

School bullies 'target RNLI crew's children over migrants'

Emma Yeomans

RNLI volunteers have been "accosted" in supermarkets and their children allegedly bullied at school as anti-migrant protesters become increasingly hostile to the charity's rescues in the English Channel.

A Portsmouth lifeboat crew leader said the children of two crew members had been harassed by fellow pupils because of their fathers' volunteer work. In an email to a councillor, he also said volunteers had been confronted while shopping and in pubs.

The lifeboat service has faced years of escalating criticism because it responds to coastguard callouts to assist small boats in distress as they attempt to cross the Channel.

A lifeboat crew was trapped in its boathouse for two hours during an anti-migrant protest last month at Eastney harbour led by Daniel Thomas, the far-right activist who goes by the name Danny Tommo. RNLI crews from other stations were tasked with ensuring the safety of protesters who entered the sea, providing them with warming blankets and monitoring them in case any got into difficulty.

Images showing the faces of RNLI volunteers involved in the protest and the rescue of a migrant boat that had spent 30 hours at sea were circulated online alongside calls to identify them. One widely-shared post on X urged people to "get their family".

The Portsmouth crew member said abuse escalated after the Eastney protest. Poole Old Lifeboat Museum was closed because of abuse directed at volunteers and Portsmouth lifeboat station was taken off service, leaving the city without a lifeboat.

He said: "Crew have had their names published on the internet, we've had spotters hanging around the station and suspicious vehicles parking up when we go out on training. We've had numerous messages left at the station.

"Perhaps the worst is the personal abuse we've had in the city. Crew members have been accosted in yacht clubs, pubs, and even the Co-op. The children of two of my crew have been bullied in school because their dad is in the RNLI. Some crew have been called cowards and traitors to their faces."

An RNLI volunteer in New Quay, Wales, had his car vandalised in an attack believed to be linked to protests.

The RNLI in Poole, Dorset, has filed a planning application for a rebuilt entrance to its lifeboat support centre after unauthorised people got in. The identities and motives of the intruders have not been made public.

Portsmouth city council passed a motion condemning the abuse and seeking to award Portsmouth lifeboat station the freedom of the city in recognition of volunteers' service.

It said: "At the heart of that service is a simple and enduring principle: when somebody is in danger at sea, you go to their aid. Those who answer the call to save a life should not be asked to judge whose life is worthy of saving."

All Reform councillors voted against the motion. Emily Strudwick, the Reform group leader, said nobody should face threats but residents opposing the RNLI's work were "entitled to express that view".

Migrant boats in the Channel account for 1.7 per cent of RNLI callouts and of the 41,472 people who crossed in 2025, only 2,353, or 5.7 per cent, were rescued by the RNLI.

The RNLI responds to small boats only when tasked by the coastguard, which co-ordinates with Border Force.

Peter Sparkes, the charity's chief executive, said: "The RNLI's people represent the very best in our society, they selflessly give up their time to keep others safe. Yet they and their families are being threatened by those who would hide behind a balaclava or a keyboard. Their action, in contrast, is wholly unacceptable in a civilised society."