



Water Cannon Briefing Paper

Would water cannon have stopped the disorder entirely?

Based on the scale and type of disorder witnessed on the streets of Merseyside I do not believe that the deployment of water cannon would have prevented or stopped the disorder entirely.

Following the shooting of Mark Duggan in London on 4th August 2011 the Force began to take preparatory planning action to bolster existing contingency arrangements in order to deal with any potential public order incidents. As such additional governance and public order resources were made available.

At the first clear sign of developing disorder, Merseyside Police commenced a mobilisation of Police Support Units to the Toxteth area of the city. Supported by a Gold strategy the operational objectives were focused upon the proactive dispersal of groups in that area. In light of both the strategic intention and the agreed tactical objectives, it is highly unlikely that commanders would have sought (or indeed been granted) the authority to deploy water cannon had this asset been available.

Ultimately Merseyside Police officers faced serious disorder involving in excess of 200 active participants. At this stage the use of water cannon may have been a valid tactical option for Police commanders to consider, however the deployment of any tactical option must be considered in light of the necessity for the Police to maximise community cohesion throughout and following an incident. In any area that has a history of social unrest or community concerns over police legitimacy, the deployment of a tactic which could be so closely associated with protracted political disorder in Northern Ireland or the suppression of political protest in Egypt, will have the potential to be significantly counter-productive, if deployed without careful consideration and management of the potential consequences.

Whilst I believe that the tactic should be available to commanders and may be of value in preventing or dealing with disorder in other situations, it is extremely unlikely that its use would have been called for, or sanctioned, during this particular period of disorder. There are no indications that the absence of this tactical option prolonged the policing operation or that water cannon would itself have resolved it.

If not entirely, to what extent could water cannon have reduced disorder, strengthen public protection or prevented injury to life and property?

The use of vehicle borne tactics in a disorder situation comes with a risk of collision with people. In addition, a lack of space for maneuverability could result in the device becoming stuck in one location. If this were to happen it is possible that this would then become the focus of any civil disobedience.

An interesting development within the 2011 Merseyside seat of disorder was the presence of the non-aggressive public whose self-appointed role was to film the Police activity on a variety of mobile devices. An important consideration for any public order commander is the facilitation of peaceful protest. While those filming were not protesting, they also took no part in the disorder. In view of the known factors following the deployment of water cannon, such as slips, trips and displacement of the water jets, it is felt that the deployment of this tactic in the circumstances experienced in Merseyside would have delivered a limited positive response.

The behaviour of the crowds involved in disorder during 2011, their consequential reaction having been subject to existing running line dispersal tactics, the geographic area of narrow terraced streets and the direction within existing doctrine that water cannon should be deployed in pairs, suggests it is highly unlikely that water cannon would have been considered a viable option within Merseyside at that time.

The use of water cannon as a tactic to prevent offenders reaching strategically vulnerable areas such as the city centre would have been an additional tactical option to consider. Clearly the impact of deploying water cannon on Merseyside, in such circumstances is untested, although it is likely that a deployment in such circumstances would have the potential to attract a crowd towards a vulnerable location, rather than the opposite desired effect.

Would other available weapons or tactics, such as firearms, baton rounds, TASER or CS Gas, conventional public order policing methods, or other tactics, such as containment, have been useful? If so, would they have been more or less useful than water cannon?

A strategic review of the tactics utilised during the disorder in Merseyside confirmed that existing public order tactics were successfully deployed. However it was recognised nationally that there were no effective and viable tactics for the deployment of firearms officers within a public disorder situation.

The introduction of Armed Support in Public Order and Armed Response in Public Order Police tactics now provides some additionality to the range of tactics available. Merseyside Police has updated its Strategic Threat and Harm Risk Assessment to recognise the risk from the lack of comprehensive firearms tactics deployable within public disorder situations and the issue has been raised through local and regional Public Order and Public Safety governance. Additionally, the force has a capability for the deployment of Attenuating Energy Projectiles in a public order environment.

At what point in the escalation of public disorder would water cannon be deployed? Would there be an intermediate step before the use of plastic baton rounds? What would be the level of authorisation?

