



Policing the riots

Police Federation of England and Wales response and recommendations

About us

The Police Federation of England and Wales is the representative body and the voice of over 138,000 members of the police service below the rank of superintendent.

Established by statute, we have a dual responsibility: firstly, for the welfare of officers; and secondly, for the provision of an efficient police service. It is in this capacity that we are submitting our recommendations.

Executive Summary

The Police Federation welcomes the opportunity to make recommendations to HMIC on the policing challenges presented by the August riots and the implications for future public order scenarios.

In recent months the tactics and methods deployed by officers both in command and on the ground have been subject to intense media and political scrutiny with allegations that the police response was not fast enough and often too soft.

The Police Federation of England and Wales Operational Policing Sub-Committee held an emergency session. The session brought together Federated officers from across the country from forces who were most affected to analyse and discuss the policing response to the disorder during August.

The events were analysed hour-by-hour from the shooting of Mark Duggan through the disorder as it broke out around the country to the final quelling of the disorder. Key themes and recommendations have been identified in brief and broken down into reporting headings.

Command

Mobilisation Plan

- The initial phases of the disorder in Tottenham highlighted several resilience issues that were to become common place (in London) throughout the ensuing violence.
- The policing style that has been adopted in London was possibly not helped by a Tottenham Borough command team that was still relatively new and may not have fully comprehended the potential for disorder that existed a number of days after the Duggan incident.

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- Furthermore the Metropolitan Force Mobilisation Plan was significantly hampered because there were insufficient public order trained officers on duty on Boroughs to meet the demand.
- Senior ranks were moved into areas to take charge often without having the local knowledge of the area and were therefore not fully aware of how their tactics would play out in specific areas.
- This was less of a problem in other English cities as they were on alert as a result of the disturbances in London.
- Post-riot analysis has demonstrated that part of the reason the police were able to respond in North London when the violence initially escalated was due to public order police (including mounted officers) who were fortuitously available for recall to the area having recently been dismissed from a football match at a nearby stadium. This raised the question of how well Tottenham officers would have coped without this opportune support.
- As the disorder spread, and it became clear more officers were required, chief officers put in personal requests to neighbouring forces for assistance. These personal requests circumvented normal mobilisation procedures. Although these extra officers helped in the short term the direct consequence of their dispatch was the disruption of the formal mobilisation plan once it was called into effect.
- Due to communication failures officers kept arriving at areas where the disorder had already been dispersed and moved on. The spontaneous nature of the disorder, facilitated in part by social media, meant police were always approximately half an hour behind the rioters.
- As a result of this analysis the PFEW Operational Policing Sub-committee would recommend an urgent review of the public order resources available to police forces in metropolitan areas and provincial forces.
- The Police National Information Co-ordination Centre (PNICC) did not work efficiently in the first 48 hours of the disturbances. During the 'limbo' period whilst the disorder was localised to London PNICC failed to co-ordinate strategy however, once the violence went national PNICC came into effect and worked as planned.
- However PNICC did encounter several key interoperability issues as the mutual aid operation mobilised.
 1. Disparate shift patterns caused significant delays in mobilising forces. Due to shift monitoring processes forces often did not know how many officers they had on or off shift (a problem exacerbated by earlier bypasses of the normal mobilisation procedures).
 2. Significant compatibility issues of communication technology between forces, and the overload of the Airwave radio system (covered in more detail under Communication section) slowed the process down immensely.
 3. Significant equipment issues presented problems for the mobilisation plan. Mutual aid officers were often dispatched without enough equipment. They therefore could not be mobilised in a public order capacity as all the riot gear was in use.
- There were no contingency plans for the mutual aid officers once they arrived in terms of accommodation, catering and equipment.
- Command structures were also ad-hoc. Mutual aid officers in some instances blended into the public order strategy seamlessly whilst in other areas they were left entirely directionless.
- The PFEW recommends that the public order manual (revised after the G20 protests) be revisited and reviewed in the light of spontaneous riotous behaviour and future mutual aid interoperability.

