conspiracists. Incidents included in-person threats, for example when attending public protest events, and via social media messages. This is a new trend.

While the BBC declined, on behalf of its journalists, to take part in this research, its Northern Ireland director **Adam Smyth** told Amnesty International:

We have had several recent instances when BBC journalists have been targeted, attacked, or felt at risk, because of their reporting. All of this is something that we condemn. And none of it has prevented us from the necessary job of telling the truth about people, issues and situations.

It wouldn't be appropriate to say more about specifics of these cases, other than to confirm that we took necessary steps to support our staff and to uphold BBC journalism.⁴¹

2.2 Communication of threats

Journalists learn about the threats in different ways. Police officers may deliver a TM1 (threat management) form in person to the journalist affected, containing details of a threat message uncovered from intelligence sources or called in to the anonymous Crimestoppers phone line. In other cases, the threats come directly to journalists via social media messages, phone calls to newsrooms, graffiti on walls, shouts in the street, or are passed on by journalists' own contacts. Some journalists told Amnesty International that the most frightening threats were the violent ones delivered in person during incidents of public disorder.

In over 60 per cent of the 59 threatening messages Amnesty International documented in this research, journalists learned about the threats when police officers came to their homes to inform them. This is usually done through the delivery by police officers of a threat management form, which records brief detail about the nature, target and possibly the source of the threat.

The PSNI said it has records of 10 threat management forms being issued to journalists since June 2022, including six during 2024, although Amnesty International has recorded 17 such forms being issued to journalists during this period.

Ciaran Barnes said:

You get the cops coming to your door and saying you're at risk of attack. Sometimes you'll get phone calls to the office, and sometimes you would hear second-hand from sources. People ring into the office and threaten to beat me up and I've been threatened on the street on loads of occasions.⁴²

Richard Sullivan said:

Almost without exception, the threats will follow a particular investigation or story I've authored in the *Sunday World* with 99.9 per cent delivered to my home on a Sunday night usually around midnight or one o'clock in the morning. The officer comes to the door. He has a form and explains what it is and reads out the message and shows me the threat. He then asks me if I have any thought as to where it might come from. I can make an educated guess based on what's been published in the paper that day but you're going to bed, it's almost midnight, and then you're being asked who's trying to kill you. It's kind of weird.⁴³

Officers arrived at **Allison Morris'** house at 2.30am one morning to check for a bomb under her car and **Paula Mackin** said it was a regular thing to have police at her house 'always late at night'.^{44 45}

Mackin said the first early morning delivery of a threat was a shock. 'The first time, you think someone's dead. You really do think something bad's happened to someone when there's police standing at your door at 12 or one o'clock in the morning. Then you become used to it.'⁴⁶

Ciaran Barnes feels that this method of delivery plays into the hands of those dealing out the threats: '... the people making these death threats are trying to disrupt my life, and by acting in that manner, the cops are doing exactly what the person making this death threat set out to achieve.'⁴⁷

Belfast Telegraph photographer **Kevin Scott** has received 'countless threats', mostly given in person:

One of our biggest issues is outside the courts. Paramilitaries, people who've been accused of having explosives, people who have been accused of murder or attempted murder are coming outside the court, and you're standing face to face, photographing them. You get: 'You fucking scumbag, I'm going to kill you. I know who you fucking are.'⁴⁸

Freelance journalist **Leona O'Neill's** public comments on her witnessing of Lyra McKee's murder, led to her receiving what she described as 'a tsunami of hate' via social media. She explains: 'It was relentless for several months. There were people in forums raising money to buy weapons to come and attack my house.'⁴⁹

One threat came to her via graffiti sprayed on a wall in the Bogside. As well as her name, it included references to ‘tout’ and ‘MI5’. There were additional threats from email and other social media messages that said if she went into the Bogside, she would be dragged out of her car and beaten up.

Threats made via the Crimestoppers telephone line cause frustration. As it is a service which allows people to remain anonymous, no additional details can be provided to journalists apart from the threat message itself.

It is not only specialist crime and security journalists who receive TM1 forms delivered by police to their home. One *Belfast Telegraph* news reporter, who does not normally cover stories about paramilitary groups, wrote an article about a woman falsely claiming benefits and the report included that she was married to a member of a loyalist paramilitary group. Officers called to the journalist’s home to say that the police had received information suggesting that loyalist paramilitaries may carry out an attack on the journalist which could involve the use of firearms.

This was the first, and, so far, only threat this reporter has received for their journalism.⁵⁰

2.3 Nature of threats

NUJ Assistant General Secretary **Séamus Dooley** said what marks Northern Ireland out is that threats received by journalists are at a much more extreme level.

‘They’re also coming from people who have, in many cases, a paramilitary background, so they’re a lot more sinister,’ he said.⁵¹

Amnesty International has seen threats received by journalists that include threats to kill them or carry out violent attacks. Some include references to guns, under-car booby trap bombs, rape, ‘shoot to kill’ and imminent attacks.

Of the 10 TM1 forms the PSNI says it has issued to journalists since June 2022, five related to threats to life, three to information about a planned attack, one was a threat of assault, and the other was a threat to attack an individual and damage their property.⁵²

Recent threat management forms delivered by police to **Allison Morris** include the threat of a ‘serious physical attack’ by dissident republicans and another stated: ‘criminal elements may intend to attack Allison Morris at her home address. The use of firearms or an under-vehicle device cannot be ruled out.’⁵³ Morris said:

During lockdown, the police came to my house a couple of times and told me that I was going to be shot. I’d moved into a different place, and they knew where I lived. Around the same time my name was painted on a wall in North Belfast saying I worked for MI5 with crosshairs.⁵⁴

Kevin Scott describes the threats he has received as ‘brutal’. ‘It quite literally is “I’ll slice your throat, I’ll stab you... I’ll do this. I’ll do that”.’ Taking a photograph of ammunition and guns found in a car in North Belfast, he was threatened by a large crowd. ‘I stood there and took all the abuse of the day, threats to kill me and all sorts like: “I’m going to fucking slice your throat the next time you’re up here, you fenian cunt”.’⁵⁵

The threats **Patricia Devlin** received spiralled:

You would have multiple accounts and anonymous accounts posting stuff about you that was really abusive. Then it became sectarian and there was also some misogyny in it. An account posted direct links to my Facebook page which had pictures of my children. It went from people being abusive to saying 'I hope she has to bury her children'. One criminal with 300 convictions I had covered in the past started sending me emoji gunshot blasts direct to my Facebook page.⁵⁶

Richard Sullivan said:

They range from giving me 48 hours to get out of the country, or I'd be shot, or to just being simply shot. Others threatened to put an explosive device under my car or firebomb my house, that kind of thing. The use of firearms is a common threat contained in the messages. They're very violent threats. Thankfully, they haven't been carried out.⁵⁷

In 2021, after writing about the anti-vaccination movement in Northern Ireland **Rodney Edwards**, then *Sunday Independent* reporter and now editor of the *Impartial Reporter*, said he received hundreds of vile messages on social media. One referenced wanting to hang him and another indicated his home address had been posted on the dark web.⁵⁸

2.4 Physical attacks

Alongside threats of violence, some journalists have experienced physical attacks or efforts to cause serious harm. Two journalists have been killed.

Amnesty International knows of at least 12 physical attacks experienced by journalists since the start of 2019. This includes the murder of 29-year-old journalist **Lyra McKee** in April 2019, who was shot while observing rioting in Derry/Londonderry.

Other reported attacks include physical attacks on journalists reporting from scenes, petrol bombs thrown at journalists' cars and feet, a phone slapped out of a reporter's hand during protests, photographers being spat at, and a journalist's car being beaten with a pole laced with nails while he was inside it.

In December 2023, **Allison Morris** received a threat. Twenty-four hours later a pipe bomb was found near her home, believed to have been thrown from a passing car.⁵⁹

A man came up behind **Paula Mackin** in a bar and told her not to turn around. He gave her parents' address and said there was a blast bomb on its way to the house. She told Amnesty International that the bomb was intercepted and stopped via contacts with loyalist paramilitaries.

'That was a warning, he was tipping me off,' she said.⁶⁰

Photographer **Niall Carson** was shot in the thigh in 2011 on the Newtownards Road. He thinks people were shooting at a police Land Rover and he got hit because he was standing beside it. He was off work for three months recuperating.⁶¹

More recently, a man filming **Amanda Ferguson** during the August 2024 ‘anti-immigration’ protests and violence in south Belfast slapped her phone out of her hand and called her a traitor.

In March 2025, *Belfast Telegraph* photographer **Kevin Scott** reported that an ‘anti-immigration’ protester had been arrested in Belfast city centre after shoving police, kicking his camera and spitting at photographers. A man arrested at the protest was later charged with disorderly behaviour and attempted criminal damage.⁶²

Many of the photographers we spoke to had experienced physical attacks while doing their job.

Scott recounted two other serious incidents which both took place on Belfast’s Shankill Road. One happened during rioting at the ‘peace gates’ on Lanark Way when the gates were closed, leaving Scott cut off from his car.

Two masked men chased me down the street and jumped me from behind. I managed to fight them off, but my cameras were broken and damaged. I had a sore arm afterwards.

Similar to that, I was parked up in my vehicle recently during race hate riots. Masked men saw my car, they knew the car, and straight away went to attack me in the vehicle. They kicked the wing mirror off and put a boot into the side of the door. They came across the back end of the car with a pole laced with nails and it ruptured the whole back end of the car and punctured the tyres at the back. The guy at the back was beating with a pole on the back window as I sped off out of the area. They didn’t get to me. They 100 per cent knew it was me because I heard the guy at the back of the car shouting: ‘Get the fucking cameras from the boot’. I think they would have killed me if I hadn’t had reinforced windows.⁶³

Another photographer who did not want to be identified spoke about a frightening incident which occurred when he was taking photographs at Easter 2024 in Derry/Londonderry.

A lad said I’d been taking pictures of him and he was lighting bangers to try and throw at my feet. As I was walking to the car, he shouted my name and told me not to come back to the Creggan again. Fortunately, I had driven away by the time he got the petrol bomb lit. He threw it directly at me. The bumper of another journalist’s car got scorched and another journalist’s shoes caught on fire.⁶⁴

Mal McCann was covering an Orange Order march three or four years ago. ‘They were objecting to me taking photographs of them outside St Patrick’s chapel. A man came at me from across the street with a sword in his hand, a sort of ceremonial sword.’⁶⁵

Niall Carson now tries to avoid covering serious public disorder at night as he feels it is extremely dangerous:

You’re being targeted by the rioters because they don’t want you taking photographs of them. They start throwing bricks and bottles at you, and ball bearings have been fired at us from catapults as well. That’s a very frightening thing – you can’t see anything like that coming.⁶⁶

In 2019, **Martin Breen** narrowly escaped injury during an encounter in a Belfast city centre bar. ‘The person overheard a conversation, and they tried to hit me on the head with a glass bottle. It was somebody who was just out of prison. Luckily, I grabbed the pint glass as the guy came towards me. He said he knew I was a journalist.’⁶⁷

In 2009, then *Sunday World* northern editor **Jim McDowell** was assaulted by four men he says were from a loyalist paramilitary group when he was attending the Christmas market at Belfast City Hall:

One of them was wearing a plaster cast and he hit me with the cast on the back of the head and another boy lamped me. When I was on the ground, they gave me a kicking and there were heel marks on my baldy head where they were stomping on me. Our own contacts told us who it was who attacked me. If they’d been carrying even a knife, I was a dead man.⁶⁸

Physical attacks on journalists in Northern Ireland have included two murders.

Sunday World journalist **Martin O’Hagan** (51) was murdered by loyalist paramilitaries in September 2001. His case, and the ongoing search for justice, is covered in detail in Section 6 in this report.

Freelance journalist **Lyra McKee** was shot and killed while observing rioting in the Creggan Estate in Derry/Londonderry in April 2019. According to news reports, the New IRA admitted responsibility for the 29-year-old’s murder.⁶⁹

She was standing near police Land Rovers in the area when she was struck by gunshots fired in the direction of the police and the nearby group of observers, including McKee.

Three men were charged with her murder – at the time of writing, their trial was ongoing. Six other men have been charged with offences including rioting and throwing petrol bombs.

McKee’s death highlights the perilous conditions faced by journalists in Northern Ireland.

In an article written for the *Washington Post* just days after her murder, the NUJ’s **Séamus Dooley** said that Lyra’s death highlighted a sobering reality: ‘Northern Ireland is inhospitable for journalists ... McKee is not the first Northern Irish journalist to face inordinate danger while reporting – and, unless things change, she might not be the last.’⁷⁰

Speaking just after her murder, the UK’s then prime minister, Theresa May, described what happened as ‘shocking and truly senseless’.⁷¹

2.5 Gender dimension to threats

‘Female journalists and other female media actors face specific gender-related dangers, including sexist, misogynist and degrading abuse; threats; intimidation; harassment and sexual aggression and violence. These violations are increasingly taking place online. There is a need for urgent, resolute and systemic responses.’⁷²

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers

The NUJ's Séamus Dooley said female journalists tend to be subjected to greater threat online than males. They experienced gendered threats that are more personal in nature than threats received by their male colleagues. There is a focus on how the women look, threats of sexual harassment and violence, and threats directed at their children and wider family.⁷³

Of the 59 threats Amnesty International knows were received by journalists since January 2019, at least 26 related to female journalists. Only a small number of women specialise in reporting on crime and security issues which are often the spark for threats to be received.

Allison Morris describes an incident during riots in the Woodvale area of Belfast in 2013 when a loyalist followed her around with a phone in his hand, playing a hardcore porn film on it featuring a woman with blonde hair. Morris said:

He was telling everyone that it was me and asked me how much I charge for blow jobs and all sorts of other things, while I was trying to do my job, and doing this really loudly. He gathered a crowd around him, who all joined in. That went on for like four hours maybe. One of the photographers said to me, 'that just goes with your job does it not?' And I went, 'But no, it wouldn't go with your job, it wouldn't go with the man's job. Nobody would ever have to put up with that.' And a lot of the threats that I get, there's a gender basis to them and there's also a sectarian basis.⁷⁴

She described another recent incident when someone took a screen grab of her appearance on the Stephen Nolan TV show:

There were about 100 comments underneath it, saying, 'wouldn't ride her, wouldn't touch her', really vile sexual shit put underneath it, and there's nothing, not one thing you could do about that. I think some of it is an attempt to scare you, but there's an opportunistic element there too. If the opportunity arrives, do I think they would attack me? Yes, I do. Some of them have such an obvious hatred for me.⁷⁵

BBC journalist **Aileen Moynagh** was subjected to what a judge described as 'horrific' sustained online harassment and threats between October 2020 and February 2021.

Her harasser, who was aged just 16 when the abuse started, received a six-month deferred sentence. He had sent messages referring to how he 'needed retaliation' because he had discovered Aileen had a partner. The court was told that the boy had complex issues and an unhealthy interest in women journalists.⁷⁶

In a separate case, the worst message **Patricia Devlin** received was to her Facebook profile threatening to rape her baby boy.

Speaking to the BBC in February 2021, she said:

Male journalists who do the same job as me, who have written closer to the bone about paramilitaries, do not get the same level of abuse. I suppose these people think that these women are an easier target.⁷⁷

Devlin told Amnesty International:

There were no male journalists who had their children threatened with rape. Being a woman, they would go for your looks, your weight, your children and calling you names. The trolls online, which were mostly men, were more ready to abuse you than they would abuse male journalists. They were always so angry.⁷⁸

3. The impact

This is the first time many of the journalists interviewed for this research have spoken publicly about threats they have received and the impact it has had on their lives.

Their accounts reference fear, anxiety and taking steps to keep themselves safe while reporting on armed and dangerous paramilitary groups and organised crime gangs. Homes are protected by alarms, reinforced doors and, in some cases, bulletproof windows. It affects where people have chosen to live and where they feel safe to socialise and shop.

The worry has not gone away. Some are still living with the ultimate fear they will be killed for doing their job.

3.1 Impact on journalists personally

Sunday Life reporter **Ciaran Barnes** says he is ‘battle-hardened’ and well used to receiving regular threats, but he is still careful. There are parts of Belfast he cannot go to and other places in Northern Ireland he says it would be unsafe for him to step foot in:

When I sit in a café, I’m facing the door. If I’m in a pub, I’m always on the lookout. It’s always there in the back of your mind. I think that for any journalist who’s got any number of death threats over a period of time, they all feel the same way. Northern Ireland is quite a small place. I don’t think you’re ever that far away from someone who you’ve written about who could potentially make a threat against you. It certainly limits your social life.⁷⁹

Allison Morris was sitting in her car recently when a man with a scarf around his mouth walked up to her window. She screamed, bracing herself for him shooting her through the window.

It was an Amazon delivery driver. She said:

It shows that somewhere in my head I’m convinced someone’s going to kill me at some point. I always think I’ll never die of natural causes. Most of the time, I would pretend that the threats don’t annoy me, but clearly, they do. I realise that what I do is not a normal way to live when I say it to other people and see the horror on their faces.

We’re not dealing with rational people sometimes, especially the crime gangs. There’s a lot of drugs involved, not just in the selling of them, but in the taking of them – so people get paranoid, and they make really irrational decisions. I do worry about that.⁸⁰

Photographer **Kevin Scott** says he is used to the threats he receives but remains wary when he is out and looks over his shoulder. He does not go to certain parts of Belfast, although he feels very safe in west Belfast where he is from. He does not get taxis to his home and when he orders food to be delivered, he uses a false name.

‘This sounds like the most awful safety approach that you’ll ever take, but nobody has tried to kill me and if they really wanted to, they probably would have done it by now,’ he said.⁸¹

However, he has thought about the possibility that, someday, they still could. But, he insists:

If I lost my life tomorrow, it was all worth it. We make a difference to people’s lives every day. Some of the most heinous people that live in our communities people wouldn’t see if it wasn’t for us.

I go out every day to work knowing that it’s a real possibility that somebody will do something really stupid. I don’t think somebody will ever intentionally kill me. I think it will happen because people lose control of themselves, I think it will be in a situation where people are so hyper or so hyped, they’re in a riot and they’ve got a petrol bomb in their hand, not realising what they’re doing, and they’ll throw it, and they’ll hit the wrong person one day.⁸²

For others, like **Leona O’Neill**, threats have seriously affected their mental health. She said:

I have a black cloud that follows me around a lot of the time. I have PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and still deal very much with that. I have terrible, terrible nightmares. I have weeks of insomnia and still dip in and out of counselling. I suffer very badly from anxiety.

I was struggling so badly with trauma, but I still went out and worked. I fell behind in my mortgage payments because I wasn’t working as much. I had all that stress, as well as our house being under threat, as well as my children being totally traumatised by what happened, as well as dealing with my PTSD. It was horrific.

