

Northern Ireland Council Defies Legal Advice to Support Palestine Action Protesters

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Derry City and Strabane District Council has voted to support a motion calling for charges to be dropped against individuals arrested for backing Palestine Action, despite clear legal warnings from senior officials. The decision makes it one of the first local authorities in the United Kingdom (UK) to formally challenge the recent proscription of the group under terrorism legislation.

Palestine Action was designated a terrorist organisation by the UK Government earlier this month, following a break-in at a Royal Air Force (RAF) base. The proscription, enacted under the Terrorism Act, means that public expressions of support, such as carrying placards or banners, can now result in arrest and prosecution. Dozens have already been detained, including elderly demonstrators such as an 81-year-old former magistrate and a female vicar.

Demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine Action were held across the UK last weekend, with more than 60 arrests recorded in cities including London, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Bristol. In Westminster, the Metropolitan Police confirmed that 55 individuals were detained on suspicion of terrorism offences during a protest.

The motion passed by Derry and Strabane Council called on the Government to drop charges against those arrested and also urged Westminster to lift the ban on the group. However, city solicitor Philip Kingston and chief executive John Kelpie advised councillors that the call to end prosecutions “must come out” of the motion, stating it was beyond the council’s legal remit.

Despite the warning, Sinn Féin Mayor Ruairí McHugh allowed the motion to proceed in full. It passed with the backing of Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), People Before Profit, and some independents. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) voted against, with Níree McMorris labelling the council’s move “absurd.”

People Before Profit councillor Shaun Harkin, who proposed the motion, condemned the Government for its response to pro-Palestinian protests

and described the use of anti-terror legislation as “ridiculous.” He accused ministers of being “complicit” in the Gaza conflict and warned they would “reap the whirlwind.”

From a centre-right perspective, the council’s decision raises serious concerns about the politicisation of local government and the undermining of national security laws. Ignoring legal advice in favour of symbolic gestures risks creating dangerous precedents and could strain public trust in lawful democratic governance.