

Engagement plans to address public disorder linked to protests

Community engagement and outreach following serious disorder in central Bristol, to communicate about the ongoing policing approaches to protest.

First published
13 August 2024

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Organisational Prevention
Topic	Community engagement Operational policing
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Region	South West
Partners	Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	March 2021
Completion date	April 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Communities Workforce

Aim

- To build understanding and awareness of operational policing activity relating to protest and public order operations, including planning, operational delivery, and media engagement.
- To improve the transparency around policing protests through accurate storytelling and provide greater insight into planning considerations and decision-making around police powers.

Intended outcome

- To build trust and confidence in policing of protests by providing greater insight into planning considerations, decision making and the objectives that are set.

Description

Background

Following serious disorder in central Bristol on 21 March 2021, tensions in the city were heightened and further protests were held. One of the protests escalated in the later hours of the evening, several individuals turned violent, and police vehicles were set on fire. This protest was focused on a police station, there was a high level of media presence and officers used shields. A second protest the following week drew allegations of heavy-handed police tactics, particularly relating to a vigil held for Sarah Everard on College Green.

Perception of policing

The perception of policing by local media and partners had become more negative following these protests. In the media, the main focus was on the level of police force used and whether it was justified. Partners, such as local MPs, had also began to feel cautious about supporting the police force due to the bad press they were receiving.

As a result, a superintendent spoke to various news outlets to discuss the police's justification on the level of power used. It was here that they realised the media and the public were not aware of the police's full role in protests and were basing opinions off situations where higher levels of force were used. It was also clear that partners and the public did not understand the escalation process during protests and how police decide when to change their tactics.

To address this, the superintendent decided to talk through the entire policing protest process with partners, including the media. This ensured the public and partners were seeing the full picture, such as:

- assisting protests
- parading around the city
- ensuring the safety of protesters

Following this, the mayor and city partners wrote a public letter supporting the police force and expressing confidence in the police process.

The superintendent developed further links between partners, including MPs, by explaining the escalation process during public order policing. This was beneficial as it gave MPs the confidence to respond to their constituents and explain police practice. Being transparent about their policing protest helps to reassure partners and enforce the legitimacy of public order policing procedures.

Engagement plan

With further protests planned for the weeks ahead, an engagement plan was developed. Proactive communication with identified stakeholders and partners was a key part of that. This engagement plan saw proactive communication with this group, to inform them of:

- when a policing operation was being mobilised
- the information and intelligence received relating to the operation
- planning considerations

Email updates

The information was shared in email updates and covered detail such as:

- protest route and cause
- level of engagement from the protest group
- number of protesters anticipated
- decisions on what uniform officers would be wearing (relating to the risk assessment)
- what specialist resources would be included in the operation and why (including a police liaison team, evidence gathering team, forward intelligence officer team, horses, dogs, drone etc)
- command structure in place
- notification to service providers and businesses operating within the protest route footprint (to assist them in advising staff and customers on related access issues if roads were to be closed)

This messaging built awareness and understanding of what was expected on the day and how the police were seeking to facilitate protest, but maintain order and safety in the city. By being able to explain the rationale being applied to decisions, including uniform deployed and where or when specialist resources would be actively deployed or held in reserve, we were able to build confidence in the policing operation by illustrating how considered such decisions are.

Daily updates

The daily updates through the planning stages were then complimented by regular updates on the day of the protest, providing commentary on:

- the numbers of people present
- the general tone of the protest
- any associated policing challenges
- command decisions made
- incidents during the protest, including arrests but also occasions where offences had been identified but no intervention delivered

This series of email updates effectively told 'the story' of the protest and policing operation as it played out. These messages were received and read by some recipients on the day but were still of value for others as they provided a retrospective and time stamped account of what the police had done and why.

Engaging with businesses

The force also directly message businesses to inform them of protest and policing operations. They communicate with local businesses through the business improvement district, a group of businesses who receive a police update monthly.

A regular police update will include police activity that has taken place in the past month to improve things in the city centre. It also includes content to share awareness of protests taking place near the businesses, and how they might impact their business operations. For example, the force will warn businesses about any bus route cancellations and road closures to ensure their staff can still get to work or so they can rearrange deliveries. This update also acts as reassurance to businesses that officers are attending the event and allows them to prepare accordingly.

Police briefings

This engagement method was further complemented by providing an opportunity for gaining even greater insight for some members of the local partnership. This included independent advisory groups (IAG) members and elected officials attending police briefings to see and hear the information provided to officers and steps taken to ensure proportionate policing of the protest. On another occasion, one of Bristol's MPs attended the silver command suite and observed the oversight of the policing operation.

To achieve the necessary level of insight through the engagement, it was tasked to an officer with relevant knowledge and understanding of Bristol, the local partnership network and public order policing operations. This ensured that the insight provided was more than would have been available through media channels but did not compromise delivery of the operation.

Overall impact

Positive feedback was received, both during the operation from those who were monitoring 'live time' and those who picked up the messages subsequently.

After this plan was put in place, there was a protest in central Bristol that turned violent in the early hours of the morning. The disruptive group particularly targeted police officers and a dispersal authority was granted to de-escalate the situation. During this operation, the community engagement plan was in place and updates were sent out throughout to media and partners

explaining why the dispersal authority and arrests were necessary.

The next morning, rather than focusing on the level of police powers used, the media headlines were centred around the seven arrests that took place because of the criminal behaviour. As the rationale for police action had been provided in advance, it was better understood and widely supported by the key partners and stakeholders, like MPs, who commended the force for their work that evening.

Learning

- This approach did not bring the same level of benefit when the updates were provided by an officer with insufficient knowledge and experience of public order policing and community engagement. It is important to use the right person to provide the inputs.
- When choosing the correct person to provide the inputs, it is valuable to have someone at command level. The chosen individual needs to understand the community makeup and the needs of the audience.
- It is important to provide as much details as possible when providing the updates, for example, if the operation is supported by a dog handler. The idea is to share the story accurately and explain how the operation has been planned and prepared for.
- It is also important that the individual chosen to provide updates can commit to that role during the operation, and not be distracted/involved in the practical side of the operation.
- This high level of community engagement and regular updates should be reserved for high level events that attract media attention.
- It is also helpful for the updates to be time and date stamped so if there are any escalations the time frame is clear.

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Tags

Community engagement Public order Public safety