The people who support the people who shot Lyra (McKee), I see them every day. I see them in the supermarket. There are people of this community, and I’m of this community. They’re constant reminders of a really awful time. So, unless I moved to the moon, I would not be able to forget what happened.⁸³

Patricia Devlin is waiting to see a psychologist for her PTSD:

I just wonder sometimes that these people behind this, did they not think about the mental impact it was having on me as a new mother? They must have known how that would impact me, but they didn’t care.⁸⁴

One photographer who spoke anonymously said he is always living with a sense of anxiety:

You need that fight or flight response to keep you on your toes. You have to keep your wits with you the whole time. It’s mentally draining. You always wear black clothes. You’re living in a dark world because you don’t want to be seen. You want to be Mr Grey. For your own mental health, it can be a bit of an issue. You’re always looking over your shoulder. While other people might have a social media profile, I stay away from it.⁸⁵

Even getting to and from work can require careful monitoring, as one journalist explained to Amnesty International:

You're always looking when you're coming to and from work. If I thought a car was behind me too long, I'd pull in somewhere or I'd take a different route. I do that now automatically. It's part of my routine. If I'm getting a taxi home, I get dropped off away from my house and walk the rest of the way because I don't want anyone to know where I live.⁸⁶

Paula Mackin says it is always at the back of her mind that there are people out there that want to do her harm. 'If they're going to get you, they're going to get you. The way they got Marty (Martin O'Hagan). He was shot in the back walking home.'⁸⁷

The *Sunday World's* northern editor **Richard Sullivan** has not spoken publicly before about the threats he has received.

I've taken the view that I don't want to give it any air or publicity, but it's still going on and I think it needs to be talked about. It's a really important issue that journalists in a major city in the UK are routinely threatened for what they do. It has an impact on your life in a practical sense in that you have to be very careful where you go. I've been accosted in the street a few times, and even out for a drink with friends, somebody will pick on you and have a go at you. I very rarely go out in Belfast.⁸⁸

Steven Moore wants to keep working and to get on with his life: 'I don't want to downplay the threats, but you do just kind of get used to it. It affects you for a bit and brings some stress into the house, but I generally try to get on with it.'⁸⁹

Eoin Brannigan voices his greatest fear: 'It's that we will get a message from the PSNI or from a relative saying someone's been shot dead. It's not that there are no guns around. There are plenty of guns. How many people are involved in paramilitary organisations?'⁹⁰

3.2 Impact on families

It is not only the journalists' lives which are affected by the threats they receive. It impacts on their families – who also need to be protected.

Sunday World reporter **Steven Moore** received a death threat when his children were very young. He was anxious that the paramilitaries could kill his children by mistake:

I remember putting cuddly toys up by the window so they would know it's the kids' room, not my room, and that the kids were sleeping in there. We slept out the back. I look back and think, 'God, I really did that'. It's mad.

I think it's more stressful for my family. I'm used to it and don't generally believe the threats. I think it's just an intimidation tactic. I used to tell my son that the police were here because they wanted to talk to me about a story and I'm helping them with something, but now that he's older I have to be honest about it.⁹¹

Ciaran Barnes is very wary about where he goes, particularly with children:

There's an increasing trend, particularly with paramilitary gangs, if they have an issue with you. They will look to target your family rather than just you. You don't want an incident happening or some sort of confrontation taking place when you're with the children.⁹²

Allison Morris is thankful that her children have a different surname to her and they are now adults. They grew up with the threats Allison faced, but she says they 'don't know the half of it'.⁹³

It is also now having an impact on the next generation. She quickly took one of her grandchildren out of McDonald's recently when she saw men in a corner recognising her, whispering together and then one stepping outside to make a phone call: 'I was more worried for her than for me. I think if I'm going to be attacked, it'll be that someone will see me and they'll opportunistically go, "right, she's here", you know.'⁹⁴

One of her brothers was beaten up in a nightclub after admitting he was related to Morris. 'My other brother said that was a rookie mistake. You never tell anyone you're related to me, under any circumstances.'⁹⁵

Paula Mackin's niece used to stay at her house a lot. She has stopped that completely: 'I was terrified that she would get caught in the crossfire and it would be mistaken identity. That was a big change I made to my life. It's hard.'⁹⁶

Mackin's mother also greatly feared for her safety, particularly after the murder of her colleague Martin O'Hagan: 'My mum, God rest her, hated it, absolutely hated it. Her attitude was she spent a lifetime trying to keep us away from paramilitaries, and I walked straight into them.'⁹⁷

Living with threats has impacted on **Kevin Scott** and his girlfriend's plans to move in together.

We've been looking to rent a house now for nine years. I can't find a landlord who will allow me to change their door to open outwards at my own cost, install CCTV cameras on the house and an alarm system, and have a panic button fitted. That's all required for my safety. I also need somewhere that my cars can be off the road so they can't be seen. This means, at 30 years old, I'm still living at home.⁹⁸

Leona O'Neill's children were terrified by the threats she received:

My children were quite young. They saw people being really hateful to me on Facebook pages. People were shouting at me in the street. We were worried they were going to actually attack our house. I'm living in a state of hyper vigilance and so are all my family. I don't think any of us feel safe, which is a terrible thing.⁹⁹

3.3 Security measures

In response to the threats, some media companies have paid for costly additional security measures at journalists' homes.

Amnesty International has seen one media company's records in response to a threat received by a journalist. It shows the high level of security required in some cases:

Upgrade of security in [REDACTED]'s home. Home alarm and panic button, smoke alarm linked to security, bullet resistant glass windows, bullet resistant external door. CCTV adjusted and cameras raised higher out of reach. Video doorbell. Improved lighting, car vehicle camera and tracker.¹⁰⁰

Kevin Scott lives with his parents. Among the security measures the company has installed at their home are cameras and a front door which opens outwards and can't be kicked in. He also paid himself for electric gates to be installed and put in cameras and a panic alarm at his girlfriend's house as 'there's an option to get me there'.¹⁰¹

He has three cars, for safety reasons, and alternates his use of them. One car has reinforced windows. That's good to stop dangerous people trying to smash through the windows – but not so good if he is ever involved in a car accident and needs to escape through a window. Only fire crews can force their way through that glass.

'Your car being recognised is part of it,' he said. 'I changed my car five or six weeks before it was attacked, and they knew what it was. I could change my car every day of the week, they'll still know what it is.'¹⁰²

Allison Morris's children call her house Castle Grayskull – a reference to a Masters of the Universe fortress. She has bulletproof windows and a bulletproof door, cameras all around the house and a security camera doorbell:

I have a dashcam at the front and back of my car. I have an alarm system which is hooked up to the cops, so that if the alarm goes off, they're alerted. Apart from putting a moat around it, there's nothing else they could do. It's probably about as safe as it possibly can be.

After the pipe bomb incident close to my house, Marty (Martin Breen) asked if I needed to move. I said no. We live in a tiny little place. You go to the garage to put petrol in your car and someone could follow you home. There's a million ways people can find out where you live. You'd just be constantly moving.¹⁰³

Ciaran Barnes and another journalist both described their houses as being 'like Fort Knox', the secure facility which houses the United States government's gold reserves.

Ciaran Barnes said: 'I've got bulletproof windows front and back. I've got a bulletproof door. I've got cameras all around the house. I've got sensor activated lights and panic alarms.'¹⁰⁴

Another journalist who asked not to be named has security cameras, reinforced doors, alarms, cameras, lights and panic button.¹⁰⁵ Paula Mackin and Richard Sullivan have a similar set-up. Mackin made the decision to live in a gated development with her security in mind.¹⁰⁶

Self-employed journalists must consider the personal cost of extra security. One photographer we interviewed anonymously said: 'I have electric gates at my house. I have CCTVs but it costs £600-800 to get them all installed and it's not something I have the money for right now.'¹⁰⁷

The NUJ's **Séamus Dooley** concludes: 'In what is supposed to be normalised society, post the peace process, journalists are living in fear and behind high security measures. That really is not the sign of a normal functioning democracy.'¹⁰⁸

3.4 Impact on journalists professionally

Some journalists made major career changes after receiving threats.

Patricia Devlin took up a role based in Dublin and has decided she will never work for a publication in Northern Ireland again or cover politics and crime.

I couldn't go through that again. I'm happy now, but there is a small part of me that is absolutely devastated that I cannot work in the place that I was born because there was nothing to stop me from being destroyed. What happened to me was orchestrated and someone wasn't going to stop until I was sacked or worse.¹⁰⁹

Leona O'Neill now works as a lecturer for Ulster University in Coleraine, training the next generation of journalists. She said:

I burnt my entire career to the ground, a career that I spent my entire life building up to, studying for, working really hard for, and they destroyed it. Those people, dissidents in particular, destroyed my life.

I felt that I had to get out of Derry because of the way that those people made me feel, that I was so hated in my own community. You're not allowed into the Bogside where my father was from. You're not allowed into the Creggan. If you come to these places, you will be met with violence. I had to go and work in Coleraine which is a bit of a detachment from here. There are times when I do struggle very much with stuff. It feels very isolating at times.¹¹⁰

Others continue to report on crime and security issues and **Ed McCann**, Mediahuis Ireland director of publishing operations, acknowledges they are very brave individuals.

It's become for them nearly like an occupational hazard, but it shouldn't be that way. They've nearly come to accept it. It's incredible the job they do week in, week out. As a company, that's why it's important we support them as they're performing such an important function in society. For us, the journalism is critical, so we'll do whatever it takes to support our journalists.¹¹¹

Every journalist who spoke to Amnesty International was clearly committed to their mission of reporting fairly in the public interest and holding power accountable.

Allison Morris still finds her job fulfilling:

It's like no other job going. I know that there will be a time when I'll stop doing this, and I will miss it greatly, because the benefits really do outweigh the risks. There's an adrenaline rush to it as well. It's an exciting job at times even if sometimes it can be very stressful.¹¹²

Kevin Scott decided early on in his career to be high profile and easily contactable. But he also knows the importance of playing by the rules.

If we're covering a parade, dissident republicans speak to us. They tell us where to stand and ask us to follow their rules. Whenever you've got a bunch of masked men who've killed one journalist, have the capability to carry out attacks on police officers and are not afraid to carry out attacks on people, you do follow the rules. So, whenever they're taking sips of water and pulling their masks down, we don't take pictures.¹¹³

Another photographer chooses to keep a low profile:

The most important thing when I leave the house is to make sure I go home every night, not that I get a picture. I try to limit the risk. I always have an exit; I always have a way to get out.¹¹⁴

Steven Moore said:

It has made me think about the stories that I do. I live in east Belfast so if I am writing about the East Belfast UVF, I have to make a call about whether it's worth the hassle. Will I do it and not put my name on it or will I just not do it at all? Generally, I do just go ahead and do it. I have never thought about leaving journalism. I can't do anything else.¹¹⁵

Niall Carson has been given additional roles because of his experience of covering public disorder in Northern Ireland and extra training he has received:

I've been sent to photograph soccer hooligans over in France during the Euros. The Press Association has given all staff training in how to protect yourself in a public order situation and first aid training. It covered tactical awareness of the police drills and a little bit of psychology about how crowds work. They issued everyone with their own PPE kit which stays in the car with them all the time and includes helmets and goggles.

If there's trouble, I prefer to put the big cameras away, mingle with the crowd and use my phone as the safest way go incognito. My main worry when I go to a riot is getting pepper sprayed.¹¹⁶

There is still a worry, however, about photographers working alone. Carson said:

It used to be two people, always a photographer and a journalist together and you had a little bit of back-up there. Now, it's usually a photographer working on their own, and that's exposing yourself to danger. That's a bit of work we're doing with our union, we're trying to make sure that no one in a dangerous situation is on their own, and that the company will allow for two members of staff to be there. At the minute, the company's policy is, 'if you're in any danger, just leave.'¹¹⁷

3.5 Impact on freedom of expression and press freedom

‘Attacks on and intimidation of journalists and other media actors inevitably have a grave chilling effect on freedom of expression and this effect is all the more piercing when the prevalence of attacks and intimidation is compounded by a culture of legal impunity for their perpetrators. Such a culture of legal impunity is an indicator of endemic abuse of human rights.’

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers¹¹⁸

The climate of violence and intimidation experienced by journalists in Northern Ireland has a chilling effect on journalism and undermines press freedom.

Former *Irish News* editor **Noel Doran** said:

There is no doubt that threats made to journalists have a chilling effect. They undermine the confidence of some journalists and make them feel there are areas where they may be reluctant to go and stories they may be reluctant to pursue. There were times when stories appeared without bylines because people were concerned.

However, I honestly don’t think it deterred journalists at the *Irish News* during my time from reporting on what we would regard as key developments. We did have to exercise some caution and talk to the staff about exactly where they were going and what they were doing.

Photographers are a bit more vulnerable. Some funerals with paramilitary connections they just didn’t cover or covered from a considerable distance. There definitely would have been cases when picture bylines weren’t used.¹¹⁹

Patricia Devlin said: ‘There is a chill factor put on journalists who write about paramilitary activity so that means certain things aren’t covered. Even thinking about working in Northern Ireland and covering politics or crime here fills me with dread.’¹²⁰

Leona O’Neill left freelance reporting to become a journalism lecturer. She said:

It’s getting worse for journalists. The hostility towards journalists, the disrespect towards journalists, discrediting journalists, dehumanising journalists, is just off the scale this last few years. I want to give my students the armour and training to be able to deal with that.¹²¹

Careful decisions are still being taken about whether to include reporters’ names within bylines. **Ciaran Barnes** said:

Pick up the *Sunday Life* or the *Sunday World*, newspapers which focus on crime gangs, and you will see loads of stories not bylined. The journalists who have their stories bylined get threatened again and again and after a while they decide it’s not worth the hassle and go ‘just take my byline off it’. That’s not good for a journalist’s career. You are putting together a portfolio of your work – and some of it you’re proud of – and you don’t have your byline on it.¹²²

Eoin Brannigan also stressed the value of putting names on stories ‘from a news organisation’s point of view and at a time when trust is very important.’¹²³

The photographer who spoke to us anonymously does not include his name on any pictures used by *Sunday Life*. He regrets this as he would like to be able to have this work acknowledged.¹²⁴

Martin Breen said: ‘We continue the policy of some stories having no bylines. I have a duty of care for my staff.’¹²⁵

The journalists we spoke to acknowledge there is a risk that younger journalists will be put off by the threats they hear about. **Ciaran Barnes** said:

Of course it puts off young journalists, and why wouldn’t it? Why would you want to get into an industry that is hard enough as it is without you picking up the paper or reading online about another journalist threatened or a death threat against a journalist. It puts people off coming into the industry. No doubt about it.¹²⁶

Rodney Edwards said if he had experienced the threats he has back when he was a teenager it would have put him off journalism for life:

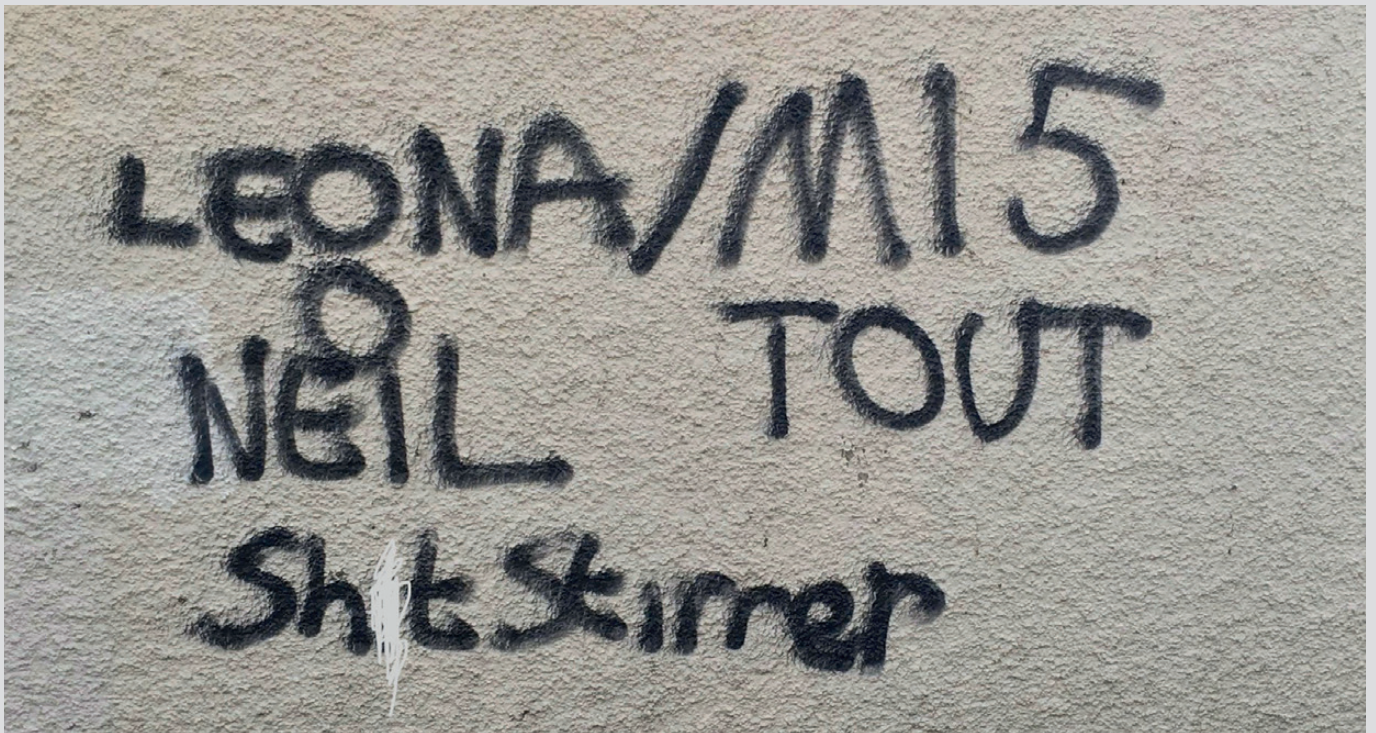
There’s no way that I would ever, ever engage in this type of work if I knew that this is the kind of response some of the stories would get. We’re living in this really difficult period with the likes of Trump and others shouting loud that journalists and editors are enemies of the people, and that we’re the bad guys. That resonates with some people, because you see that all that nonsense about fake news is trickling down.¹²⁷

Allison Morris warns any young journalist who wants to be the kind of journalist she is that they should expect people to shout things at them and to receive threats:

You are going to have to learn how to put up with that, but also how to protect yourself and deal with it. Don’t think you can stop it, because you can’t. Awful people are just awful. There’s nothing you can do about them. There are things you can learn about how to position yourself and not put yourself in danger.¹²⁸

The *Sunday World*’s former northern editor, **Jim McDowell**, is adamant that this type of journalism will survive:

Nobody will ever stop journalists doing their job and exposing criminals and criminal empires. Threats will never stop journalists. We’ve dug in further and deeper and said ‘fuck them’, they’re not going to stop us and they’re not going to shut us up.¹²⁹



PHOTOS

(Clockwise from top)

