

Introduction

Background

Bobby Storey died in England on 21 June 2020. His funeral was held in Belfast on 30 June, during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Hundreds of mourners attended to pay their respects to a senior Sinn Féin member who was seen by many as an important figure in bringing hard-line Republicans round to the Northern Ireland peace process.

On behalf of those who worked on this report, we send our condolences to all those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic.

Funerals in Northern Ireland typically draw huge numbers of mourners, all wanting to pay their respects to the dead and to comfort family and friends. But, in a time of COVID-19, such gatherings have had to be restricted for the sake of public health.

Because of Mr Storey's prominence in the Republican community, and the crowds expected at his funeral, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and funeral organisers talked beforehand. The PSNI was initially concerned that some of the mourners might perform a Paramilitary-style show of strength. This would have significant political and community ramifications throughout Northern Ireland. The organisers later allayed these concerns in conversations with the PSNI.

The PSNI knew before the funeral that many people, including politicians, were taking a keen interest in the policing on the day. The service was concerned about a loss of support for the PSNI if action wasn't taken against any mourners who breached the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Sinn Féin members, including its President and Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly (MLAs), attended Mr Storey's funeral. Large numbers of mourners lined the route and followed the cortège.

Immediately after the funeral, there was anger from the public and other politicians. They questioned the actions of MLAs, who appealed to the public to adhere to the Regulations during the pandemic and then appeared to have contravened the very rules they had helped set.

The PSNI responded to the criticism by opening an investigation into the potential breaches of the Regulations. Later, a senior investigator from a police force in England was appointed to provide independent oversight. This also made sure that there was no perceived conflict of interest in the PSNI effectively investigating members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), the independent body that is responsible for its oversight.

Several MPs wrote to the PSNI Chief Constable straight after the funeral. They asked what the PSNI was going to do about breaches of the Regulations at the funeral. Many referred to the deputy First Minister.

One MP asked:

- Why there was no evidence of PSNI presence at the funeral?
- Was any attempt made to intervene to limit crowds gathering?

Another MP commented on publicly available photographic evidence of people breaching the Regulations. They wanted to know about enforcement steps, because “the public expect the law to be applied equally across all circumstances regardless of the status of those that partake in the action”.