# Belfast’s city centre buzzes with protests and shoppers despite retail challenges



Belfast was teeming with life during my recent visit to the city centre, marked by an intriguing interplay of bustling shopping, vibrant protests, and a certain nostalgic charm. Several Saturdays ago, I embarked on a shopping trip—a rare excursion prompted by my wife's insistence that my wardrobe needed a refresh, beyond the concert tees that have long dominated my attire.

Accompanied by our eldest son, who appeared eager to update his own closet without dipping into his pocket, we set out, with the understanding that our adventure would include at least one coffee stop. The experience proved to be a tapestry of mixed emotions, ultimately enjoyable, yet layered with reflections on the city’s current climate.

Barely into our trip, the first of many marches came into view while we enjoyed our coffee. The city was alive with a series of protests: a trade union rally, a demonstration highlighting the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and a march advocating for more affordable childcare in Northern Ireland. Brendan Mulgrew remarked that such vibrant civic engagement gives the city a sense of life and energy, actively connecting local concerns with global issues.

Protests, while a sight one might expect in any urban centre, appear to be particularly salient in Belfast, giving the impression of a city more in touch with activism than many others. Yet this sense of energy is tempered by visible challenges; as we navigated through Royal Avenue, a striking number of retail units stood empty, adorned instead with signs of charity shops or bargain outlets. Ann Street, once vibrant with the likes of Caroline Music and Eason’s bookshop, now reflects a shift accompanied by a sense of loss. This shift, however, does not negate the presence of interesting retail options in the city, which boasts a diversity of chains, independents, and hospitality venues.

A thriving urban environment requires not merely a blend of shops but a holistic array of services and experiences that cater to families and visitors alike. Previously, the Northern Ireland Executive had initiated a High Street Taskforce to address such issues, driving extensive public consultations under the leadership of Retail NI’s chief executive, Glyn Roberts. Unfortunately, this process stagnated by December 2021, with little progress or policy enthusiasm since then. The importance of revitalising city centres is crucial; they are essential contributors to local economies through rates income and job creation.

As we continued our journey, we encountered an array of buskers, engaging in friendly competition for attention. Among them, a particularly talented guitarist emulating Rory Gallagher drew our interest, while an entertainer in Cornmarket captured our attention with daring acts of sword swallowing and fire breathing. With bags full of purchases, we rounded off our outing at a quaint bookshop before enjoying a light lunch—much more akin to my idea of a fulfilling Saturday.

Despite the ongoing vibrancy, recent events in Belfast remind us of the fragile balance between civic engagement and public safety. In early August 2024, anti-immigration protests turned violent, resulting in extensive damage to property and heightened police presence in the city. Such unrest has raised concerns not only about safety but also about the economic repercussions for local businesses, especially during peak tourist seasons, as the Belfast Chamber noted in August. The tension stirred by these protests underscores the need for constructive dialogue and community resilience.

Yet amidst these challenges, the city remains a hub of activity, drawing tourists keen on discovering its historic charm and modern allure. On the very day of my city exploration, Belfast welcomed a barrage of tourists eager to explore local sites, reflecting the city’s potential as a must-visit destination. Looking ahead, with notable policy interventions and community engagement, Belfast could well reinforce its status as a vibrant epicentre of culture and commerce.

As I prepare to hop over to Manchester for a fleeting visit to see Bruce Springsteen, I reflect on the eclectic and dynamic atmosphere of Belfast, one which possesses the potential for rebirth and steady growth if given the right support.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
2. Paragraph 6.
3. Paragraph 6.
4. Paragraph 6.
5. Paragraph 6.
6. Paragraph 6.
7. Paragraphs 2, 6.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/business/clothes-shopping-street-protests-coffee-shops-and-misty-eyed-nostalgia-all-on-a-belfast-saturday-CSAXOEIDJBD4HN5UNBCRSAZRSI/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/belfast-businesses-closing-amid-planned-city-centre-protests-D3UF2UYAZ5A53CPYJNUGUECUWY/> - Several businesses in Belfast city centre closed early or remained shut on August 9, 2024, due to planned protests. The Belfast Chamber criticized the impact of these protests on local businesses, highlighting the challenges faced during peak tourism season. Restaurants, opticians, and other establishments adjusted their operations to ensure the safety of staff and customers amid the unrest.
3. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/businesses-and-cars-set-on-fire-after-belfast-anti-immigration-protests-turn-violent-2EMHHXQTXZKTFFPU5JBD4QGVIU/> - In early August 2024, anti-immigration protests in south Belfast escalated into violence, resulting in businesses and cars being set on fire. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) maintained a presence in the Donegall Road area as firefighters responded to multiple blazes. The unrest led to significant property damage and raised concerns about public safety in the city.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm2n0lxjmrzo> - On August 9, 2024, over 1,000 anti-racism protesters gathered at Belfast City Hall to oppose an anti-immigration protest. The demonstration concluded peacefully, with both groups dispersing without major incidents. However, prior to the protests, sporadic violence had occurred across the city, leading to targeted attacks on homes and businesses. A significant police presence was maintained to ensure public safety during the events.
5. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2024/08/03/riot-police-separate-protest-groups-at-belfast-demonstration/> - On August 3, 2024, riot police intervened to separate anti-immigration and anti-racism protesters in Belfast city centre. The confrontation involved the throwing of fireworks and other missiles. The anti-Islamic demonstration moved towards the university area, where clashes occurred with residents of the Lower Ormeau area. The PSNI treated reports of criminal damage as hate crimes and made two arrests during the unrest.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/protestors-against-the-war-in-gaza-block-belfast-city-centre-road-at-rush-hour-in-previously-unplanned-action-KJXHYJNXXZCTVG4W5LPOSD6CMY/> - On October 23, 2024, approximately 40 protesters blocked a main road outside Belfast City Hall during rush hour to protest against the destruction in Gaza. The unplanned action lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. The protesters expressed their anger over the situation in Gaza and felt that traditional demonstrations were insufficient, prompting them to take direct action.
7. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/loyalist-protests-crippling-belfasts-st-georges-market/29041540.html> - Loyalist protests in Belfast have significantly impacted St George's Market, leading to a decline in footfall and sales for traders. The protests, which began in early January, have deterred shoppers, with some stallholders reporting substantial losses. The market, usually bustling with activity, has seen a noticeable decrease in visitors, affecting the livelihoods of those who depend on its success.