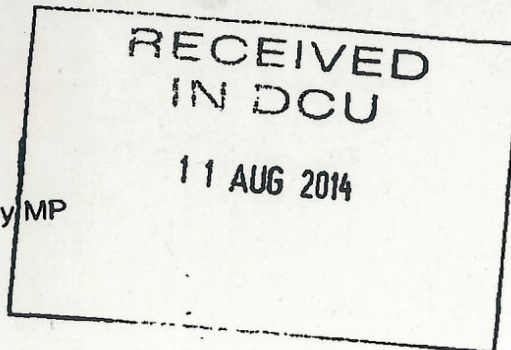




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Rt Hon Theresa May MP  
Home Secretary  
Home Office  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

4 August 2014

Dear Home Secretary

Thank you for your letter of the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2014 seeking my views on the potential application of water cannon in policing public order events. As you will be aware, the West Midlands force area saw disorder during the 2011 riots and the force has policed a number of large-scale EDL demonstrations as well as routinely managing smaller protests and weekly football fixtures.

Our approach to policing these events has evolved significantly in recent years, in line with national guidance, and partly in response to the experiences of 2011. The riots of that year were characterised in the West Midlands area by fast moving and fragmented groups of rioters, generally focussed on looting rather than a specific geographical objective, facilitated by social media and mobile communications. The scenario proved challenging with the tactical options practised at that time, which tended to be more focussed on the steady and methodical taking of ground or static defence of iconic/target locations. Since 2011, the emphasis of our public order training has shifted to the use of more dynamic and agile tactics and also encompasses the proportionate management of smaller protests/events, which form the vast majority of our work by volume.

A second significant development in our approach has been the increased emphasis on direct police engagement with protest organisers, community leaders and the protesters themselves. We work closely with the National Public Order Intelligence Unit and have strong relationships with local communities, both at a senior management and local neighbourhood level. This contact is extremely important in providing the force with early notification of local tensions or national issues that are likely to impact at a local level. In many cases, potential causes of protest are diffused through local engagement, and the influence of local community leaders can make outbreaks of violence far less likely. The use of Police Protest Liaison Officers and negotiators to improve communication with protesters during demonstrations has also been shown to be extremely effective in reducing tension and minimising the risk of disorder.

In the context of these trends in our approach to public order policing, I would have reservations regarding the deployment of water cannon in the force area. From a purely legal perspective, I do not see a difficulty with utilising water cannon as a potentially reasonable and proportionate use of force in certain circumstances. However, in our local context, I would question its utility in

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tackling the type of disorder the force is likely to face and also be concerned that the potential negative impact on community relations would outweigh any tactical advantage that might be gained.

On the issue of utility, as already described above, the trend appears to be towards more mobile and dispersed disorder flashpoints that necessitate a more dynamic tactical response. Water cannon would not be considered as a viable policing response in such circumstances owing to their somewhat limited mobility, complicated by the need to provide protection and support to the vehicle. Protests in the West Midlands force area in recent years have tended not to be focussed on particular iconic locations requiring static defence, where water cannon might have greater utility, and, unlike the situation in Northern Ireland where protesters can be emotionally committed on a particular route of protest, it would seem to be relatively straightforward for violent protesters to take an alternative route to by-pass the vehicle. In certain situations the force has made good use of fencing and specialised barrier equipment to assist in the tactical containment of demonstrations; providing a similar outcome to that which might be achieved through the use of water cannon without the associated cost, training implications and political impact.

In terms of the impact on community relations, it should be noted that the vast majority of protests are successfully managed through the use of local engagement both with organisers in the planning phase and through direct liaison with those taking part during the event. The force has worked hard over a number of years to develop strong relationships with community leaders and to establish a level of trust that is vital to carry out this work successfully. I have no doubt that any potential deployment of water cannon by the force would cause concern amongst local communities, being seen to go against the trends in our policing approach that I have described, and require a great deal of engagement to convince them of the legitimacy of tactic. I am concerned that this may have a detrimental impact on ability to work with community leaders to reduce tensions and minimise violence in the future.

I am grateful for this opportunity to comment on this important policy decision. For the reasons outlined, I would not be supportive of the purchase or use of water cannon by West Midlands Police at this time. I am very happy to continue to be part of the consultation process and to offer any assistance that I can in progressing the issue.

Yours sincerely



**Chris Sims**  
**Chief Constable**

copy: Chief Constable David Shaw (West Mercia Police)