Graffiti targeting Leona O'Neill, Derry, February 2020 © Leona O'Neill

The PSNI booklet *Protect Yourself*

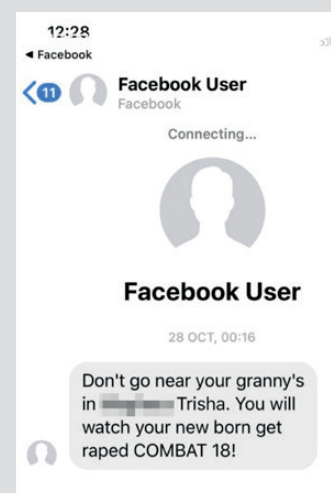
Video screenshot of a petrol bomb attack on journalists, Derry, April 2024 © Kevin Scott/Belfast Telegraph

Graffiti targeting Allison Morris, February 2021 © Allison Morris

CONFIDENTIAL MESSAGE

Name – Richard Sullivan	
Address – [REDACTED]	
Dob- [REDACTED]	Gender- Male
<p>Message - Police are in receipt of information that serious criminal elements are planning to kill Richard O'SULLIVAN from the Sunday World and are aware of his home address. The use of firearms cannot be ruled out. Police believe that this refers to you. Please review your personal security.</p>	
Delivered by:	
Name - [REDACTED]	Rank - Sergeant
No - [REDACTED]	Station - [REDACTED]
Date – 07 th July 2024	Time - 0005 Hrs
Location - [REDACTED]	
<p>**Once complete this form is to be printed and delivered to Recipient</p>	
Received by	
Name - RICHARD SULLIVAN	Signed [REDACTED]
<p><i>If delivered to person other than the individual concerned, state relationship.</i></p>	

CONFIDENTIAL



PHOTOS

(Clockwise from top left)

Police TM1 form warning of a threat to Richard Sullivan

Online threat to Patricia Devlin and her son, 2019

More examples of police messages warning of threats made against journalists in Northern Ireland

Graffiti targeting Patricia Devlin, east Belfast, February 2021 © Sunday World



<p>Message - "Police are in receipt of information suggesting that Loyalist paramilitaries may intend carrying out an attack on [REDACTED] over the next number of days. This may involve the use of firearms."</p>

Dob- [REDACTED]	Gender- [REDACTED]
<p>Message - Police are in receipt of information to suggest that Dissident Republicans plan to carry out a serious physical attack on journalist [REDACTED] outside the Belfast Telegraph Building. Please review your personal security.</p>	

4. Official state responses

‘In order to create and secure a favourable environment for freedom of expression as guaranteed by Article 10 of the Convention, States must fulfil a range of positive obligations, as identified in the relevant judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and set out in the principles appended to this recommendation. Such obligations are to be fulfilled by the executive, legislative and judicial branches of governments, as well as all other State authorities, including agencies concerned with maintaining public order and national security, and at all levels – federal, national, regional and local.’¹³⁰

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers

‘We don’t report everything because you’d be there all day. If I was to report every time somebody threw something at my car...’¹³¹

Kevin Scott

‘I don’t report it all to the police. I stopped doing that. I don’t have the time to be sitting in a police station making statements that nothing’s going to come of.’¹³²

Allison Morris

The concerns raised by the journalists we spoke to relating to the police response in Northern Ireland fall into two categories; failures in protection and failures in investigations.

Failures in protection include how threats are communicated by police, support for home security, follow up communications whether there has been an investigation or not, and protection of journalists in public assemblies. Failures in investigation include the inconsistency in processes and protocols, service instruction, concerns around the protection of informants, gaps in investigations and low confidence in police leading to under-reporting.

4.1 Failures to protect journalists.

PSNI Chief Superintendent Sam Donaldson explained how threats to journalists are handled:

If a journalist rings in and reports something to police and it’s in connection to their role as a journalist, that’s when a lot of our protocols kick in.

The Journalist Safety Officers will always be informed. If it’s a threat or a crime, we will always appoint a detective to investigate it. Cases involving journalists also are raised in PSNI senior executive team meetings.¹³³

Notwithstanding these police protocols, the effect does not seem to be increased accountability for those behind the threats or increased protection for many of the journalists who spoke to Amnesty International.

4.1.1 Low confidence among journalists in police response

Ciaran Barnes said:

No-one has ever come back to me after I've had a death threat – and I have had dozens. No police officer has ever come back to me and said, 'Look, here's an update on the case. Here's what we've done, here's how many arrests.'

I have no faith in the PSNI to arrest anybody in connection with these threats, and even take these threats particularly seriously, and that's based on my previous experience.

We had a blanket threat [on staff of all the Mediahuis newspapers in Belfast] from the South East Antrim UDA here a few years ago, during Covid. Reports are that South East Antrim UDA has murdered seven people in Carrickfergus in the last 15 years. There's not been a single conviction.

How are you supposed to feel confident, as a journalist, that the police are going to secure any sort of prosecutions or conviction in respect of any threats made against me?

I'm going to use this word. I feel it is necessary in certain circumstances. The incompetence of the PSNI in dealing with these things. A lot of the times, they treat you as an afterthought, they don't take them too seriously. There's no follow-up. It's important that the public know the PSNI don't really treat them with the severity that they should be treated. You can see that from the amount of people they have charged or successfully prosecuted.¹³⁴

The lack of prosecutions has resulted in journalists having very low expectations for any outcomes from reporting threats to the police.

The *Belfast Telegraph*'s **Allison Morris** said:

I'm not saying I would never go back and report something to police, depending on what happens, but in the majority of times, you just take a picture of it, log it and leave it and get on with your job. I realised a long time ago that all the wailing and gnashing of teeth makes no difference. It's still going to happen anyway.¹³⁵

Positive obligations under Article 2 – Right to Life European Convention on Human Rights

These include:

- 1 **Investigation:** When a journalist receives a death threat or is subjected to violence, the authorities are obligated to conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, transparent and effective investigation into the threat, to establish whether there has been an actual risk to the journalist's life and to identify the suspected perpetrators as well as ensure access to justice and effective remedies for victims and their families.

2. **Preventative measures:** The authorities must also take steps to protect journalists from the threat. This could involve providing security measures, like police protection or other means of safeguarding their life, if the threat is credible.
3. **Timely response:** The investigation and protective measures must be carried out in a timely manner, ensuring that the response is not delayed or ineffective.
4. **Accountability:** If the investigation reveals that there has been a violation of the journalist's right to life (such as if the threat was not adequately addressed or if state authorities were complicit or failed to exercise due diligence), the state must hold those suspected to be responsible accountable.

Obligations and international standards for police forces

In addition to the state's international and regional treaty obligations such as those under the European Convention on Human Rights (further detailed in Section 7 Human Rights Analysis) there are specific obligations and international standards for police forces. Those most relevant to this report include:

- **The European Code of Police Ethics¹³⁶**
 - Police Investigations, Paragraph 51: The police shall be aware of the special needs of witnesses and shall be guided by rules for their protection and support during investigation, in particular where there is a risk of intimidation of witnesses.
 - Police Investigations, Paragraph 52: Police shall provide the necessary support, assistance and information to victims of crime, without discrimination.
- **The Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors¹³⁷**
 - Section 1, Guidelines, Paragraph 8: Legislation criminalising violence against journalists should be backed up by law enforcement machinery and redress mechanisms for victims (and their families) that are effective in practice. Clear and adequate provision should be made for effective injunctive and precautionary forms of interim protection for those who face threats of violence.
 - Section 1, Guidelines, Paragraph 9: State authorities have a duty to prevent or suppress offences against individuals when they know, or should have known, of the existence of a real and immediate risk to the life or physical integrity of these individuals from the criminal acts of a third party and to take measures within the scope of their powers which, judged reasonably, might be expected to avoid that risk. To achieve this, member States should take appropriate preventive operational measures, such as providing police protection, especially when it is requested by journalists or other media actors, or voluntary evacuation to a safe place. Those measures should be effective and timely and should be designed with consideration for gender-specific dangers faced by female journalists and other female media actors.

4.1.2 Police communication of threats to journalists

Many journalists we spoke to complained about the manner in which the police informed them of threats. They spoke of poorly informed officers being sent to communicate the information, often about serious threats to life, but unable to give sufficient detail to enable the journalist to assess the seriousness or imminence of the threat.

Séamus Dooley of the NUJ said:

The PSNI will come to your door and say that they have what they regard as a viable or verifiable threat. They don't necessarily outline in any detail what that threat is, and they also refuse to indicate who they believe to be the source of the threat. So, one of the problems is, you know you're under threat, but you don't know what the threat is, and you don't actually know who the threat is coming from.¹³⁸

The NUJ represents members across the UK and Ireland, but Dooley notes that the experience of the 'midnight knock' from the police is particular to journalists in Northern Ireland:

We would not have the experience in any other part of the UK or in the Republic, where police would come late at night and knock on your door and say you have a threat. That's not something I have come across in any area other than Northern Ireland.¹³⁹

Martin Breen, deputy editor-in-chief at the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life*, told us:

They're sending low level constables. Anyone I've had, it tends to be younger constables, guys who have been on the night shifts and not maybe the long-term officers. They don't really know anything. That's a big problem.¹⁴⁰

Breen related one incident when he was contacted late at night at home by the police via telephone:

They wouldn't tell me what it was about. I guessed myself it must be about a threat. So, I asked – again young constables – they actually said '[it's] really serious, really serious, you have to stay up. There will be a policeman at your door in ten minutes'. So, I sat up about an hour or so. No phone call. Nobody called. That was between 1 and 2am. They called the next day at 4pm.

When the police did call at 4 o'clock, they were able to just give me the details of the TM1 [threat management form]. They didn't even give me a copy of it.¹⁴¹

The PSNI 'aide-mémoire' for the delivering officer states that they should ensure the TM1 form is completed fully. It also says that they must request the threat notice is signed and, if the recipient refuses, this should be recorded on the threat message and witnessed by a colleague where possible.

Six TM1 forms shown to Amnesty International were not signed by the recipients, and had no record that the recipient refused to sign, while another did not contain important details like the name, rank and station of the police officer delivering the threat or the date and time it was delivered.

According to **Richard Sullivan**:

In the early days, the police would have contacted me directly, either by phone or would have come to the office. In recent years that's changed, and they turn up without warning at your house.

The officer comes to the door. He has a form and explains what it is and reads out the message and shows me the threat. He then asks me if I have any thought as to where it might come from. They very rarely give you any indication as to where it's come from. Sometimes, on a very rare occasion, they've specified an organisation, but it's extremely rare.¹⁴²

There seems to be an inconsistent approach by the police regarding prior contact by telephone with the journalist before a visit to their home or place of work. One journalist told us they did receive a telephone call from the PSNI the evening after they had filed a story which discussed a member of a loyalist paramilitary group.

The next day at about five o'clock I had a missed call from the PSNI. It was during Covid and I was at home. There was a voicemail asking me to ring back and that it's very important. I rang back and she told me 'We've received a threat against you... can we call out and see you?'

Two constables came and gave me the form. It said police are in receipt of information suggesting that loyalist paramilitaries may intend carrying out an attack on me over the next number of days. This may involve the use of firearms. I knew straight away that was what it was about. The story had been in that morning's paper. They knew as much as was on the form because obviously the threat would have been passed down to them. They were just delivering the message.¹⁴³

The PSNI confirmed to Amnesty International that following a meeting with Mediahuis, it is now reviewing its policy around threat to life and how threats are communicated to people, including journalists.¹⁴⁴

4.1.3 **Police security advice and measures**

The police routinely offer security advice in the wake of a threat to a journalist. Usually this is in the form of a 38-page PSNI-produced booklet, *Protect Yourself: a guide to personal security*, which offers 'common sense' advice to anyone with concerns about their or their family's personal security, and is also available to download.¹⁴⁵

Richard Sullivan has been a frequent recipient:

They're only in the house for 10 minutes. I sign the forms. They read out what they have to read out to me. They give me the little booklet which gives you security advice. I haven't kept any of them because I've had so many I could probably recite them. It's good, common-sense advice.

They advise you to increase your personal security but what can you do at midnight on a Sunday or one o'clock on a Monday morning? What I do immediately is inform the company, I inform my union, and that's really it.¹⁴⁶

In some cases, PSNI officers have also carried out security visits to the homes of journalists and have provided panic alarms and additional door security.

Martin Breen is critical of the limited security measures offered by the state to journalists working under death threats in Northern Ireland:

If the police are coming to tell journalists they're under threat, you know, a crime prevention guy coming out and saying, 'here's a little panic alarm, or here's a little thing to put behind your door' is not going to cut it. We're not dealing with an opportunist thief or whatever, who will maybe break into your house like a burglar. That's the kind of crime prevention advice you get if somebody broke into your house. We're dealing with paramilitary gangs, who in the past have sledge-hammered doors down or opened fire with AK-47s or assault rifles.¹⁴⁷

One journalist was complimentary about the approach of the police officers who visited them at home to inform them about a threat. They offered to arrange for additional 'drive-bys' of police vehicles past their home over the following days and other security measures:

They were very reassuring and just asking were we okay. They did say about extra patrols, but I don't know whether or not that ever happened because I never saw any extra patrols around the estate.

They did send someone round to do a survey of the house and he gave me door stops, motion sensor alarms to hang off the door and a brace for the bottom of the door – until proper burglar alarms and things like that were installed in the house.¹⁴⁸

The PSNI chief constable says he and other senior officers have made a point of personally phoning journalists who have received threats to offer support.¹⁴⁹ One of the journalists who spoke to Amnesty International confirmed they had received such a call.

When threats of violence were made against **Rodney Edwards**, PSNI in Fermanagh advised him to check under his car for bombs and conducted a home security survey. He was reassured that they also arranged a short-term increase in police car patrols near his home. "They would drive around the house, they would stop down the road, and they would sit there. I found it reassuring to have the police presence there in those early days."¹⁵⁰

Richard Sullivan also appreciated increased police patrols, although he noted this is inevitably only a temporary measure: "They do keep an eye, and they would do "drive-bys" past the house and I appreciate that. But obviously they can't maintain that."¹⁵¹

Amnesty International is concerned that more should be done to protect journalists in Northern Ireland's Article 2 rights (Right to Life) particularly regarding Preventative Measures. The Council of Europe have also expanded on this specifically for journalists in its Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, specifically Section 1, paragraph 9;

State authorities have a duty to prevent or suppress offences against individuals when they know, or should have known, of the existence of a real and immediate risk to the life or physical integrity of these individuals from the criminal acts of a third party and to take measures within the scope of their powers which, judged reasonably, might be expected to avoid that risk. To achieve this, member States should take appropriate preventive operational measures, such as providing police protection, especially when it is requested by journalists or other media actors, or voluntary evacuation to a safe place. Those measures should be effective and timely and should be designed with consideration for gender-specific dangers faced by female journalists and other female media actors.¹⁵²

4.1.4 The Home Protection Scheme

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO), a department of the UK government, operates the Home Protection Scheme (HPS) which can fund the installation of home security measures, such as CCTV, lighting, and sensors, for people facing specific security risks.

The NIO describes it as ‘a threat-led scheme with established admission criteria which provides limited protective security measures for those in certain occupations assessed to be at significant risk of terrorist attack’, including but not limited to PSNI officers. ‘HPS applicants are typically engaged in occupations or activities considered pertinent to the preservation of the national security of the United Kingdom.’¹⁵³

NIO advised the Information Commissioner’s Office, in response to a complaint about its refusal to release requested information on the scheme, ‘that the HPS aims to mitigate national security threats by providing protection measures to those in public service concerned with the effective administration of government and the criminal justice system, upholding law and order and maintaining the democratic framework.’¹⁵⁴

In 2021, a solicitor who had been advised by the police of various threats, including that ‘Republican elements’ might attempt to kill him, took an unsuccessful application for judicial review against the PSNI Chief Constable and the Secretary of State for denial of access to the HPS. He was advised that his profession as someone involved in the administration of justice did fall within the admission criteria, but that the threat level in his case did not meet the required ‘substantial threat (where an attack is likely)’ standard for him to be provided with security measures.¹⁵⁵

The NIO advise that the scheme has ‘established admission criteria’.¹⁵⁶ However, eligibility and application procedures are not published.

An unsuccessful judicial review application in 2009, by a person denied access to the Home Protection Scheme who, along with his wife, had been the subject of multiple threats to his life from both loyalist and republican paramilitaries, provides more background on the PSNI approach in cases of anonymous threats against individuals.¹⁵⁷ In this instance, the court upheld the decision to refuse access to the HPS on the grounds that the security service assessed the threat level against the applicant as ‘moderate’ and not ‘substantial’ or ‘severe’:

Police messages in relation to threats to life are issued as part of the duty to protect life imposed on police by section 32(1)(a) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. Anonymous information is difficult to assess and there can be no objective verification by PSNI of the motive behind it. Such information is treated as giving rise to a real and immediate threat. The police message is designed to enable the individual to take steps in relation to their behaviour.

The threat assessments with which this application is concerned were conducted by the Security Service. The Security Service took over this responsibility in October 2007. The assessment is designed to establish the intent and capability of attack and provide a statement of the assessed probability of attack. It looks at current intelligence, the current security situation, current and past intelligence in respect of similar targets, past attacks on the target and a profile of the individual. Assessments are categorised as critical where an attack is imminent, severe where it is highly likely, substantial where it is a strong possibility, moderate where it is possible but not likely and low where it is unlikely.

In determining the measures required from the State by way of positive obligation under article 2 of the ECHR the Minister takes into account the protective steps already taken or available, the likely effectiveness of any particular step, the resources aspect of taking any particular action and any public interest issues. In balancing the risk to the applicant against the reasonable measures available to the State to reduce it, the Minister took into account the nature and extent of the threat concluding in March 2008 that the applicant could be viewed as a potential target for dissident republican terror groups and in September 2008 that it was possible that there had been a chance sighting of the applicant's wife at her place of work by loyalist paramilitaries. The Minister was also advised that this decision could create a precedent requiring large numbers of people under moderate threat to be protected as a result of which money might have to be moved from front-line policing. The applicant was offered a visit by the Crime Prevention Officer on a number of occasions but has declined that offer.¹⁵⁸

No matter how substantial and imminent the threat level, it appears that journalists in Northern Ireland do not meet the HPS admission criteria with respect to their occupation.

In addition, given the anonymous nature of most of the threats made against journalists, it is likely that in the cases documented in this report, journalists would not meet the current threat level criterion to trigger access to the scheme.

Some journalists who spoke to Amnesty International reported having made enquiries about the scheme but had been advised of their ineligibility and were additionally deterred by the reported time taken to process applications. The police confirmed to Amnesty International that they were not aware of any journalist being able to access the scheme.¹⁵⁹

This means that media organisations are currently paying for home security measures for their journalists while freelancers either pay for their own security or are left unprotected due to the prohibitive cost of some measures.

Giving evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in February 2025 on the surveillance of journalists and press freedoms, **Allison Morris** said:

I have never received any assistance from either the NIO or anyone else in terms of the amount of money it costs to protect yourself from this [threats].