In accordance with the current Disorder Model and if available, water cannon would be considered by public order commanders as a tactical option during a state of serious disorder. Consideration for deployment would be made in light of a broad range of factors, such as the available intelligence, the use of weapons or missiles by protestors, the local geography, the dynamics and profile of the crowd and inherent risks to the public, police and protestors. All available tactical options would be constantly reviewed and considered, through National Decision Model assessment, to ensure the proportionality of Police response. It would therefore be impossible to identify a pre-determined 'tipping point', however such a 'tipping point' would be considered and authorised by the tactical and strategic commanders, in light of all available information, during the event.

Authority for the deployment of water cannon is and should remain a decision for Chief Officers.

How would water cannon be used alongside other public order tactics?

It is likely that water cannon would be deployed in support of officers deployed on foot, who would have an objective to disperse, contain or arrest those involved in serious disorder. In some circumstances it is conceivable that water cannon may increase the safety of those officers, due to the range and physical impact of the equipment. However, it is also likely that the deployment of water cannon could prove to be problematic in the majority of those suburban conurbations within Merseyside, where serious disorder has previously occurred and where the potential for recurrence exists. Many such neighbourhoods contain large areas of Victorian social housing, with typically narrow streets resulting in a distinct lack of space for the manoeuvrability of large and heavy vehicles. As such, the likely potential effect would be the reduced mobility and tactical flexibility of PSU resources, together with the aforementioned potential to attract the attention of the crowd rather than encouraging it to disperse.

What are the implications for specialist training of officers and staff?

It is acknowledged that there will be an increased training commitment to deliver the skills needed for the roles directly associated with the use of the water cannon. In order to ensure that the current force public order capability is able to safely and effectively work alongside water cannon, further training would be required for all public order trained staff (operational officers and commanders), commensurate with our commitment to the Police National Mobilisation plan.

Having considered the potential benefits and implications of successfully deploying this tactic within Merseyside, the consequential additional training and maintenance of associated qualifications may be considered disproportionate to the risks. Additionally when dealing with multi-seated national disorder events, as seen during 2011 (and before), the local availability of national water cannon assets would naturally be limited. As such, there remains an overall question of value for money.

How many officers would be needed to protect the water cannon and in what formations?

The dynamic nature of a public disorder environment necessitates a coordinated multi-agency response, which includes the deployment of large numbers of public order trained Police officers. The addition of a high profile vehicle such as a water cannon would bring an additional dynamic to an already sensitive gathering of people.

During the disorder of 2011 Merseyside experienced a short-lived period of disorder compared to other locations nationally. Whilst a large number of police vehicle windscreens were smashed, they were replaced through existing procurement processes. This was successful due to a mainstream vehicle being used – Mercedes Benz transit van.

As already indicated, the inclusion of a specialist vehicle such as the water cannon may serve to act as a magnet for direct hostility from protestors. The deployment of one PSU (25 police officers) to form a protective circle around the vehicle, equipped with public order shields, may serve to minimise a direct attack on the vehicle but this is likely to be a short-term consideration.

In view of the topography of the locations within Merseyside it is less likely that the protection of the water cannon would be a prime consideration for the public order commander. Were it to become so, the drain on resources, given the pressure of police resources during any such local, regional or national event could be disproportionate to the benefit gained.

How would the use of water cannon affect the deployment of your officers both in terms of specific public order threat and the wider policing of the community?

Colleagues within Police Service of Northern Ireland have successfully deployed the water cannon as a tactic during public disorder for a number of years. The operational effectiveness of the device is not being questioned.

However, based on a number of considerations including the recent experience of 2011, the geography of the county of Merseyside, the sustained community intervention work of both Police and multi-agency partners to minimise any legacy from the 1980 Toxteth riots and a Strategic Threat, Harm and Risk Analysis, it is concluded that the use of a water cannon within Merseyside will deliver only minor positive outcomes at best. At worst the impact on the perception of our legitimacy could be significant and long lasting and would require intensive management.

In conclusion, whilst I believe that water cannon would have had very limited value during the serious disorder of 2011, given the particular operational and social context there are circumstances when its availability may, during significant disorder, deliver a tangible benefit and assist commanders in protecting life and property.