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TEMPORARY DEPUTY CHIEF CONSTABLE

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August 2014

WATER CANNONS

I write on behalf of the Chief Constable, George Hamilton in response to your request, dated 15 July 2014, regarding additional information on the use of Water Cannons in Northern Ireland.

As you will be aware, senior PSNI Commanders have already assisted CC David Shaw in providing our context, policy, procedure and, indeed, experiences of using the Somati RCV9000 Water Cannons in Northern Ireland. As such, I am conscious that this short articulation of issues, in response to your request, will only summarise a greater piece of engagement and consultation provided to David.

The provision for Policy, Procedure and Guidance relating to our Water Cannons is referenced nationally in Authorised Professional Practice - Public Order and the Association of Chief Police Officers Guidance on the Deployment and Use of Water Cannon. Similarly, our training programme utilises the National Police Public Order Training Curriculum Module E4 – Water Cannon in Public Order. As such, the criteria for use, tactics and authority levels for deployment and use of the Water Cannon are those identified by ACPO and the College of Policing legal and policy framework, the same as for England and Wales.

As the Water Cannon can only be used by officers suitably trained, and such officers are routinely deployed on other duties, the spontaneous deployment of this asset, without advance notice, is problematic.

Accordingly, the predominant method of deployment for the PSNI is within a pre-planned public order operation with cannons deployed to either a reserve, holding or forward location, depending on an assessment of 'immediacy' of use. In 2012/13 authorisation for deployment was granted 175 times with 17 uses, in 2013/14 142 authorisations resulted in 12 uses, these deployments related to anticipated serious disorder such as at contentious parades and the "Flag" disputes.

In our experience Water Cannons enhance the tactical options available to Police Commanders and are best utilised in support of, and supported by, other tactical options, such as Protected Officers and Attenuating Energy Projectiles (AEPs), [REDACTED] [REDACTED] The use of Water Cannon Tactics relating to Show of Force (the visible presentation of the cannons as part of continuing negotiation/communication with the crowd to facilitate a peaceful conclusion to the potential for disorder), Static Support (stationary position providing protection to cordon lines, Moving Support (measured advance to identified tactical objectives such as advancing cordon lines) and Withdrawal Support (measured withdrawal, protecting assets who are retreating), have all been demonstrated effectively within serious disorder in Northern Ireland. The most recent deployments have involved situations of serious disorder but also in 'diffusion' mode to assist in the dispersal of sit down protestors.

Routine operational configuration in Northern Ireland consists of two Water Cannons, crewed each by four officers, accompanied by three additional vehicles crewed each by four officers providing command and fill support. Cannons are routinely deployed in pairs to provide mutual support and immediate recovery capability in the event of a mechanical failure. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The purchase cost of each cannon in 2004 was £583,333 and the average cost of annual maintenance during the last twelve months per cannon was £11,698.

The Water Cannon is intended to be a less lethal use of force option and the method of delivery and use is intended to avoid causing serious or permanent injury. It would be our experience that the use of the Water Cannon results in few injuries, indeed, the Water Cannon does not have the emotional resonance associated with the use of AEPs and is regarded by our communities as a less aggressive policing response to serious disorder than AEPs. It is, however, important to remember that they are large vehicles and generally only suitable for deployment on main roads due to difficulty in manoeuvrability.

It is clear that the use of the Water Cannon can be effective in keeping those involved in serious disorder at a distance from the police lines, thus minimising the opportunity for officers to sustain injury from projectiles and direct strikes from violent offenders. Under Health and Safety legislation and associated guidance, the management approach by an employer for the hierarchy of controls which ends in the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is as follows:

- 1 eliminate hazard at source;
- 2 reduce hazard at source;

- 3 remove person from hazard;
- 4 contain hazard by enclosure;
- 5 reduce employee exposure;
- 6 PPE.

In this instance, the use of the Water Cannon assists in either eliminating the hazard, reducing the hazard or removing our personnel from the hazards; the hazards being the physical confrontation with violent offenders.

As always, if we can assist in any way with your deliberations, please do not hesitate to contact me.

ALISTAIR FINLAY

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