The amount of security in my house has cost tens of thousands of pounds and my employer has footed that bill. I imagine that had I been a politician or a police officer, that would have been paid for by the Northern Ireland Office. But that is not accessible to journalists, even though the threat level would be quite similar.¹⁶⁰

Amnesty International is concerned that the issue of threats against journalists in Northern Ireland has not previously been systematically analysed, which has resulted in a lack of recognition of patterns and trends, and the specific and targeted risks and vulnerabilities of journalists to threats and attacks from paramilitary and organised crime groups and networks. This in turn has resulted in them not being identified as a group who should be supported by the Home Protection Scheme and have received either no protective measures, received inconsistent support or have relied on support for protective measures from their employers. We do not believe that this is an adequate state response to the threats we have identified.

4.1.5 Protection of journalists during public order situations

‘Member States are urged to develop protocols and training programmes for all State authorities who are responsible for fulfilling State obligations concerning the protection of journalists and other media actors... Member States should take into account the specific nature and democratic value of the role played by journalists and other media actors in particular contexts, such as in times of crisis, during election periods, at public demonstrations...’

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers¹⁶¹

Under international human rights law (see boxes on ‘Obligations and international standards for police forces’, ‘Positive obligations under Article 2 – Right to Life, European Convention on Human Rights’, and Section 7, ‘Human rights analysis’), the PSNI have a duty to take positive steps to protect journalists during protests and public disorder. The police should:

- Facilitate journalists’ access and freedom to report during protests and public disorder
- Protect their safety and physical integrity, including through the provision of briefings and evacuation protocols
- Avoid arbitrary detention or use of force
- Train officers on press freedom and integrate media protection into planning, including the designation of police liaison officers for media
- Investigate violations and provide remedies.

Kevin Scott described an incident from April 2024 when journalists were targeted with petrol bombs following a republican parade in Derry/Londonderry in what the NUJ described as ‘clear strategy... to intimidate photographers and to attempt to intimidate individual members of the media corps’.¹⁶²

One petrol bomb was thrown at a television reporter; another exploded at the feet of a journalist after he warned a colleague he was being pursued. Two petrol bombs were

thrown at members of the media as they tried to escape while being chased. A media crew was chased from the area by a group wearing balaclavas.¹⁶³

Scott said that journalists were left unprotected when the police made a sudden withdrawal from the area.

The police knew this was happening at the time. We'd made a 999 call to say, 'look, there's kids attacking journalists here with petrol bombs on the street'. The response from the 999 caller was 'well, you just need to get yourselves out of there'.

There was no police unit sent back into that area. A police helicopter watched overhead as a UTV journalist ran down the street for his life, quite literally, for his life, while petrol bombs were being thrown at him and the police response was, 'well, you really need to get yourselves out of there, don't you?'.

We were very aware we needed to get out of there. But the problem is we can't get to our cars. We're near a two-mile, three-mile walk before we're back to the safest part of the city for us to be at that point in time. Your units have pulled out, your units armed with assault rifles, armed with pistols, armed with tasers and in full riot gear, thought that it wasn't safe for them.

Whenever the police leave, the next target automatically becomes the media and the police know this. This was a full-blown withdrawal. They didn't come back into the area again for seven hours. It's that sort of response that make us fearful for what we do.¹⁶⁴

Allison Morris told of a situation when police officers failed to assist her during and after an incident of extreme harassment while covering a prolonged public order incident in the Woodvale area of Belfast. A loyalist followed her around with a phone in his hand, playing a hardcore porn film on it featuring a woman with blonde hair. He was 'telling everyone that it was me, and asked me how much I charge for blow jobs and all sorts of other things. Then he gathered a crowd around him, who all joined in.'

Morris asked for assistance: 'At that stage, I asked the police, could they move him or stop him. And [the police officer] said, "You could leave if you want". ... I asked the police officer, would he note it because I was going to make a police complaint the next day.' She adds that when she made the complaint, the officer said he did not remember speaking to her. There was no prosecution even though two other journalists corroborated her statement.

The police did call to say the loyalist had made a counter allegation, that she had threatened him, 'and the good news was they weren't going to prosecute me in relation to that.'¹⁶⁵

Kevin Scott relates an incident in April 2021 when he was left unprotected after police withdrew in another public order situation when there was rioting near the 'peace gates'. These are part of the 'peace wall', a large physical barrier separating predominantly nationalist and unionist neighbourhoods, at Lanark Way in Belfast.

The peace gates had closed behind me. And police didn't warn me of this. They pulled out of the area. I noticed the jeeps, them jumping in and speeding off. And when I looked behind, the peace gates were closed. My car was at the other end of those peace gates, unfortunately, and I was left to walk down the two-and-a-half-mile long road by myself with my camera gear on the Shankill side of the divide, the same area that I would get a lot of abuse on.

As I was walking, two masked men chased me down the street and jumped me from behind. ... I managed to fight them off. My cameras were broken and damaged. Thankfully, I didn't sustain much injury, just a sore arm afterwards. If it hadn't been for one of the residents picking me up at the bottom of the road, I reckon they would have come down again and went again at me...¹⁶⁶

Scott feels that the approach of the police to journalists covering events is not consistent across Northern Ireland: 'When I'm in Belfast, I feel safer, because I have a personal relationship with officers there. Whenever I attend something outside of Belfast, I do not feel safe at all.'¹⁶⁷

The PSNI confirmed to Amnesty International that officers do not receive specific training in how to deal with the media during public order situations.¹⁶⁸

Specifically in relation to policing during public disorder, Chief Constable **Jon Boucher** said:

It's such a difficult environment. It's a devilish enough job to keep the officers safe, trying to get in between rioters. Everybody, including journalists, has to take a bit of personal responsibility for what they are doing in a riot situation to make sure that they manage their role in as safe a way as they possibly can. There's a limited amount I think that we can be reasonably expected to do.¹⁶⁹

Chief Superintendent **Sam Donaldson** added:

When policing a particular area we cannot give specific advice to members of the public and different advice to journalists. So, when the police communicate a message that it's not safe to be here, then the message is: it's not safe to be here. I do know there are occasions when journalists have taken the decision to be there, and that's a matter for the journalist, and I appreciate that. That's their job, and they want to get the story.¹⁷⁰

It is of particular concern to Amnesty International that there is an apparent lack of awareness within the PSNI of the positive obligations of the State on the protection of journalists during public order situations such as at public demonstrations. The Council of Europe have drawn attention to the specific nature and democratic value of the role played by journalists and other media actors in these contexts. Indeed, much of the testimony we collected demonstrates that perpetrators particularly react against the visibility and accountability that journalists are bringing to their abusive acts and are acting to silence and intimidate them away from shining a light.

4.1.6 Follow-up communication by police

‘I would say 99 per cent of the time I’ve never heard back from the police ever again.’¹⁷¹

Paula Mackin

Paula Mackin experienced regular threats during more than two decades working for the *Sunday World*, most recently in August 2023 after writing articles about figures associated with republican paramilitary group Óglaigh na hÉireann. She reports a lack of follow-up communication from the police once she has been informed of a threat or she logged a threat with the police. She also notes a lack of continuity in the police officers dealing with threats against her.

It’s frustrating. They come into the house, two officers, and that’s it. At the start, sometimes a liaison officer would have come down just to say, ‘are you okay?’ and ‘this is what you we can do for you’, and things like that. But other than that, no ‘we’re investigating this, or investigating that, or we’ve had a lead’. It’s just the leaflet, and ‘hope everything’s okay, ring me if you need me’. The person who you dealt with the previous time is no longer dealing with it. So, there’s no consistency.

I would say 99 per cent of the time, I’ve never heard back from the police ever again. I had one Constable and then you ring him to say something has happened and he says, ‘Oh, I’m not dealing with you anymore’. And then somebody else would be on the phone and then that would change. So, there doesn’t seem to be a liaison consistency. You have to ring up and go through all the process and you just sort of think what’s the point?¹⁷²

Leona O’Neill also experienced an absence of follow-up communication from the police after she reported multiple threats against her from 2019 onwards:

You would have got a reference number, and you would have spoken to a detective and then that was really it. There was nothing really following up from that, apart from them maybe telling you that there was nothing that they could do about it.¹⁷³

She also struggled to get helpful responses from the police when she sought information about progress in dealing with her cases. Instead, she feels she was fobbed off with a series of excuses at a time when a man was threatening to harm her and her children:

PSNI: ‘Your one’s off on leave; she was dealing with it’.

The response after three weeks without police contact: ‘She’s on her rest days now, but she’ll get back to you whenever she’s back’.

Then, ‘I don’t think that it’s anything to do with us. You need to go to the guards’ (An Garda Síochána – the police force in the Republic of Ireland). And then I went to the guards, and they said, ‘you’re from the North; we can’t deal with this’. How are you supposed to be protected when the cops are telling you here in the North to go down south, and they’re telling you go back up north? I just wanted somebody to help me.

I know things are different now and they have a specialist journalism safety team – which is good progress – but at the time I felt really, really let down by the police.¹⁷⁴

Richard Sullivan also reports that follow-up communication from the PSNI is unreliable:

Some are very good at keeping in touch, and others you never hear from them. There's no follow-up whatsoever. The most recent threat, it was only when the NUJ contacted the police liaison officer that he then contacted me, and that was some days after I received the threat.

It's incumbent on the police to be a bit more forward-stepping and reassure journalists. We are just human like everyone else, and it's not nice and it is scary. We need reassurance that the police are looking at it because there is a sense that it's noted, marked down and move on. The police have never come back to me and said, 'we know who did that', not once.¹⁷⁵

Sullivan told us about one particularly sinister threat, when he had expected further information from the police, but which he had to follow up personally given the lack of communication.

I received bullets in the post from South Belfast UVF. Bullets, a mass card and a picture of me with crosshairs drawn across my face. I gave the bullets to the police for forensic examination. That's the only time there's ever been any really substantive follow-up. About eight months later, I followed up the call because I hadn't heard anything. There was nothing on them. I had to follow it up. They didn't come back to me.¹⁷⁶

One journalist told us they had not heard from the police again after initially being informed of the paramilitary threat against them:

Whenever you get a threat like I got threatening to shoot me you would think they would take it very, very seriously. I know they did come round that night and gave me the letter and did the security survey on the house. But after that it was almost like: 'Okay, see you later'.¹⁷⁷

Martin Breen thinks that one of the reasons for a lack of subsequent communication from the police is because they have been unable to ascertain any more information about the threat given the manner in which many are communicated: 'We hear nothing really in follow-ups a lot of the time, because a lot of these threats come from Crimestoppers.'¹⁷⁸

But this is clearly not the situation in other cases.

Niall Carson told us that the police conducted an attempted murder investigation after he was shot in the leg – suspected to be the deed of a republican – while taking photographs of public disorder from behind armoured police Land Rovers in east Belfast in 2011. However, he notes that the police failed to keep him informed about any progress in the case: 'There was a police investigation. I gave a statement, I gave several statements. The police came back to me and just said that "we're still investigating", and never came back. I never heard anything else about it.'¹⁷⁹

PSNI Chief Constable Jon Boutcher told Amnesty International that he would address concerns about a lack of follow-up: ‘I don’t want anyone suffering in silence, feeling intimidated or unable to do their job because of threats. We want to ensure that everything that needs to be done is done.’¹⁸⁰

4.2 Failures in police investigations

It is imperative that everyone involved in killings of, attacks on and ill-treatment of journalists and other media actors be brought to justice.¹⁸¹

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers

The role of law enforcement agents: strengthening investigations into crimes against journalists¹⁸²

Summary of key UNESCO recommendations

1. Consideration should be given at an early stage of an investigation whether there are connections between the victim’s journalistic activities and the crimes committed against them.
2. Investigators should be given specific training around the issues and challenges faced in investigating crimes against journalists.
3. Journalistic sources are confidential and should be treated as such at every stage of the investigation and judicial proceedings. Authorities must take all possible measures to ensure the protection of journalistic material/confidential data that may lead to the identification of sources.
4. Consideration should be given to the creation of specialist units or teams dedicated to investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists.
5. Investigators may benefit from cooperation and liaison with other investigative forces, notably transnational ones and specialist units, who may be able to provide specialist technical expertise.
6. While the role of law enforcement agents, including forensic investigators, differs according to their investigative jurisdiction, it is important that international good practice regarding the investigation of cases involving journalists applies.
7. Investigations into crimes against journalists must be effective, thorough, impartial, independent and prompt. When possible, information on the investigation should be provided to the public through the media in an open and transparent manner, and taking care to avoid prejudicing the investigation or breaching court orders.
8. In cases where there are credible allegations of the involvement of State agents in crimes against journalists, investigations should be carried out by an authority outside the jurisdiction, or sphere of influence of those authorities.

Many of the journalists who spoke to Amnesty International reported inadequate investigations into threats or acts of violence against them.

Richard Sullivan has received 15 to 20 threats throughout his career to date including three in the last five years. The last threat he received was in July 2024. He has not seen evidence of effective investigations into the threats against him: ‘I don’t get a sense that there’s an investigation as to find out who’s behind it.’¹⁸³

Another journalist was able to identify to the police the likely loyalist paramilitary figure behind the threat against them as he had been referenced in a newspaper article under their byline that day. He told us: 'In my opinion, they obviously knew where it came from but... I knew nothing was going to happen and no one was going to be arrested.'¹⁸⁴

Kevin Scott is concerned that an inadequate police response, even when police themselves witness death threats, can leave journalists feeling unprotected and creates a sense of impunity for those making the threats.

In June 2022, Scott photographed ammunition and guns found in the back of a car in north Belfast. He reports that police officers failed to act when members of a hostile crowd which had gathered threatened to kill him:

A large crowd – a mixture of residents, some paramilitaries – had gathered at the car. I decided to go in anyway and photograph it, and stood there and took all the abuse of the day, threats to kill me, all sorts. 'I'm going to fucking slice your throat the next time you're up here, you fenian cunt.'

Cops just stood listening to it. One of the police officers joked with me as I left: 'Thank God you turned up, because we were having to listen to that the whole time.'

I had just been threatened to be killed multiple times by a boy standing with a tattoo saying 'UVF' up his arm and you don't think to even turn around to him and say, 'mate, do yourself a favour, keep quiet'. But as far as they [the loyalist paramilitaries] are concerned they can give me all the abuse of the day and the cops won't do anything about it. It's that that causes us issues. It spirals from that. People think they can get away with it.¹⁸⁵

Ciaran Barnes feels that the police response to threats of violence against journalists, even when those responsible are clearly identifiable, is often half-hearted.

He describes one incident from July 2022 related to threats against him made on a social media page linked to a County Antrim bonfire, which his newspaper had reported had links to an alleged loyalist paramilitary figure.

You started getting all this crap on their [Facebook] page, and it started targeting me for some reason. It was like, 'I'll put a bullet in his head', 'We need to throw him on the bonfire and burn him.'¹⁸⁶

Barnes reported the threats to the police, pointing out the identities of those responsible via their social media profiles: 'They came back to me a few weeks later, said it didn't meet the test for prosecution, even though it was clearly a threat to throw me on the bonfire, shoot me in the head.'¹⁸⁷

Steven Moore received threats to attack him and his family. He was unimpressed by the police response:

He sent me messages saying he was going to come to my house and burn my house down and cut up anyone who comes outside, so make sure your kids are away tonight. I phoned the police liaison officer and they told me to call 101. I was on hold for about 40 minutes. Someone from Strandtown [PSNI station] called me back and told me they would have to take my phone. You could tell they weren't interested.

They said they would have to take my phone maybe for six months and there wouldn't be any guarantee that they would be able to find anything on it. That was my work phone and I didn't want them to take that. They were basically saying there was nothing else they could do. There was no other way of finding out who it was.¹⁸⁸

Moore decided to investigate the threats himself and in effect, did the police's job for them:

They told me not to engage with him but, later on that day, I did, and I found out who he was. He was still sending threatening messages, so I contacted 999 as I now knew who he was, and he said he was coming tonight. They told me I needed to be more patient and call 101 as 999 was for emergencies.

Eventually they arrested him. I think that could have been handled better. Since they identified him, they have been very good and have kept me up to date with what's happening with the case.¹⁸⁹

The case is not typical of the majority of threats made against journalists in that it did not come from paramilitary or organised crime groups, but from an individual who took exception to a newspaper report of a case in which he was convicted of a criminal offence.

Martin Breen notes:

There have been a couple of prosecutions, but none for our company, although Steven Moore's [case] should hopefully result in a prosecution. There's certainly been no-one done for any kind of paramilitary threats against journalists.¹⁹⁰

Freelance reporter **Amanda Ferguson** was assaulted by an individual at an 'anti-immigration' protest in Belfast in August 2024. She recorded video footage on her phone which clearly pictured the person responsible and provided this to the police when she made an official complaint:

The next day, I made a police report. They phoned me recently to say, because six months had passed and none of their sources recognised who it was, that was the matter closed.

They said the video was circulated among colleagues to see if they recognised the guy. They asked me had anybody identified him underneath the social media video post [which she had made]. And I thought to myself, 'Is that not something that you should be looking for?'.

That seemed to be the extent of the investigation: 'Does anybody know who this guy is?' And that was the end of it.

While I didn't have a huge expectation that anything would come from reporting it, I felt it was important to do so.¹⁹¹

Irish News photographer **Mal McCann** had a similar experience after he was assaulted by a man while covering a major fire at a private recycling centre in Newtownabbey in autumn 2024.

I reported it to the police online because I had photographs of the guy.... about a week later, I got passed around different police stations and then the [police officer] took a statement and then had to come back and take another statement. They said they couldn't identify the guy – even though they have a clear photograph of him.

So late last year, they asked me to put the stuff in again. I don't know what happened, they lost it or something, so I had to log [the photographs] again. But I haven't heard anything since.¹⁹²

Kevin Scott is concerned that police investigations are not as thorough as they should be.

Following an assault on Belfast's Shankill Road in 2021 and another serious assault in August 2024, he told Amnesty International:

There was CCTV on both incidents and no outcome at the end of them; they couldn't identify the masked men. There was an evidence-gathering operation in place; zero arrests in relation to the evidence-gathering operation.¹⁹³

Freelance reporter **Leona O'Neill** was subjected to a sustained campaign of intimidation after witnessing the murder of journalist Lyra McKee by republicans in Derry/Londonderry in 2019. This included graffiti featuring O'Neill's name and gun crosshairs and an accusation that she was an MI5 informant.

The police did contact me after the graffiti went up in the Creggan and said, 'Do you want us to do anything about this?'. And I was like, 'Do I want you to do anything about somebody spraying hateful graffiti?'. Is that not what the police are supposed to do?

I think the only reason that the police asked did I want them to do anything about it is because the NUJ raised it. I just said, 'No, I don't want you to do anything'. At that stage, I was so tired of the threats.¹⁹⁴

O'Neill was also subject to multiple online threats: I went to the police several times about people, and was just told, 'Well, it's just the internet. That's a grey area.'