Policing Style

- Community links in the affected areas were often 'out of date' with many of the main links being based on relationships that may not be relevant to the community anymore.
- This created a fundamental intelligence problem. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many officers were aware of the levels of 'disenfranchisement' and the potential for a public order incident however they had very little specific intelligence to go on. When the disorder then erupted it was difficult to call upon community links that may have been able to calm the situation.
- The PFEW recommends that this be reviewed as a matter of urgency, for not only will this aid in managing any future disturbances it will assist with a swift recovery from August's events and build up better community relations where tensions may exist .
- The Sub-Committee also identified that the above problem was exacerbated by the recent changes in the style of UK policing and the re-focus of intelligence resources.
- The emphasis on the expansion of Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) over the last decade whilst beneficial in many respects has led to a cultural shift in the British policing style.
- Young in service officers are often assigned to NPTs (a non-confrontational role); this has led to a disparity between officers that are face to face with the community and the officers that do the majority of the reactive role (response teams).
- Previously there was more cohesion between the two strands of policing. The PFEW notes that this has had fundamental effect on the criminal's perception of the police. The 'softly-softly' approach has allowed gang culture to ferment unopposed and as such criminal elements have lost 'respect' for the local officers due to a lack of confrontation and positive initiatives designed to stamp out anti-social behaviour.
- This PFEW recommends an urgent review of the relationship between response teams and NPTs with a view to a more joined-up approach.
- A further intelligence problem identified during the analysis was the increased diversions of intelligence resources post the terrorist activities of 9/11 and later the attack on the London transport network on 7/7.
- The increased emphasis on combating Islamic extremism both at home and abroad, whilst immensely important to national security, has to some extent diverted the intelligence focus away from other forms of home grown extremism and organised crime.
- Furthermore the PFEW has identified potential problems for future mutual aid and national public order scenarios which may present itself with the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) where local accountability will be outweighed against a National requirement to deploy officers during a major disorder.

Powers

- The Operational Policing Sub-Committee identified the potential legislative issues that may affect the interoperability of Scottish officers on mutual aid to England and Wales. Although officers can be 'sworn in' to assist officers as with previous events across borders.

- At this stage the Operational Policing Sub-Committee has not identified any additional powers that would be required to police future public order scenarios. Those outlined in the Home Office consultation already exist in practice and are not deemed necessary. It is not the powers of arrest that is the concern, it is the resources to make those arrests and the ability to detain those individuals who have been arrested and the political backing to make arrests in good faith that is of chief concern.
- Of key concern is the inconsistency of political and media commentary during public order incidents. Officers have often felt “damned if they do and damned if they don’t”.
- Public order strategy was heavily criticised after the G8 and G20 protests and the Student Riots as being ‘too tough’. As many as 50 officers were investigated under caution following the G20 protests. The political establishment was also heavily critical of police ‘heavy handedness’. This is in direct contradiction to the criticisms that were levelled against the police during and following the August riots.
- A direct consequence has been a muddled approach to public order training in subsequent years where erring on the side of caution has become the norm during public order scenarios. This approach led to accusations of ‘timidity’ and allowing rioters to “run amok”.
- The PFEW recommends an immediate review of the standards and responses expected of officers during such circumstances so that commanders can operate in the confidence that their tactics will not be immediately critiqued.
- Whilst the committee recognises the importance of accountability it is also extremely important that officers can discharge their duties in the knowledge that they will be supported as a default position and in the knowledge there will be no political interference to what is a policing function.

Threats to Service

- The Operational Policing Sub-committee has identified several key issues that may present a threat to the operational efficiency of policing similar public order scenarios.
- The Home Office budget cut to policing will undoubtedly affect the number of officers available for any future disorder. HMIC have forecast an estimated reduction of 16,200 warranted officers across England and Wales by 2015.
- With the budgetary burden moving increasingly onto Local Authority precepts under the scrutiny and administration of PCCs the PFEW envisions potential tensions in the mobilisation of mutual aid.
- This Sub-Committee has concerns over potential interoperability problems presented by the introduction of PCCs during a national public order incident. As was highlighted in earlier points some chief officers bypassed normal mobilisation procedures, PCCs could add another layer of confusion during the implementation of any mobilisation strategy. Inevitably PCCs will be focused on local security and may be reticent (and therefore a hindrance) to provide mutual aid to other forces at the risk of a reduction in numbers in their own area.
- The August disorder demonstrated in practice the importance of the voluntary functions in the police service. Many of the auxiliary roles occupied by police officers are voluntary, and this is reflected in their terms and conditions. The Operational Policing Sub-committee highlighted concerns that changes in officers’ terms and conditions may lead to unwillingness to take on these vital roles.