She asked the police: "Can you do anything about the abuse and the threats?" And they said, "Here's some alarms. If anybody comes at you, ring us." They gave me alarms to put on my doors and said they would drive around in the area around my house.¹⁹⁵

O'Neill identifies one of the problems as being a lack of continuity in the police officers dealing with the multiple threats against her: 'I got a different police officer every single time I went down [to the police station].'¹⁹⁶

Ultimately, she lost confidence in the police:

The police didn't do anything, and I just gave up going to them about it then. At that time I had no faith in the police helping me with any of this stuff.

I was made to feel that I don't matter, that my family doesn't matter, and that what happened to me didn't matter, that I was not worthy of help, I suppose, or support or protection.¹⁹⁷

With further threats in March 2020, as a freelancer working without support from a media company employer and with confidence in the police eroded, O'Neill approached a journalism charity for help with home security, 'because I couldn't get any help from the police.'¹⁹⁸

The *Sunday World's* **Hugh Jordan** made a report to the police in January 2025 about a message he received that he considered threatening. Two months later, he had heard nothing back from the PSNI. 'I contacted them several times, but they did absolutely nothing,' he said.

After the *Belfast Telegraph* contacted the PSNI, the police are reported to have telephoned Jordan and apologised.¹⁹⁹

The *Sunday World's* **Steven Moore** doubts the thoroughness of police investigations into threats against him:

I don't think there are any police investigations into the threats. They seem to think their job is done once they've delivered the threat ... if they believed it was really serious, they would investigate it, but I think they know themselves it's mostly people trying to scare and intimidate and they are just covering their asses.

I don't want them wasting their time on someone sitting in the pub reading the paper and going 'I don't like that' and deciding to ring the confidential helpline to make a threat. But if the threat is from intelligence and they genuinely believe it, then of course you would like them to investigate that.²⁰⁰

Eoin Brannigan, editor-in-chief of the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life*, has low expectations about the likelihood of anyone from a paramilitary group being held criminally responsible for threats to his staff.

You would like arrests, but if you're dealing with certain organisations, I suppose there's a bit of a reality check. I mean, they're not arrested for the crimes we're writing about [in the newspapers].

The PSNI are struggling for resources. It's never going to be priority number one for them until it becomes priority number one for them. We don't want to get that to that stage.²⁰¹

The Osman test

In *Osman v. United Kingdom*, 1998 the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) considered whether and in what circumstances the state had a duty to protect individuals from threats to their lives from third parties.²⁰² The court concluded

that such a duty can exist under Article 2 ECHR, the right to life, and set out the factors to be considered when determining whether the duty applied in a given case.

The Osman test the court established determines when the state's positive obligation to protect life is triggered. It requires that:

- There must be a real and immediate risk to the life of an identified individual or individuals from the criminal acts of a third party.
- The authorities know or ought to have known about the risk.

In these circumstances the authorities must take reasonable measures available to them to counter that risk.

The Osman test aims to ensure that the positive obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights do not impose an impossible or disproportionate burden on the authorities.

Police may issue 'Osman warnings' or 'threat to life notices' to individuals if they have intelligence of a real and immediate threat to their life. These warnings advise individuals to take precautions and may include suggestions to change their schedule or temporarily move home.

4.2.1 PSNI procedural approach

To meet the requirements of Section 32(1) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, PSNI Service Instruction SI2317 sets out the procedures for dealing with 'threats to life' arising from criminal, or potential criminal actions.²⁰³ The primary objectives of the instruction include to assess information received and ensure the relevant person is informed of the threat-to-life, and to protect any intended victims.

Citing case law,²⁰⁴ the service instruction says that in determining a 'real and immediate threat', officers should assess whether the alleged threat has been (a) objectively verified, and is (b) present and continuing. It recognises that the threshold for the application of a threat-to-life response 'is a high one'.

The PSNI has confirmed that threats are graded as low, medium or high, with low threats currently often not communicated to the people at whom the threat is aimed.²⁰⁵

While the service instruction is not prescriptive, it notes, 'In many cases, the issue of a Form TM1 and the *Protect Yourself* booklet will be sufficient.'

In a 2023 review of human rights and the management of threats-to-life in Northern Ireland conducted for the Department of Justice, Dr Colm Walsh, Queen's University Belfast, questions whether the current service instruction is fit for purpose:

... it is not sufficiently clear how PSNI decide on appropriate action to be taken to protect any intended victims. This is core to Article 2 of ECHR and yet, a consistent approach does not appear to be in place.

... the service instruction states that in most cases, the issuing of a TM1 form or threat notification is a sufficient response. Whilst PSNI may indeed fulfil part of their statutory function, it does not appear from a range of data that this is a sufficient response. Respondents have often spoke of the re-traumatising effects of being issued with a TM1 without additional guidance or support.²⁰⁶

These findings mirror what threatened journalists told Amnesty International, with an apparently inconsistent approach by the PSNI leaving some victims feeling anxious, traumatised and unsupported.

In some cases we documented, it appears there was scope for the police to provide victims with more complete information about the nature and source of the threat, to provide more comprehensive and practical support with personal security, and to conduct more effective investigations.

Our assessment is that the service instruction, or in some cases its operationalisation, may not be human rights compliant. Our concern is that the instruction allows a subjective assessment of the ‘real and immediate threat’, those we spoke to did not believe that the threats were taken seriously, they were not put into context of the journalists’ job, patterns and trends in threats and the impact they are having on their lives, families and work. The anonymous reporting mechanisms make verification of threats hard or impossible, meaning that many officers’ assessments will automatically disregard some threats as they are instructed to ‘assess whether the alleged threat has been (a) objectively verified’. Amnesty International is also concerned with inconsistency in the implementation of this and other processes. Inconsistency was identified in the use of TM1 forms, depending on the source of the threat, how the threat was communicated to the target and therefore a lack of confidence in the assessment being made.

In an interview with Amnesty International and following a recent meeting with Mediahuis, the PSNI confirmed that the police procedural approach to threat to life is being reviewed. The chief constable said he wants his officers to have the confidence to do their best to communicate the level of proportionality of threats.²⁰⁷

We recommend that this review is conducted in consultation with journalists and others who have experienced threats to life.

4.2.2 Concern about prioritisation of informants over journalist safety

Amnesty International heard repeated concerns from journalists that the protection of informants may be a factor in the lack of prosecution of perpetrators of threats and acts of violence against journalists by paramilitary groups. Amnesty International is not in a position to verify these concerns.

The security correspondents interviewed for this report believe that the PSNI and MI5 have Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS) or informants within most if not all paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland, both loyalist and republican.²⁰⁸ Concerns have developed that the police and security service have repeatedly prioritised the protection of these individuals as ongoing sources of intelligence rather than risk exposing them by making arrests or taking other actions in response to the intelligence provided.

This was a widespread practice during the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’, even going so far as to allow informants suspected of having committed murders to continue in their CHIS roles.^{209 210 211 212}

There have been no prosecutions resulting from threats to journalists by paramilitary groups, even though this category makes up the majority of such threats documented by Amnesty International in the course of this research.

Four experienced journalists told Amnesty International of their concerns that an apparent absence of effective investigations, arrests and prosecutions may, in some cases, be due to police protection of agents or informants within paramilitary groups.

Amnesty International met Chief Constable **Jon Boucher** and asked specifically if the protection of police or MI5 informants was a consideration when planning any investigation or prosecution of threats or acts of violence against journalists; he gave an emphatic no: 'If you're saying is there an immunity because the suspect is an agent? Absolutely not.'

On the question of whether going after the suspect may reveal the source of the information, Mr Boucher explained that various investigative processes exist that allow policing to distance the source of information from investigative activity. He made clear that the overriding priority is the protection of any potential victim to which information about any prospective assault relates.²¹³

Within the PSNI Crime Operations Department, the C3 Intelligence Branch (the successor unit to and still commonly known as Special Branch), is responsible for gathering, assessing, and disseminating intelligence related to paramilitary and criminal activity.

Historically, there have been well-documented tensions between PSNI Special Branch and the PSNI's Criminal Investigations Department (CID) in relation to the priority given to protecting informers over allowing the intelligence taken from them to inform criminal investigations. A 2002 review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) characterised this as a tension between the two competing human rights of protecting the right to life of a source and the duty to conduct an effective and thorough investigation.²¹⁴

Positive obligations under ECHR Article 2 (right to life) are directly relevant to the use of 'covert human intelligence sources' in Northern Ireland. Being revealed or even suspected of being an informer can endanger life: paramilitary organisations have killed those suspected of being informers. Hence, there is an onus on the state to take reasonable steps to protect the life of its agents. However, there is also an obligation to protect the lives of those who the state is aware are under threat, which clearly may involve acting on the information provided by an agent.

A number of specialist crime reporters who spoke to us shared concerns that the intelligence unit which operates informants within paramilitary groups may be acting to shield their covert human intelligence sources at the expense of protecting journalists.²¹⁵ **Allison Morris**, one of Northern Ireland's most experienced security correspondents, told Amnesty International of her concerns:

If it's an intelligence-led threat, an informer has to give that threat to his handlers and say, 'I was in a bar or in a house or in a meeting, and there was a discussion around attacking or killing or bombing or shooting Allison Morris', whatever it was. I am then delivered that threat. But the protection of the informer trumps the protection of my life. So, no one is arrested. So, I'm told, but then they [the police] just leave. And that's it. Nothing else happens.

The response of the PSNI has got better in recent years but it isn't better to the point where they're arresting or charging anyone for this. There is support there, they are trying. It doesn't result in convictions. And maybe that's where the letdown is. In the list of priorities. Where do we rank? I'm not sure.²¹⁶

Ciaran Barnes believes that the police often know the identity of some of those in paramilitary groups who make threats to journalists:

I raised with a senior PSNI officer recently that a lot of these people making death threats are registered [informants], and they have been for a long while. And what does that tell you? It's someone who's in the employ of the state threatening journalists, and then those threats [are] being investigated by the state. It's bullshit.

I have absolutely no doubt that the PSNI knows the identities of a substantial amount of people behind these threats. I believe many of them are working for the PSNI.²¹⁷

Deputy editor-in-chief **Martin Breen** told us:

There's strong suspicion this person [a named known paramilitary figure] has been a long-standing police agent and this person has threatened some of our journalists. Would we be confident that that person would ever be prosecuted? Probably not.

I certainly believe that a lot of intelligence, probably Special Branch intelligence or whatever... about where threats are emanating, is probably not even being shared wider in the PSNI. If they do not want to expose an informant by telling us where the threat came from, that's probably one of the reasons why we don't get that information.²¹⁸

Ciaran Barnes is unequivocal: 'I've no doubt that he [a named senior PSNI officer] and certainly the Branch, or C3 as they are known now, know the identities of informants who are making these threats against journalists.'²¹⁹

Barnes cites one case of which he has direct knowledge.

[A named convicted paramilitary] is a prime example. [He] has run around for years with a camera and showing up at riot scenes. He wasn't taking photographs of rioters, he was taking photographs of journalists, which he was then publishing online. And he's been working for the cops since 1989... [when] he was recruited by [named RUC Special Branch officers], and he's still one of them.²²⁰

Another seasoned crime and security correspondent, **Steven Moore**, has similar concerns:

If the information comes from an informer, the police know who they are but what do they do? I assume they make the decision that this threat is only bluster. I'm assuming the informer has heard them in a meeting or in a pub saying they should do this or will do this, and the police have to make a judgement call about whether they are actually going to do that or is it just talk. We are at their mercy. I understand that they would have to grade it and decide if it's worth exposing their informer.²²¹

Kevin Scott is also concerned about possible collusion, in the form of information-sharing between police and some of those behind the threats, a concern which also makes him reluctant to report all threats:

I find if you report it to the police, it just gets worse. We live in a very small place in Northern Ireland. Police officers are friends with criminals, and that's undoubtedly true. I know that because I work with a lot of police officers who are friends with criminals.²²²

Amnesty International has no way of verifying the journalists' concerns. PSNI Chief Constable **Jon Boucher** denied to Amnesty International that the protection of police or MI5 informants was a consideration when planning any investigation or prosecution of threats or acts of violence against journalists.²²³ A recent PSNI response to the Policing Board stated that three times a year, the assistant chief constable of the Crime Department 'reviews those CHIS presenting higher risk issues', that 'risk control measures are discussed to ensure they do not engage in criminal activity', and that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) independently scrutinises the use of the powers by PSNI on an annual basis.²²⁴

4.2.3 Surveillance of journalists

Journalists' trust in police has been further eroded by incidents of unlawful police surveillance of journalists in Northern Ireland.

In 2024, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal (IPT) ruled that both the PSNI and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) had unlawfully surveilled journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey.²²⁵

Evidence in the case revealed that applications had been made to access McCaffrey's telecommunications data on a number of occasions, including after his life had been threatened by a paramilitary group in 2009.²²⁶ McCaffrey believes that the death threat against him was used as an excuse by the PSNI to covertly access his phone data.²²⁷

A report submitted by the PSNI to the Northern Ireland Policing Board in June 2024 disclosed that the PSNI had made 323 applications for phone data related to journalists, including 10 attempts to identify confidential sources, and that four Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS) were authorised in respect of journalists or lawyers (the report does not specify which) during the period from 2011 to March 31 2024.²²⁸

PSNI covert surveillance practices targeting journalists and others is currently the subject of an on-going independent review by Angus McCullough KC, commissioned by the chief constable, the report from which is due later in 2025.²²⁹

The police surveillance of journalists' phones and telecommunications data raises significant human rights concerns, primarily around freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Multiple journalists told Amnesty International that these incidents had shaken their faith in the police, and made it harder to approach them when they were threatened and attacked.

4.2.4 National Committee for the Safety of Journalists

The UK government convened the first meeting of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists in July 2020. It brought together 'representatives from government, journalism, policing, prosecution services and civil society to work in collaboration to make sure journalists in the UK are able to operate free from threats and violence.'²³⁰ Its listed members include Police Service of Northern Ireland Chief Superintendent Sam Donaldson and Michael Agnew, deputy director of the Public Prosecution Service

of Northern Ireland. It has met eight times, most recently in December 2024, with minutes recorded on the government website.²³¹

The committee developed a National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists (first published in March 2020 and in revised form in October 2023), setting out how the safety of journalists in the UK can be protected. Its introduction cites the UN Human Rights Committee: ‘a free, uncensored, unhindered press or other media ... constitutes one of the cornerstones of a democratic society.’²³² It notes that:

Journalists, while working in the UK, have reported being punched, threatened with knives, and forcibly detained. There have been hospital admissions following assaults. Others have reported having shots fired at their house, their pets killed, and having received rape threats and death threats.²³³

It says that ‘it draws inspiration from the long-standing efforts led by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) to support media freedom across the world... and work with UNESCO, which has adopted a UK proposal for a UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.’²³⁴

The introduction to the plan sets out the Northern Ireland context and the limited ambitions of the plan to address that specific context:

In drawing together this Plan, it has been acknowledged that a number of journalists who operate in Northern Ireland have been subjected to threats by paramilitaries and criminals. The Plan does not, however, draw out those threats into Northern Ireland-specific action, as to do so would be to take them out of their wider context.

In addition to the work undertaken by law enforcement agencies in response to specific threats, the Northern Ireland Executive’s Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime²³⁵ aims to address the long-term, underlying problem of paramilitary activity. The success of both will clearly be of critical importance in terms of keeping safe those journalists reporting from, and on, Northern Ireland.

As well as these specific issues, journalists in Northern Ireland also face the same, wider issues as their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. For that reason, the Plan sets out a number of commitments that are applicable throughout the UK, to ensure that stakeholders, while mindful of the relevant context, are robustly held to account.²³⁶

The commitments in the government plan include:

Every police force within the UK will have access to a designated journalist safety liaison officer.

The police will engage with the NUJ, the Society of Editors and others to update their training offer for police in relation to demonstrations (and the role of journalists in covering these), and in relation to investigating crime against journalists.

...the Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland (PPSNI) reaffirmed their commitment to a robust prosecutorial approach in relation to crimes against journalists.²³⁷

The first meeting of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, held in July 2020, recorded that one of the key issues was ‘attacks on journalists at protests and threats in Northern Ireland.’²³⁸

The minutes of the July 2021 meeting noted early progress from the PSNI which had appointed a journalist safety officer, developed a journalist safety group of experts, and that a Northern Ireland-specific journalists’ safety strategy had been drafted and approved. The meeting also heard from Northern Ireland journalist Patricia Devlin who shared her ‘experiences of threats, harassment and abuse’.²³⁹

At the December 2022 meeting, PSNI then Acting Assistant Chief Constable **Sam Donaldson** noted that ‘two Journalist Safety Liaison Officers had been appointed and a Journalist Safety Group had been established to support them.’ He also noted the force had recently engaged student journalists at the University of Ulster on public order policing.²⁴⁰

In December 2024 the meeting noted the ‘importance of attaching senior investigating officers to cases, as was already happening in Northern Ireland.’ The minutes also noted as ‘good practice’ the PSNI’s ‘appointment of a head of communications who also acts as their Journalist Safety Liaison Officer’.²⁴¹

A Northern Ireland journalists’ safety strategy, developed by the PSNI with the NUJ and some editors, was finalised in June 2021.²⁴² Its overall aim is: ‘To maximise the safety of journalists operating in Northern Ireland.’²⁴³

Among a range of actions, the strategy committed the PSNI to the development of an action plan and ‘training packages for journalists and police officers’, and the appointment of ‘a designated Journalist Safety Officer (JSO) in PSNI with a clear role profile and clear responsibilities. The JSO will be supported by a Journalist Safety Group (JSG)...’²⁴⁴

The agreed paper notes: ‘This strategy will be reviewed by all partners at quarterly meetings and will be updated accordingly.’²⁴⁵

A journalist safety ‘action plan’ was developed by the PSNI in June 2021 in consultation with the NUJ. The union’s **Séamus Dooley** said: ‘We were involved in the development of the strategy in 2021 and we were happy with the plan. The overall approach mirrored the approach of the National Safety Committee in the UK, where former General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet played a key role.’

A progress report produced by the PSNI in March 2023 shows which actions had been taken at that stage and which were still in process.²⁴⁶ The PSNI said that while there have been no ‘administrative updates’ to the plan since March 2023, activity and engagement has progressed.²⁴⁷

The three actions marked as completed were the appointments of a journalist safety officer and an internal PSNI journalist safety group, and the holding of two online safety seminars for journalists.

Work in progress noted was updating of the PSNI website with safety guidance for journalists and development of online training resources for police officers, although a senior officer noted there was ‘no budget’ for the e-learning package.

A June 2021 written answer to a question from a member of the Policing Board regarding online threats against journalists noted:

A Journalist Safety Group has been established to co-ordinate our response to such activity. It is headed by a Chief Superintendent. In addition, a Journalist Safety Officer has been appointed to provide a single point of contact for all journalists subject to such threats. A Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) has been appointed to co-ordinate and quality assure all such investigations. We are currently investigating three offences in relation to online threats dating from October 2019 to May 2021. A number of offenders have also been identified and files submitted to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS).²⁴⁸

The PSNI said that, since June 2022, eight files have been forwarded to PPS for consideration.

In relation to these files, the PPS has confirmed:

- Four cases resulted in a decision not to prosecute after it was concluded that the evidence submitted after police investigation was insufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of obtaining a conviction for any offence. Each included a potential charge of improper use of the public electronic communications network.
- A suspect was charged with one count of harassment, one count of threats to kill and one count of threats to damage property in relation to an incident from July 2021. They pleaded guilty and were sentenced in January 2022. He received an eight-month prison sentence, suspended for three years. The court also granted a two-year restraining order.
- Another file related to three suspects the PPS decided to prosecute on one count of disorderly behaviour each and two counts of common assault each – relating to an incident in September 2021 which involved two journalists. Each suspect was acquitted of all charges.
- An individual was found guilty of improper use of a public electronic communications network. They were sentenced to two months' imprisonment, suspended for one year, in January 2024.
- From two separate files, a decision was taken to prosecute an individual with two counts of stalking and two of harassment. The charges relate to one complainant. These proceedings remain live (as of 20 May 2025).²⁴⁹

None of the files sent to the PPS concern paramilitary-related threats or attacks against journalists.

In his December 2023 written update to the NI Policing Board, the chief constable provided a progress report:

Significant engagement and collaboration has been progressed over the last 18 months with representatives from the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and all local news editors. A joint strategy has been developed and a Journalist Safety Plan agreed and implemented. The overarching objective is to provide journalists with the confidence to report incidents, threats and crimes to police.

As a direct result of the Journalist Safety Plan, we have appointed two Journalist Safety Officers (JSO), established a Journalist Safety Group (JSG), which includes representatives from across the organisation and provides advice and support to the JSOs, implemented a new approach at Contact Management to identify and support any journalist who is the victim of a crime as a result of their role as a journalist, and updated our website to provide advice and guidance to journalists.

In addition, a new policy has been implemented and any journalist who is the victim of a threat or crime as a result of their role will now have their case investigated by a detective. Every report, whether it be an incident, threat or crime, is followed up by the JSO who makes personal contact with the journalist to provide advice and support.

Two on-line seminars on 'safety and wellbeing' have been delivered to journalists and two lectures have been delivered to media students at Ulster University. Bespoke crime prevention advice has also been provided on a number of occasions. Furthermore, new instructions have been provided to our officers and staff on how to recognise NUJ members via their passes.

A number of offenders have already been identified and their cases forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service.

In terms of challenges, it is clear that incidents are increasingly 'played out' on the internet, especially those involving harassment and abuse. Whilst the UK government's Online Safety Act 2023 will certainly have a positive impact, 'policing' the internet from both a journalistic and non-journalistic perspective will remain difficult.

We have been recognised nationally for our recent interventions, and have provided input to a national 'master class' and delivered a briefing to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. Whilst great progress has been made and confidence amongst NUJ, Editors and journalists appears high, we will continue to ensure that our professional approach to journalist safety is maintained.²⁵⁰

The Public Prosecution Service said it takes 'a robust prosecutorial approach in relation to crimes against journalists'.²⁵¹ It added:

The Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions Michael Agnew has attended meetings of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists since being invited in 2021 and has helped ensure that the particular challenges facing journalists working in Northern Ireland have been reflected in the important work of this group.

In all cases involving a crime against a journalist, the PPS works closely with the PSNI to build strong cases and to prosecute any case at its height where there is the evidence to do so.²⁵²

Agnew said:

Journalists fulfil an absolutely crucial role in society and it is vital that they can do so without fear of violence or abuse. In Northern Ireland, we recognise the particularly challenging environment in which journalists work.

The fact that we are a small jurisdiction where paramilitary organisations continue to exercise significant control over communities, means that journalists here can be working in a particularly intimidating environment. We have had cases at the most serious end of offending, including murder. We have also prosecuted other serious cases involving abuse and intimidation, often enabled by the use of social media.

When a journalist is a victim of an attack or abuse, the PPS and the wider criminal justice system seeks to protect them by pursuing robust prosecutions where the available evidence provides a reasonable prospect of conviction. The fact that a victim has been targeted due to their role as a journalist, and the potential chilling effect on freedom of speech that such offending can generate, aggravates the offence for the purpose of sentencing. The court can also be made aware of the particular impact upon a victim in an individual case by the provision of a victim personal statement. In this way the prosecution will seek to ensure that the seriousness of this type of offending is recognised by the courts and reflected in the sentences imposed.²⁵³

While progress in the implementation of the journalist safety strategy is evident, the chief constable's view that 'confidence amongst NUJ, Editors and journalists appears high' was matched by the views and experiences of only a few of the journalists, editors, and NUJ representatives who spoke to Amnesty International for this research.

Ed McCann, director of publishing operations at Mediahuis, has a positive view:

We've had quite a bit of interaction with the PSNI. We had the chief constable in here in June (2024), and then we had a follow-up meeting a couple of months ago. I think it's fair to say it's improved a lot from where they were a few years ago, and that's a result of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. The PSNI are quite active in that, and they have made progress.²⁵⁴

While he is appreciative of the greater engagement by the PSNI, he has not seen much evidence of effective investigations into the many threats against their media group's journalists: 'I don't think I can think recently of an investigation.'

Martin Breen, deputy editor-in-chief at *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life*, also thinks the PSNI has shown initiative:

The police set up the journalism safety group here. You know, very few other forces have done that. And we have met a few times, and we had them in here recently, and I know who I can pick the phone up to if there is a threat.²⁵⁵

But he regrets that PSNI meetings with editors and the NUJ have not been happening in the way agreed at the commencement of the journalists' safety initiative:

We haven't met as regularly as we used to, and I don't know why that is. It met a lot in 2020 and 2021 after the (NUJ and editors-led) campaign. But no, it hasn't [since]. The last one I can remember I got a record of doing was on 30 June 2021.²⁵⁶

Séamus Dooley of the NUJ also thinks that the initial momentum behind the PSNI-led journalist safety initiative has dwindled: 'One of the difficulties we encountered is that broad principles agreed with NUJ did not translate into change at local level – and I know you will have heard this from people like [named journalists].'²⁵⁷

NUJ meetings with the PSNI have been 'informal' and without formal minutes, according to Dooley:

In 2021, the PSNI promised quarterly meetings with the NUJ.

There was a mechanism whereby the PSNI set up consultation process with ourselves as a union, and with media owners. That was very much reliant on individuals. Those individuals have moved on, and it's less active now than it used to be.

At one stage, it was very proactive, but with a change in personnel [in the PSNI], that has altered. In reality, there's very little contact now. There are infrequent meetings between senior PSNI personnel and us, but that's at the level of a phone call and a brief conversation. But there is no sort of formal committee of all of the stakeholders together, with meetings online or in person, with formalised meetings, agenda, minutes – that does not exist.²⁵⁸

Richard Sullivan, northern editor of the *Sunday World* echoes this experience: 'I sat on a body between the industry and police. It was about security and safety for journalism – and it just seems to have died a death. There hasn't been a meeting called in well over a year.'²⁵⁹

At the time of writing (May 2025), no meeting has been held since April 2024.

The PSNI confirmed that quarterly meetings with the NUJ and editors have not been taking place, but say that meetings have been taking place 'on a regular basis' individually with editors and the NUJ. An internal PSNI Journalist Safety Group continues to meet at least quarterly.²⁶⁰

The PSNI said, since January 2023, there have been four formal meetings with the NUJ, two formal meetings with NI-based editors, and one formal meeting with the Stormont All Party Group on Journalists and other informal conversations with NUJ representatives.²⁶¹

Noel Doran was editor of the *Irish News* until April 2024:

All the initial indications were good. I'm not aware that most of the aims were followed through. I think that it kind of diluted over a period of time. I certainly hadn't any contact for a year or two up until last April, when I stood down as editor. So, there didn't appear to be a prolonged structure there. I think there were definitely some discussions and some useful exchanges at the time, and it definitely focused attention on it. But whether it made any long-term difference, I really wouldn't say that was the case.²⁶²

Eoin Brannigan, editor-in-chief of the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Sunday Life* newspapers, has had a mixed experience from his contact with the PSNI:

The journalist safety group was set up, but doesn't meet particularly often. We had the PSNI in here in September or October (2024), which was a useful meeting. There were certain action points taken down.

We were meant to, for instance, have one of the deputy chiefs or assistant chiefs in to give a safety talk to journalists. So that was one of the things which would have been useful for the entire newsroom, and we haven't heard anything on that yet. But I'd imagine it's just a matter of scheduling.²⁶³

The NUJ would like to see a more formal and structured process for engagement with the police in Northern Ireland and draws comparison with the approach in Ireland where the NUJ is formally represented on the Media Engagement Group, established by An Garda Síochána in June 2022.

Séamus Dooley said:

I think there is a need for a more formal PSNI-led partnership. Meetings won't solve the threats, but it will ensure a structured approach to the issue. In the South we have the Media Engagement Group, which is actually chaired by the Garda Assistant Commissioner Paula Hillman. That group was formed pretty much based on what was supposed to be happening in Northern Ireland. We continue to operate in the South, but I don't think the Northern Ireland committee really operates. Unless there's been a breakdown in communications with us.²⁶⁴

Dooley points to the participation of senior leadership from the police, government and the media industry in the Ireland initiative:

The committee in the South is chaired by a Garda Assistant Commissioner, so that's quite a high level. Also the managing director of news and current affairs in RTÉ attends, the senior personnel from all of the leading newspapers, the deputy editor of the Irish Times, people from the Coimisiún na Meán, which is the media regulator. There's a representative as well of the Department of Media.

I think it does need to be mainstreamed in that way... that's the kind of body that is needed. It can't just be the PSNI coming in now and again, having a chat about what's going on. That sort of contact is valuable, and I wouldn't underestimate it. I think we're talking about a need for a more systematic and structured approach.

I think the PSNI do have a responsibility here. We have the responsibility to represent our members, but they have a responsibility to enforce the law.²⁶⁵

The PSNI reportedly considers itself as leading best practice in the UK in addressing threats of violence against journalists.²⁶⁶

The NUJ's **Séamus Dooley** is sceptical:

The feedback that we got from the National Safety Committee was that the PSNI had identified themselves as being 'best in class'. And I think that's an exaggeration. It's the notion that if you get reputation for getting up early, you can stay in bed all day.

In the vast majority of cases, there have not been prosecutions. I don't think that threats to journalists are given the level of priority that they need to. The PSNI talk a good talk.²⁶⁷

One journalist, who has been threatened by loyalist paramilitaries, is similarly unconvinced:

I can't see how they can be best in class if they haven't arrested anyone. The PSNI will be the most experienced in dealing with threats to journalists, certainly, but I wouldn't say they're the best in class. There's a difference. I can say I am a very experienced journalist but I'm not as good as Sam McBride. That's just being honest.²⁶⁸

While the PSNI considers its approach to be exemplary, the journalists we spoke to identified serious shortfalls in the support, assistance and information that should be provided to victims of crime under the European Code of Police Ethics.

5. The case of Patricia Devlin: Police investigation failings

‘Female journalists and other female media actors face specific gender-related dangers, including sexist, misogynist and degrading abuse; threats; intimidation; harassment and sexual aggression and violence. These violations are increasingly taking place online. There is a need for urgent, resolute and systemic responses.’²⁶⁹

The Committee of Ministers, Council of Europe

5.1 The threats

Journalist Patricia Devlin first received a threat just after the murder of Ian Ogle in east Belfast in January 2019.²⁷⁰ She said:

Before that I had only received abuse over Twitter, social media, things like that, which is run of the mill in our work. I made contact with the family and they were putting us in touch with people in the area and there was a whole community revolt against the UVF.²⁷¹

Devlin, then working for the *Sunday World*, describes the social media abuse she received as orchestrated and abusive.

At that stage, in April 2019, I had never reported anything to the police. I was made to believe that it’s part of your job. You’re a crime journalist, and you get shit, basically, and you just have to deal with it. Being a female in that role and surrounded by a lot of men, I didn’t want to make a big deal of it.²⁷²

But she received a threat in October 2019 which made her go to the police. ‘I received a message to my Facebook profile threatening to rape my wee boy. Combat 18 [a neo-Nazi group] was mentioned in the message.’^{273 274}

In November 2020 she received a death threat:

I had been reporting on a feud and pipe bombs were placed in cars in a tiny village. A statement went up on a community (Facebook) group blaming me and another journalist for the bombs. Two detectives and a chief inspector came to my house and this was the one and only time I got a TM1 form. It said that North Antrim UDA were going to target me and my family with firearms and pipe bombs, and that ‘Devlin’s children may also be targeted’. That was the worst one. I didn’t sleep that night.

The next morning, I got a call from a sergeant I know, and he told me not to leave the house. He came out and said it had just come through that morning that Trish Devlin was going to get shot dead in the next 48 hours in Belfast city centre. That was the worst time, because I really did believe that they were going to do something. I did believe that they could make an example out of me.²⁷⁵

In February 2021 her name appeared on three walls in east Belfast with gun crosshairs.²⁷⁶

Devlin told Amnesty International that she reported everything to the police:

I spent hours upon hours in police stations and with everything I reported, including the rape threat, no action was taken, nothing. This was emboldening these people, because I said publicly I was going to the police and then nothing was being done so they were just going at me all the harder.²⁷⁷

Devlin thinks the PSNI did not take the threats seriously enough because they were made on social media: ‘Even when I made the report about the rape threat, it was me contacting the police for an update, no one was checking in with me. I just felt I was left on my own.’²⁷⁸

5.2 Investigation by the Police Ombudsman

In October 2020, Amnesty International supported Devlin in lodging a complaint with the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland in relation to the lack of an effective investigation by the PSNI into the threat to rape her newborn son. The complaint was specifically against the assigned police investigating officer.

Devlin’s complaint was upheld by the Police Ombudsman Marie Anderson in September 2021. Anderson is reported to have described the threat as ‘repulsive’ and said it was ‘concerning that police failed to take measures to arrest the suspect at the earliest opportunity.’²⁷⁹

The Ombudsman concluded that ‘evidential opportunities were missed in regard to enquiries that should have been conducted by police during the investigation’. Her letter to Devlin also stated that there were other legal and operational alternatives that the officer could and should have considered in relation to the belief that the suspected offender was living in Scotland at the time of the investigation.²⁸⁰

The Police Ombudsman recommended that an officer should be disciplined and said the PSNI accepted there had been failings and implemented measures to improve the officer’s performance.²⁸¹

Devlin said: ‘The Ombudsman came out and backed me up, which was really important. I felt vindicated and was happy that it was very thorough and well done.’²⁸²

In February 2023, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) confirmed it would not prosecute the person accused of sending Devlin abusive messages saying there was insufficient evidence to proceed. A review requested by Devlin upheld the PPS’s original decision.

Devlin told the BBC that it was a hugely disappointing decision.²⁸³ ‘I feel again that I wasn’t protected, that my son hasn’t been protected.’

The PPS told Amnesty International:

While we determined that the message was grossly offensive and menacing contrary to the Communications Act 2003, it was determined that the available evidence was insufficient to link the reported person to the message.

After careful consideration, and taking into account all the facts of the case, and the advice of independent counsel, it was determined that for this reason the evidence was insufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of conviction of this individual for any offence. Therefore, the Test for Prosecution was not met.

It added: ‘We acknowledge that the content of the message will have been very upsetting and hurtful to the victim.’²⁸⁴

Devlin told Amnesty International:

The Police Ombudsman ruled that the police did not investigate the rape threat properly. To be honest with you, and it’s a terrible thing to say, but if I got another one in the morning, I don’t think I would even report it to the police because it was more stressful reporting it to the police, then chasing them up, and then for them to do nothing. What’s the point if the outcome is the same? They weren’t protecting me; they weren’t protecting me whatsoever.²⁸⁵

She also feels that newsrooms need to change: ‘The attitude from some people that this is just part of your job needs to go. I think there needs to be better mental health training and support in workplaces.’²⁸⁶

Devlin now works for the *Journal Investigates*, an outlet based in Dublin.

She said: ‘I’ve made the conscious decision that I’ll not work for a publication in Northern Ireland, and I’ll not cover politics and crime because I couldn’t go through that again.’²⁸⁷

The investigation by the Police Ombudsman into the inadequate and failed police investigation of the threats against Patricia Devlin is currently the only case where there has been an independent review of police actions in response to threats against a journalist. Its findings present a *prima facie* case of a failure to conduct a thorough and effective investigation of a serious threat.

6. The murder of Martin O'Hagan

'The procedural dimension involves a positive obligation on the State to carry out effective, independent and prompt investigations into alleged unlawful killings or ill-treatment, either by State or non-State actors, with a view to prosecuting the perpetrators of such crimes and bringing them to justice.

'The absence of such effective measures gives rise to the existence of a culture of impunity, which leads to the tolerance of abuses and crimes against journalists and other media actors. When there is little or no prospect of prosecution, perpetrators of such abuses and crimes do not fear punishment. This inflicts additional suffering on victims and can lead to the repetition of abuses and crimes.'

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers²⁸⁸

Martin O'Hagan was an investigative reporter with the *Sunday World* newspaper. He specialised in writing about criminal gangs and paramilitaries and had repeatedly been threatened by both republican and loyalist paramilitaries due to his work. O'Hagan was secretary of the Belfast and district branch of the NUJ.

The father-of-three was 51 years old when he was murdered by loyalist paramilitaries in September 2001.

O'Hagan and his wife Marie were walking home hand-in-hand from a pub in Lurgan in County Armagh when a car pulled up alongside them. A passenger shot him three times. He died trying to shield Marie from the bullets, just metres from their front door.

O'Hagan was the first working journalist to be killed in Northern Ireland since the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969, although this murder happened in 'peacetime' Northern Ireland, more than three years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. No one has been held to account for his death.

The killing was claimed by the Red Hand Defenders, a cover name used by both the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) and Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

In 1992 O'Hagan had exposed the alleged leader of the Mid-Ulster UVF as Billy Wright, who lived only a few miles from Mr O'Hagan's home in Lurgan.

That same year, after Wright allegedly ordered the bombing of the *Sunday World* offices in Belfast and threatened to kill him, O'Hagan was advised by the RUC to leave Northern Ireland. He did so, working in Cork and Dublin for about a year before deciding that the threat against his life had subsided and that he was safe to return home.

Coroner John Leckey concluded at an inquest in 2006 that Mr O'Hagan was killed for exposing the drug dealing activities of loyalist paramilitaries in the Mid Ulster area. Mr Leckey said the bravery of journalists seeking to expose criminals must be recognised.

6.1 The impact on the family

Martin's wife Marie died in April 2022 with no one found guilty of his murder.

Fintan O'Hagan spoke to Amnesty International about his brother's murder, alongside his solicitor Niall Murphy.