- Budgetary considerations are already leading to equipment and training shortages. The committee highlighted the concern that this problem may only get worse throughout the continued funding reductions.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that public order training has been 'diluted' in certain areas and training days removed from the normal shift patterns. This is in part due to the increasing costs of the training as the price of equipment has inflated. This has led to a skills base deficit that meant some officers were not at full readiness when the violence broke out.
- The lack of suitable equipment meant many public order qualified officers were not mobilised to their full capacity. It also led to unacceptable scenarios where officers were being transported to crime scenes in non-issue vehicles, such as school busses.
- Since 1997 police forces have been subject to the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and as such Chief Officers, as the employers, have to fulfil statutory obligations in relation to the health, safety and welfare of their employees. Of particular interest to the PFEW during the riots were the welfare of the officers; accommodation and catering; equipment failures including Airwave, transport and personal protective equipment; and training. These will be the subject of a further investigation.

Federation Role

- The PFEW played an important role in the co-ordination of the policing response and the welfare of the officers involved. PFEW can also assist in the preparation for any pre-planned or spontaneous event. The Federation has shown that engagement can alleviate any difficulties that arise and support not only those officers on the ground but those in more senior roles where difficult decisions have to be made to ensure the safety of all police officers and staff. There were a number of issues relevant to deployments during the August riots in terms of the expected long hours worked by rank and file and the interpretation of police regulations. At the heart of this the Federation is able to coordinate its resources to support duty management teams and other back office functions in order that most, if not all, of the officers are working to the plan prepared by the Gold group.
- The PFEW notes concerns raised on the constraints around the deployment of flexible working officers who remained in force dealing with everyday policing business. This had a particular impact on female officers due to childcare/flexible working arrangements.

Communications

- Social Media played a significant role in the spontaneous nature of the August disorder. Closed communications channels like Blackberry Messenger and open public channels like Twitter allowed rioters to muster, co-ordinate and perpetuate misinformation with unprecedented rapidity. Conventional mobile communications technology (e.g. Mobile Phones) also played a significant part in co-ordinating the criminality. Social media is still a relatively new method of communicating and sharing information and it will take time for police responses to adapt.
- However, monitoring social networks provided essential intelligence that was not, and would not, have been available through conventional methods. As was highlighted earlier there was already a significant intelligence deficit before the disorder and monitoring social media communications was one of the only intelligence sources available.

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- There were significant local technical difficulties with the (London) Airwave network that were compounded by force equipment compatibility issues. This represents a significant communications failure that was to hugely influence the strategic co-ordination of the policing response. This was not as significant an issue in other English cities.
- A direct consequence of communication failures was the use of unofficial channels. Officers on the ground and in command resorted, in the majority, to the use of personal mobile phones to co-ordinate a response.
- The PFEW recommends an immediate review of communication procedures during a national crisis.

Lessons learnt

- It has to be recognised that all those officers involved during the event upheld the proud traditions of Policing in the UK. The feedback from those officers is of significant importance so the police service can move forward, share best practice and learn from any mistakes that were made. A thorough grassroots debrief has begun and it must take account of those officers' experiences of the situations that they faced. Within the Metropolitan Police Federation a survey is underway which will hopefully assist with collating and analysing any positive or negative feedback. In addition West Midlands Police produced a booklet that outlined how officers felt during the riots.

IPCC

- The PFEW request that the media protocols with the IPCC are urgently reviewed with ACPO. In the early stages following the death of Mr Duggan mixed messages were sent out which caused alarm and distress to the family and friends of Mark Duggan and to the police officers involved. It is incumbent on a senior police officer to prepare an early press release in company with all interested parties at a Gold group meeting in order that the service and the persons involved are prepared for any media interest that would follow.

If you require any further information on our submission please contact the Communications Department at the Police Federation on 01372 352071 or via email: media@polfed.org