Within three years, my ma died, broken-hearted, devastated. Within four years, my da died, broken-hearted, devastated. No answers. His wife, Marie, has since died. Whatever terrible effect it's had on me it's a hundred times worse on his children. I can't speak for them, but it's devastation, and for all of my brothers. It never goes away, even twenty-odd years later, it's always there.

You actually feel guilty that you're not doing more. You feel guilty that these people are still walking the streets. What can I do with that?²⁸⁹

Fintan O'Hagan says he has not given up hope of getting justice.

6.2 The impact on *Sunday World* colleagues

Over 23 years on from the killing, journalists at the *Sunday World* continue to receive death threats. In the immediate decade which followed, 50 threats were recorded.

Martin O'Hagan's colleagues live in homes with safety measures installed which include bullet-resistant glass, security cameras, monitors and direct panic buttons.

Jim McDowell was northern editor of the *Sunday World* at the time of the murder. He said:

I got there after Martin was murdered and the police had the place roped off. A crowd of LVF bastards had gathered on the corner of the street and started chanting something like 'another fenian dead, it's just another fenian dead'. I went to go and the big cop grabbed me and said: 'Jim, do you want a riot erupting over this wee lad's body?' He said: 'Stand where you are, don't move'. There was a kind of evil base sectarianism that drove these people. Everybody's got to reject that.

It grieves me still and grieves everybody who's involved with the paper, and a lot of people who are not, that no one has ever been brought to justice for Martin's murder. It had a huge impact on the industry.

Martin's murder just cemented what we were at. We were going to keep on doing the job that Martin was doing and the rest of us were doing. That meant that other *Sunday World* journalists got threats. Nobody will ever stop journalists doing their job.²⁹⁰

The paper's northern editor, **Richard Sullivan**, said the murder was 'an extraordinary time':

I still get hairs on the back of my neck standing up every time I talk about it. I remember getting a phone call from Jim. He was at the scene, and he called me and told me about it. It was just utterly surreal.

The next day, all hell broke loose. I don't know how we got a paper out. I don't know how we did it. I'm incredibly proud of the staff; the pressure they were under and the shock that they were in. There was no counselling, there was none of that. We put the paper out and went to the pub and cried basically. As Jim always said, we did our counselling in the pub.²⁹¹

They still talk about Martin, a lot. Sullivan continued:

We feel very bitter and let down that nothing was done about Martin's killing. A journalist murdered on the streets of the UK just for doing his job, and nothing happened. It had a huge impact on the industry, but it had an unbelievable impact on the *Sunday World* staff. All of the people that are here now, were there then. It was an awful time. It was the single worst day of our careers, just dreadful.²⁹²

He does not remember being frightened by what had happened.

I think it was more a case of, pardon my French, 'fuck yous' and we just carry on, and that's what we did. People may think that's a bit reckless, but that's our only weapon.

The guys that did it were kind of laughing in our faces and still are to an extent. There are still people who don't quite grasp the enormity of what happened. I think it was a seismic event. So many bad things happened in this country, but to shoot a journalist really crossed the line.

It's really hard to put into words the impact. We think about him a lot. We talk about him a lot and what he was like. He was Martin, he was ours, and a really determined journalist and a great guy. I do think it's impacted all of us a lot more than we realise. And then the anger kicks in, and you've got the Secretary of State John Reid coming in and standing in our office and saying no stone will be unturned until those guys are caught. I don't think he's said a word about it since.²⁹³

Paula Mackin had a work experience placement with Martin O'Hagan when she was just 15 years old. She went on to join him as a *Sunday World* colleague.

I was 21 when he was murdered. That's when you start to think: 'holy shit', and, obviously, we were heartbroken.

As soon as we got the phone call, we were straight into the office. The paper was ripped up. We sat at our desks, and we wrote stories and then we went next door to The Duke [of York pub] and cried our eyes out. That's how we got on with it. We never forgot him, and we talked about it, but it just made us more determined that they couldn't get away with it; which, you know, they did.

We were very, very tight within the office. The camaraderie was very important and got you through. It was like McDowell said, his mantra was 'We're not beat yet'. One foot in front of the other, we just go on. There's an awful lot of anger still, because it's so unfair, you know. Marty was lovely.

It didn't change the journalism for anyone in the *Sunday World*. It got harder, not for us – the stories got harder. We started to become more and more focused, more driven.²⁹⁴

Steven Moore, who attended the scene of the murder on the night of the killing, described it as 'absolutely shocking'.

There was an absolute failure of the police to do anything about it. There was a lot of anger that it soon dawned on us these guys had no intention of bringing anyone to justice over Martin.

I don't remember questioning if I wanted to do this job. I think it made me want to do it more. I never felt like I shouldn't do this because it's dangerous. It never stopped us writing about the LVF and the people who did it.²⁹⁵

6.3 The police investigations

'Investigations into killings, attacks and ill-treatment must be effective and therefore respect the essential requirements of adequacy, thoroughness, impartiality and independence, promptness and public scrutiny.'

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers²⁹⁶

Solicitor Niall Murphy criticised the initial police investigation:

In the immediate hours, days and weeks after the murder, none of the key suspects or major players in the LVF were arrested or had their homes searched.

It was clear what the immediate and compelling intelligence picture was, given Martin's profession, his ongoing work and from whom he was under threat.

Could the police argue that they had no grounds to target or arrest individuals? We say 'no'. Evidence is required to submit a charge to the court. However, an arrest can be and frequently is effected on the sole basis of intelligence. Physical evidence is then procured when police go and look for it.

The abject failure to conduct house searches, seize exhibits like clothing, gloves and God knows what else means that there was no evidence for a charge. When the police don't look for evidence, then there is no evidence.

This was clearly a flawed investigation.²⁹⁷

A second investigation was conducted by the PSNI's Retrospective Murder Review Unit and it made arrests in September 2008.²⁹⁸ **Fintan O'Hagan** said:

The first investigation wasn't an investigation. It was just a cover-up job. The second investigation, when they brought in the outside officers... happened and, within a short period of time, there were arrests.²⁹⁹

On the police team who carried out the second investigation, Murphy said: 'They themselves made complaints to the Police Ombudsman about the quality of the original investigation.'³⁰⁰

During police questioning, one suspect, Neil Hyde, indicated that he was willing to enter an agreement to assist the authorities and subsequently signed a contract to become an ‘assisting offender’ in return for a reduced sentence for offences to which he had already pleaded guilty.³⁰¹ However, charges were withdrawn by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) against four men in July 2010³⁰² and against Hyde in October 2011.³⁰³

Jim McDowell said he was told in a private meeting with a senior person in the PPS that charges were going to be withdrawn. ‘I was furious. I lost the head in the office.’³⁰⁴

Hyde was jailed in 2012 for three years for 48 LVF-linked offences. Judge Patrick Lynch QC told him that if he had not agreed to identify the alleged culprits in Mr O’Hagan’s murder and give evidence about the activities of the outlawed LVF, he would have been jailed for 18 years.³⁰⁵

In January 2013, the decision was taken by the PPS not to prosecute in the Martin O’Hagan murder case. The then director of public prosecutions, Barra McGrory QC, said:

The prosecution of any of the accused in this case would depend on the evidence of Neil Hyde. Having regard to all the circumstances it has been concluded that, in the absence of any corroboration, the available evidence is insufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of obtaining a conviction against any individual.³⁰⁶

In September 2013, the PPS said Hyde’s reduced sentence was no longer under review.³⁰⁷

Niall Murphy is critical of the PPS decision not to prosecute anyone. He said:

What we had in Hyde was a witness who was prepared, he says, because he’s getting 15 years off a sentence, to go to court, to tell a court publicly who killed Martin O’Hagan.

The PPS were therefore depriving that witness of the opportunity to tell the court his account. The PPS were depriving the court the opportunity to consider the truthfulness or otherwise of that evidence, and ultimately deprived the family and indeed the public, the opportunity to understand and see justice in action.³⁰⁸

In response, the PPS said: ‘We understand that it is frustrating and disappointing for families seeking justice and truth when an investigation cannot proceed to prosecution. It is, however, a core duty of the PPS to only present a case in court where it provides a reasonable prospect of conviction.’³⁰⁹

NUJ Assistant General Secretary **Séamus Dooley** described no one being held accountable for Martin O’Hagan’s murder as ‘a stain on the history of Northern Ireland’, adding:

After Martin was murdered, people said: ‘we’re not going to let it happen again’. But I don’t think you can ever say it won’t happen again. My hope is that journalists can get up in the morning and do their work without fear of being in any way intimidated.³¹⁰

Richard Sullivan said: ‘I know the police will say the file remains open but realistically we all know nobody is going to do time for Martin’s murder even though we all know who did it.’³¹¹

The *Sunday World* choose to repeatedly name the people they believed were the killers, despite no one being convicted. Sullivan explained: ‘We had it confirmed from multiple sources, both paramilitary and security sources.’³¹²

On 4 April 2025, the PSNI announced that detectives from its Legacy Investigation Branch investigating the murder of journalist Martin O’Hagan had charged a 42-year-old man with ‘fraud by false representation’ and the charges do not relate to the murder itself.³¹³

6.4 Allegations of state failure

In 2022, the BBC reported that security sources had told them that ‘Witness A’ gave the police names of people said to be involved in the killing within 48 hours of the murder and details of a yard in Lurgan being used to dispose of the car and other items used in the murder, but the police did not act on the information.’³¹⁴

This heightened concerns within the O’Hagan family that state informers had a role in the murder and have been protected from prosecution.

The PSNI has insisted that it thoroughly investigated Mr O’Hagan’s murder in 2001 and 2007, although concerns remain that the police prioritised the protection of informants within the paramilitary organisation responsible.

The family’s solicitor Niall Murphy claims that two members of the LVF gang which allegedly carried out the murder were ‘were fully-employed, paid state assets’.

He said: ‘Within days of the murder, Witness A told them who did it, and nothing happens. The murder... is not investigated. To this day, nobody has been prosecuted. A trial has not taken place.’³¹⁵

Richard Sullivan said:

Informants are always a big issue here. Were these people in the employment of the state, Special Branch or security services? That shadow hangs over everything in this country. I don’t believe there was active collusion. I think it was opportunistic for them to do it, and I think they did it in the knowledge that there would be no consequences for them. I have absolutely no faith that there’ll be any criminal conviction for the murder of Martin.³¹⁶

6.5 Investigation by the Police Ombudsman

In September 2013, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) was called in to investigate the police handling of the O’Hagan case. PONI’s role is to provide an independent and impartial service for dealing with complaints about the conduct of police officers in Northern Ireland.

The PONI report into the police investigation has not yet been published.

In 2015, it was claimed that this report had been delayed because the PSNI refused to hand over crucial intelligence files.³¹⁷ In May 2024 it was confirmed to Niall Murphy that the investigation had been completed and the draft report remained with the ombudsman. In February 2025, when being interviewed for this report, Niall Murphy said they were initiating judicial review proceedings over the failure to publish the report.

As part of our research, Amnesty International made enquiries to PONI about the status of their investigation, reasons for the delay, and expected publication date of the report. PONI responded to say the report will be published later in 2025:

The Police Ombudsman investigation was initially completed in 2018. Shortly thereafter, new and relevant information was obtained by the Office, which required further investigation.

The investigation has been necessarily protracted due to its complexity, the volume of enquiries and the thorough examination required to ensure accuracy, fairness and compliance with legal and procedural standards.

Resourcing in this Office has also imposed a challenge, as investigation teams balance a demanding volume of on-going cases.

I can confirm that the investigation is complete and the Police Ombudsman will issue a Public Statement under section 62 of the 1998 Act in this case.

However, as you will be aware, the timeframes for reporting on Troubles-related matters imposed by the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 mean that the Police Ombudsman must conclude and communicate her findings in extant cases by 30 April 2025.

This case has, therefore, been prioritised from May 2025 with a view to issuing the Public Statement later in 2025.³¹⁸

Speaking in February 2025, Martin's brother Fintan O'Hagan said in relation to the publication of the PONI report: 'It was always "within the next few months", this last 15 years. We're still fighting for it. We're not going to let go.'³¹⁹

6.6 Calls for a public inquiry

In September 2024 the National Union of Journalists renewed its call for an independent inquiry into Martin O'Hagan's murder.

Séamus Dooley said then: 'The murder of Martin O'Hagan was a watershed moment for journalism in the UK and Ireland. The failure to properly investigate it has cast a long shadow and continues to embolden those who seek to silence journalists.'³²⁰

In an interview for this report, Dooley said:

It is very difficult to talk about the practice of journalism in a society where no one has been successfully prosecuted for the murder of Martin O'Hagan. That's a real problem.

Last September, we wrote to the then new prime minister. Our belief is there's a need for an international investigation. Hilary Benn wrote saying that it was a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, for Naomi Long as minister for justice. But Naomi Long can't order an international investigation. That has to be done at the level of the two national governments in my view.

In the context of potential conflicts of interest, in the context of collusion and the concerns around it, I don't have any trust in the PSNI to carry out an investigation. I don't believe we should be looking at another police force such as Durham. I would like to see some international figure coming in. I genuinely believe there are two levels needed – an investigation into the murder but there is also a need for an investigation into the lack of investigation.

I don't think that it's good enough to say that we don't know who did it, and we just leave it be, and it becomes one of the unsolved mysteries.

There are so many questions to be asked, and the fears around collusion, the role of the state. The suspicion that there were people involved in this murder who were protected by virtue of the fact that they were useful to the state. This goes back to the fact that this is the murder of a journalist. That raises real human rights issues.³²¹

Martin's brother Fintan O'Hagan said:

There has to be an inquiry that's not based in the north of Ireland. It has to be an inquiry from some sort of outside body. If ever there was an inquiry needed, this is it. So many people who deserve inquiries here, and we're one of them.³²²

7. Human rights analysis

Northern Ireland's state obligations on acts and threats of violence, including death threats against journalists, fall within the framework of international human rights standards. These standards aim to protect the rights of journalists to report freely and safely, without fear of violence, intimidation or harassment. They include special protections that recognise the essential role of journalists in ensuring the right to freedom of expression is fulfilled.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a state party to a number of relevant international human rights treaties. The UK government is required to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights outlined in these treaties, including in Northern Ireland where some government responsibilities, including justice and policing powers, have devolved to the NI Executive. The Executive has authority over areas such as policing, prisons, prosecution, courts, and justice policy, while responsibility for national security, counter-terrorism, and the intelligence services is reserved to the UK government.

By virtue of the UK government's ratification, the NI Executive is subject to the obligations in the specified regional and international treaties. All public authorities in Northern Ireland including the police must comply with obligations under section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which incorporates the ECHR into UK law.³²³

The UK is also expected to adhere to various international declarations, plans and guidance that set out standards on the protection of journalists. These treaties, standards and declarations and their relevant sections are summarised here.

7.1 International human rights standards

International human rights law requires states to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right to freedom of expression and press freedom. Attacks and threats of violence against journalists and other media workers undermine the rights of individuals and society to seek, receive and impart information. Their protection is essential for guaranteeing freedom of expression and other human rights.

The United Nations General Assembly has called on all member states to prevent violence against journalists, to secure accountability through proper and effective investigations, and to bring criminals to justice.³²⁴

International human rights standards on protection of journalists

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Article 19 states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

This article protects journalists' right to work freely and without fear of threats or violence.

2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

The UK is a state party to the ICCPR which further guarantees the right to freedom of expression and provides several key provisions relevant to police investigations.

Article 6: The state must take measures to protect individuals from threats of violence and conduct investigations when such threats are made.

Article 19: Protects the rights of individuals to hold opinions without interference and to freely express those opinions, including through journalism. States must ensure that this right is not impeded by violence, threats, or intimidation.

Article 20: Requires states to prohibit advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred, which could incite discrimination, hostility, or violence, including against journalists based on their national, racial, or religious identity.

Article 21: Guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, which is relevant in protecting journalists in situations where they may face threats when covering protests or public events.

3. UN Human Rights Council Resolutions on the Safety of Journalists

These reaffirm the international community's commitment to prevent violence against journalists and ensure accountability for acts of violence against them. They explicitly call on states to take measures to ensure the safety of journalists, condemn all acts of violence, intimidation, and harassment against journalists, and bring perpetrators to justice. They urge states to adopt specific legislation and policies to protect journalists.³²⁵

4. UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity

This addresses threats facing journalists, including violence, harassment and intimidation. The UN calls on governments to ensure effective protection of journalists, to prevent impunity for those responsible for violence, and to investigate attacks. The plan emphasises the essential role played by members of the judiciary and law enforcement officials in reinforcing the 'three Ps' (Prevention, Protection, and Prosecution), to protect freedom of expression and safety of journalists.³²⁶

5. UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials

This emphasises the ethical conduct of law enforcement agencies, stressing the importance of respect for human rights in all aspects of police work, including investigations into threats of violence.³²⁷

6. UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

The UN Special Rapporteur's reports emphasise the responsibility of states to prevent violence against journalists and to investigate and prosecute those responsible for such attacks.³²⁸

It is clear from the evidence we have collected that the climate of violence and intimidation has a chilling effect on journalism and undermines press freedom in Northern Ireland. Because of these threats, journalists have changed jobs, left the country, avoided using bylines on their work, taken security measures at home, and decided what stories they do and do not cover.

Amnesty International believes the UK is not upholding its international obligations to protect freedom of expression and the specific role of journalists in Northern Ireland. In fulfilling its positive obligations in Northern Ireland the state needs to take particular account of the ongoing reality of active armed paramilitary and organised crime groups.

7.2 European regional standards

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers has recognised that:

Journalists and other media actors in Europe are increasingly being threatened, harassed, subjected to surveillance, intimidated, arbitrarily deprived of their liberty, physically attacked, tortured and even killed because of their investigative work, opinions or reporting, particularly when their work focuses on the misuse of power, corruption, human rights violations, criminal activities, terrorism and fundamentalism.³²⁹

This could have been written with the experience of journalists in Northern Ireland in mind.

The Committee of Ministers continues:

The abuses and crimes... have a grave chilling effect on freedom of expression, as safeguarded by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights including on the ability to access information, on the public watchdog role of journalists and other media actors and on open and vigorous public debate, all of which are essential in a democratic society. They are often met with insufficient efforts by relevant State authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice, which leads to a culture of impunity and can fuel further threats and violence, and undermine public trust in the rule of law.³³⁰

Again, the relevance to the Northern Ireland experience, as documented in this report, is striking.

The Committee of Ministers makes clear that all member states must ‘fulfil a range of positive obligations, as identified in the relevant judgments of the European Court of Human Rights’. It sets out recommendations for action by the ‘executive, legislative and judicial branches of governments’ including ‘agencies concerned with maintaining public order and national security, and at all levels – federal, national, regional and local.’³³¹

The UK government, the NI Executive, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other branches of the criminal justice system all have obligations to protect the safety of journalists.

European regional standards and the UK's obligations

1. European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

The UK is a signatory to the ECHR,³³² and its provisions are incorporated into domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998. Several key articles of the ECHR are relevant to press freedom and police investigations into threats of violence against journalists:

Article 2: Right to Life

Under Article 2, when death threats are made against journalists, the state has a positive obligation to investigate the threat and take steps to protect the journalist from harm. Failure to do so can result in a breach of the journalist's right to life under the ECHR.

This obligation means that when a journalist receives credible death threats, the state has a legal duty to actively investigate these threats and hold those responsible accountable. The state must take appropriate and timely measures to protect the journalist's life, and actively work to prevent potential harm. This is considered a key aspect of the broader 'right to life' protection under Article 2. Journalists are particularly vulnerable because of their role in society, and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has emphasised the importance of ensuring that their right to life and safety is protected by preventing attacks and also through proactive steps to prevent and respond to threats against them.

Article 3: Prohibition of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment

The state has a 'positive obligation to investigate' under Article 3. With threats of violence against journalists, the state has a legal duty to actively and thoroughly investigate credible allegations of such threats, taking necessary steps to ensure a proper and effective inquiry, even if the journalist does not formally file a complaint. The state cannot simply ignore threats of violence against journalists and must take proactive measures to protect them.

As with Article 2, an effective investigation under Article 3 must not be just a perfunctory exercise: it must be thorough, impartial, and conducted with a view to identifying perpetrators and holding them accountable.

Article 8: Right to Respect for Private and Family Life

While investigating threats of violence, police must balance the need for an investigation with respect for individuals' privacy rights. Surveillance and other investigative techniques must be conducted in accordance with the law, and any interference with privacy must be necessary and proportionate.

This is relevant in the context of police accessing a journalist's telecommunications data in response to a threat against that journalist.

Article 10: Right to Freedom of Expression

'Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers...'

Failure by the state to protect journalists facing threats or violence may violate this right.

Article 13: Right to an Effective Remedy

If there is a violation of rights, individuals must have access to an effective remedy, including the ability to challenge unlawful actions and seek redress.

2. Council of Europe Recommendations and Declarations

The Council of Europe has issued specific recommendations concerning the safety of journalists. Notably:

Recommendation CM/Rec (2016) 4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, urges member states to take concrete measures to ensure the safety of journalists, including responding to threats of violence and ensuring effective investigations and prosecutions.³³³

The European Code of Police Ethics sets out the Council of Europe's recommended approach to enable the police 'to protect and respect the individual's fundamental rights and freedoms as enshrined, in particular, in the European Convention on Human Rights.'³³⁴

3. European Union (EU) Charter of Fundamental Rights

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights remains applicable in Northern Ireland due to the Windsor Framework and the Withdrawal Agreement between the EU and the UK.

Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights protects the right to freedom of expression and the freedom of the media, reinforcing the importance of safeguarding journalists from threats and violence.³³⁵

4. OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Commitments

The OSCE has developed specific commitments for the protection of journalists, including the requirement for member states to protect journalists from violence and ensure that attacks are investigated and perpetrators are held accountable.³³⁶ OSCE provides guidelines on policing that include human rights standards for effective investigations.³³⁷

7.2.1 European jurisprudence

According to the ECtHR case law, genuine and effective exercise of freedom of expression does not depend merely on the state's duty not to interfere, but may require positive measures of protection.

In the case of *Dink v. Turkey* the court concluded that the authorities failed in their duty to protect the life (Article 2) and freedom of expression (Article 10) of the journalist Firat (Hrant) Dink, who was murdered in 2007.

Journalist Kemal Kılıç was killed in 1993, despite his urgent requests for protective measures because of attacks and killings aimed at persons working for the *Özgür Gündem* daily newspaper. In *Kılıç v. Turkey*, 2000, the court found there was a violation of Article 2: the failure of the authorities 'to take reasonable measures available to them to prevent a real and immediate risk' to the life of a journalist; the lack of any inquiry as to the possible targeting of the victim due to his job as a journalist and the lack of an effective investigation (a further violation of Article 2).

In *Mazepa and Others v. Russia*, 2018, the court found that the Russian government violated the journalist Anna Politkovskaya's right to life by failing to conduct an effective investigation into her murder (Article 2). The court pointed to the protracted investigation, which had lasted 10 years, and declared that it did not matter that the investigation produced numerous investigative files if it did not lead to tangible results.

Journalist Georgiy Gongadze disappeared in September 2000 and his body was found in November 2000. In *Gongadze v. Ukraine*, 2005, the court found a violation of Article 2, a decisive factor being that the authorities, primarily prosecutors, ought to have been aware of the vulnerability of the journalist covering sensitive topics at the time.

The case of *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, 2019 concerned the failure to effectively investigate serious intrusions into the private life of a journalist including attempts at public humiliation. The court found that Article 10 required the state to take positive measures to protect her journalistic freedom of expression, in addition to its positive obligation under Article 8 to protect her from intrusion into her private life. It noted that the applicant had repeatedly brought to the attention of the authorities her concerns and fears that she was the victim of a concerted campaign orchestrated in retaliation for her journalistic work.

In a series of cases the court has decided that the positive obligations under Article 10 of the convention 'require states to create, while establishing an effective system for the protection of journalists, a favourable environment for participation in public debate by all the persons concerned, enabling them to express their opinions and ideas without fear' (*Dink v. Turkey*, 2010, § 137; *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, 2019, § 158; *Huseynova v. Azerbaijan*, 2017, § 120; *Tagiyeva v. Azerbaijan*, 2022, § 78; *Gaši and Others v. Serbia*, 2022, § 78).³³⁸

It is not difficult to identify parallels between European Court case law and some of the Northern Ireland cases and incidents, and the state's responses, recorded in this report.

7.3 Failures to protect journalists in Northern Ireland

The international obligations and standards of the state and the police as a state authority are detailed in Section 4, Official State Responses. In Northern Ireland the PSNI believes their approach to the safety of journalists is exemplary – but Amnesty International has detailed a number of areas that should be addressed urgently where journalists believe they are being left unprotected, unsupported and vulnerable to attack.

Many journalists we spoke to complained about the inadequacies of police communication. They spoke of poorly-informed officers sent to communicate information, often about serious threats to life, but unable to give sufficient detail to enable the journalist to assess the seriousness or imminence of the threat. Victims felt threats were not taken seriously, they had to chase police for follow-up information and as a result had no confidence that an adequate investigation would take place.

There are apparent inconsistencies in the implementation of processes such as the threat management (TM1) form, where data is missing or incomplete. There is a noticeable gap in police data on officially recorded number of threats, which, according to the data Amnesty International has collected, we believe under-represents the true extent of the threats.

Home security surveys conducted by police in response to threats have been welcomed by journalists who spoke with us, as were other response measures such as a temporary increase in police patrols near their homes. However, it has fallen to private employers, rather than the state, to put in place long-term home security measures seen as necessary for their journalists. In most cases, freelance journalists have been left without any significant home protection.

Amnesty International is concerned that the issue of threats against journalists in Northern Ireland has not previously been systematically analysed. This has resulted in a lack of recognition of patterns and trends, and the specific and targeted risks and vulnerabilities of journalists to threats and attacks from paramilitary and organised crime groups and networks. As a further result, journalists are not being identified as a group who should be supported by the Home Protection Scheme and they have received no protective measures or inconsistent support, or have relied on their employers for protective measures. In our view this is not an adequate state response to the threats we have identified.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the PSNI's apparent lack of awareness of the state's positive obligations on protecting journalists during public order situations such as demonstrations. The Council of Europe has drawn attention to the specific nature and democratic value of the role played by journalists and other media actors in these contexts. Much of the testimony we collected shows that perpetrators particularly react against the visibility and accountability that journalists bring to their abusive acts, and seek to silence and intimidate them.

7.4 Failures to investigate

This research points to failures of the state to adequately protect journalists. There have been no prosecutions in any case involving a threat by a paramilitary group to a journalist, and only a small number of prosecutions involving other perpetrators, despite the many incidents documented here and which have been reported to the police.

It is impossible to determine if there have been effective investigations into all or most of the cases of criminal activity we have documented. In the one case which was independently investigated and resulted in a published outcome, that of Patricia Devlin, the Police Ombudsman found a series of investigative failures by the PSNI. Its findings present a *prima facie* case of a failure to conduct a thorough and effective investigation of a serious threat against a journalist.³³⁹

In the case of the murder of Martin O'Hagan, the Police Ombudsman has told Amnesty International that the long-awaited report of their investigation into the police investigation is due to be published later in 2025. It will be read closely not only by his bereaved family, but by former colleagues and journalists in newsrooms across Northern Ireland.

Clearly, many of the journalists whose lives have been threatened, primarily by armed and dangerous paramilitary groups, have seen scant evidence of effective investigations. Most believe they have not been kept adequately informed by the police about progress in investigations into the threats and acts of violence against them.

Some journalists are sympathetic to the investigative difficulties faced by the police, but many are deeply critical of the police and the general state failure to hold accountable those who regularly threaten their and family members' lives.

Confidence in police ability to secure prosecutions is very low among journalists who have experienced acts or threats of violence, particularly those from paramilitaries. Some have concluded there is little point in reporting threats to the police and view this as a waste of their time.

Sadly, many journalists in Northern Ireland have come to regard threats and acts of violence against them as an 'occupational hazard', albeit one they utterly reject and see as an unacceptable working condition for a journalist.

8. Conclusion

Evidence gathered by Amnesty International from journalists demonstrates that a sustained campaign of acts and threats of violence against journalists in Northern Ireland is undermining freedom of expression in the region.

The climate of violence, intimidation and harassment within which journalists work is having a chilling effect on journalism.

Journalism has always had an important role to play in Northern Ireland. It is journalists who have created the ‘first draft of history’ with reports on the long-running conflict, peace talks, political progress, relative peace – and the ongoing search for truth about past human rights violations and abuses.

Throughout all of this, paramilitary groups have continued to exert control over communities through the use and threat of violence. Reporting on their activities brings danger, up to and including murder.

Others not involved in paramilitary groups also attempt to threaten and intimidate reporters and photographers to deter them from supporting the public’s right to access information.

Since the start of January 2019, we know of at least 71 incidents of threats or attacks on journalists. These include physical assaults and multiple threats to kill from paramilitary groups that have killed before.

Some journalists report they have received more threats in recent years than previously.

It is not acceptable that journalists are threatened on our streets while doing their jobs. Or that they are woken in the middle of the night by police officers passing on serious threats to their lives involving under-car bombs and firearms.

The personal and professional impact is massive.

Leona O’Neill left freelance journalism to become a lecturer. She has PTSD and still suffers from ‘terrible, terrible nightmares’.³⁴⁰

Sunday Life reporter **Ciaran Barnes** is ‘battle-hardened’ but is still careful. There are places he will not go. Sitting in cafes, he faces the door. He’s always watching for danger.³⁴¹

Journalists’ homes have been turned into fortresses with the installation of bulletproof windows and doors, alarm systems, panic buttons and cameras.

Photographer **Kevin Scott** has three cars and alternates his use of them, for safety reasons.³⁴²

A number of journalists genuinely believe the death threats they receive could result in them being killed. Journalists also feel unprotected when reporting on public order situations. The murders of journalists Martin O'Hagan and Lyra McKee are stark examples of what is possible.

Amnesty International's interviews with journalists forced some to see what they have experienced through fresh eyes.

Belfast Telegraph journalist **Allison Morris** said: 'I realise that what I do is not a normal way to live when I say it to other people and see the horror on their faces.'³⁴³

Many felt empowered that a group of journalists were speaking out en masse for this report in the hope of challenging what the NUJ warned in July 2024 was a 'creeping culture of complacency regarding threats to journalists in Northern Ireland'.³⁴⁴

But they also had little expectation of people being held account for threats made against them.

Sunday Life reporter **Ciaran Barnes** said: 'I have no faith in the PSNI to arrest anybody in connection with these threats, or even to take these threats particularly seriously, and that's based on my previous experience.'³⁴⁵

The absence of any prosecutions in relation to threats from paramilitaries against journalists suggests the validity of such concerns.

Since June 2022, eight files relating to threats or attacks against journalists have been forwarded by the police to the Public Prosecution Service. So far, two have resulted in successful prosecutions.

But none of these prosecutions relate to paramilitary groups, the single most significant source of such threats.

Amnesty International was told of journalists' concerns that the protection of police informers may play a part in prosecution decisions – although this was emphatically denied by the PSNI Chief Constable Jon Boutcher.³⁴⁶

The right of journalists to protect their sources is fundamental and protected in law. A number of journalists also raised concern about police surveillance in an attempt to identify journalists' sources – as exemplified by the case involving unlawful police action against journalists Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney.

Progress has been made by the PSNI in implementing a journalist safety strategy, although the last formal meeting of its Journalist Safety Group involving external participants was over a year ago.

The National Union of Journalists has called for a more formal and structured approach to engagement with the police in Northern Ireland. Amnesty International agrees that this is necessary to ensure a sustained and strategic response to the safety of journalists in the region.

The UK and devolved Northern Ireland governments must play their part in ensuring a safe environment for journalists in order to uphold media freedom in the region.

Human rights abuses committed by proscribed paramilitary groups are only possible because of a security situation which reflects a failure to build the peaceful society envisaged in the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and ‘to achieve a society free of paramilitarism’. This commitment was reiterated by the UK and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland Executive in the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement.³⁴⁷ The UK government itself recognises that the ongoing ‘threat level’ from paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland is ‘substantial’ and ‘severe’.

It is the state’s responsibility to create a safe environment where journalists can carry out their professional roles without the threat of violence to them and their families.

The UK and devolved Northern Ireland state authorities must act more effectively to bring to an end the climate of violence within which journalists work and which has, by some accounts documented within this report, worsened in recent years.

Where journalists are under clear threats to their lives, the state must act to ensure their protection at work and at home.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) have a particular responsibility to demonstrate that those who commit or threaten acts of violence against journalists are not able to enjoy de facto impunity for their offences.

The recommendations which follow set out actions which will improve the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland and remove the complacency which appears to have settled around this issue.

9. Recommendations

Co-ordination of state response

By the end of 2025, Northern Ireland's Minister for Justice should establish and chair a new Media Safety Group, with senior representation from the PSNI, PPS, media companies, NUJ and other partners to build on the work of the UK National Committee for the Safety of Journalists and commitments in the UK National Plan for Journalist Safety. It should ensure a more systematic approach to the work developed by the PSNI and to oversee the implementation of the recommendations in this report.

By the end of March 2026, this Media Safety Group should agree an adequately resourced journalist protection and safety strategy for Northern Ireland and take responsibility for its implementation and monitoring. This should include improving protocols for reporting threats and information sharing between the PSNI, media companies and the NUJ. The group should agree on key data to be collected and regularly published on the number of threats or acts of violence against journalists and the progress of cases through the PSNI processes and legal system. The group should have a programme of regular meetings, with formal agendas and minutes.

The Northern Ireland Policing Board should build on this Amnesty International report by conducting and publishing a thematic human rights review of police practice in responding to acts and threats of violence against journalists. The board should provide oversight for the implementation of its recommendations.

Effective investigations and prosecutions

The PSNI must demonstrate compliance with their human rights obligations towards journalists and in upholding freedom of expression and press freedom.

The police must conduct prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, transparent and effective investigations, in all cases where journalists are threatened or attacked. These should include identifying suspected perpetrators and evidential links between multiple case of threats to life, and ensuring effective prosecutions, including where acts and threats of violence emanate from paramilitary groups.

Affected journalists must be regularly informed about progress in their cases, in relation to both the status of the investigation, and any further information on the source of the threats so that they may take appropriate security precautions.

The PSNI should review Service Instruction SI2317 on dealing with 'threats to life' in light of states' specific obligations to prevent and protect against attacks against journalists and the concerns raised in this report (as well as prior concerns highlighted in a study by the Department of Justice/Queen's University Belfast in November 2023), to bring it into line with international human rights standards and best practice. This police review should be conducted in consultation with journalists and others who have experienced threats to life.

In line with relevant international standards on the protection of journalists, the PSNI should publish new specific guidance for the police officers on investigation

and protection measures for journalists receiving threats. This guidance should be developed in consultation with the NUJ and affected journalists.

The chief constable should provide updates in reports to the Policing Board at least on an annual basis.

To ensure meaningful accountability, the guidance, including its implementation, should be regularly reviewed by the Policing Board and its human rights advisor.

The Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland has a responsibility to demonstrate the ‘commitment to a robust prosecutorial approach in relation to crimes against journalists’ which they affirmed in the UK National Plan for Journalist Safety, but which is not evident from the small number of prosecutions documented in this report. By the end of March 2026, the PPS should put in place a monitoring system for cases involving violence and threats against journalists and provide progress reports to the Media Safety Group chaired by the Minister for Justice.

Home protection

The Northern Ireland Office and Department of Justice should review the eligibility criteria and ensure appropriate funding for the Home Protection Scheme, or devise a new bespoke scheme, which can provide and fund appropriate security measures at the homes of journalists who are at significant risk of violent attack. They should commit to publishing the findings of that review and introduce the necessary changes no later than the end of 2026.

Police training

New PSNI guidance should be developed on the protection of journalists during public order situations no later than the end of March 2026. PSNI officers should receive specific training in how to ensure appropriate access for, as well as the safety of the media during protests and public order situations. This training should be developed in consultation with the NUJ and affected journalists.

PSNI officers should receive specific training on delivering notices of threats to life to journalists. This should include how to accurately complete TM1 forms, the delivery of the forms, consideration of security measures, next steps by police, and ensuring ongoing communication with affected journalists.

Investigation of the murder of Martin O’Hagan

The PSNI should pursue new evidential opportunities in its investigation of the 2001 murder of Martin O’Hagan with a view to securing prosecutions against all those suspected to be responsible.

The Police Ombudsman should publish its review into the police investigation of the murder of Martin O’Hagan.

Should the Police Ombudsman’s investigation find serious failings or wrongdoing by the police amounting to possible violations of the European Convention on Human Rights, the UK government should establish an independent public inquiry into the circumstances of the case.

Crimestoppers

Crimestoppers should review the operation of their telephone and online reporting mechanisms to ensure they are not being abused as a means of making threats.

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OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD?

Threats and violence against journalists in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is the most dangerous place in the UK to be a journalist.

Journalists get death threats, bomb threats, rape threats. They are told they will be shot or stabbed. Their names, with gun crosshairs, appear in street graffiti.

They also face physical attacks – their equipment damaged, petrol bombs thrown at their cars, pipe bombs left close to their homes.

Some live behind bulletproof doors and windows – and fear they will be killed for doing their job.

Two journalists have been killed.

In this major report, Amnesty International's research shows there have been at least 71 threats or attacks on journalists in Northern Ireland since the start of 2019.

The threats come primarily from armed paramilitaries and organised crime groups. Most go unprosecuted and unpunished. Other cases are not reported. Many journalists feel unprotected.

The report highlights the state's duty under international human rights law to uphold the right to freedom of expression and press freedom. It makes comprehensive recommendations for changes to the police and government response to ensure this duty is fulfilled and journalists are protected.

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