

Sent by email:

The Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

14 January 2026

Dear Home Secretary,

Inspection of police forces' contributions to safety advisory groups: West Midlands Police

Further to my letter dated 23 December 2025, I write in connection with the inspection you commissioned on 31 October 2025 into the contributions police forces in England and Wales make to [safety advisory groups \(SAGs\)](#) and other bodies responsible for licensing high-profile public events.

Progress so far

In your letter of 27 November 2025, you asked that I rapidly consider information and [intelligence](#) in respect of the match assessment and categorisation produced by West Midlands Police (WMP) in advance of the Aston Villa v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture on 6 November 2025. We have prioritised this aspect of the inspection, and this letter provides you with an update. It does not constitute my final inspection report.

We have received approximately 200 relevant documents in total from WMP, Birmingham City Council, the [National Police Chiefs' Council's](#) UK Football Policing Unit and National Police Coordination Centre, and police in the Netherlands.

We have also carried out 20 interviews with significant people, including:

- the Chief Constable of WMP;
- the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner;
- several of the force's gold, silver and bronze commanders and other senior officers, all of whom played a role in planning the fixture;
- the Chair of Birmingham City Council's SAG;
- Lord Mann of Holbeck Moor, in his capacity as the Government's Independent Adviser on Antisemitism;
- the Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of Israel in London;
- the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for football policing;
- the Director of the UK Football Policing Unit;

- a representative of the Jewish Representative Council for Birmingham and West Midlands; and
- police commanders in the Netherlands, who were responsible for policing the Ajax v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture in Amsterdam in November 2024.

We have also reviewed video recordings and documentation from four police gold meetings held between 17 September and 17 October 2025, and two SAG meetings held on 7 and 16 October 2025.

We observed the Home Affairs Committee oral evidence sessions of 1 December 2025 and 6 January 2026. We have also reviewed additional material that the Committee requested from WMP on 9 December 2025.

Preliminary views: the Aston Villa v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture

I am now able to offer my preliminary views in respect of the match assessment and categorisation that WMP provided to Birmingham City Council's SAG. I do so in the context of widespread media reporting, some of which continues to – sometimes inaccurately – conflate elements of the evidence. In my assessment of the facts, I seek to provide as complete a picture as possible, separating out events clearly. I have confined my assessment to the specific matters under consideration, rather than straying into other territory. For example, I recognise there are significant concerns about elected officials attending the SAG. Additionally, questions have been raised about the nature and frequency of contact between the force and local politicians when it was preparing for the fixture. However, these concerns are outside the terms of reference for this part of our inspection. I will address them, and other similar matters, in more detail in my final report.

In offering these preliminary views, I wish to clarify that my role is that of an inspector concerned with police efficiency and effectiveness, not an investigator examining the conduct of individual officers. My inspections aren't carried out under the police conduct regime, or with all the checks, balances and protections the relevant regulations are designed to provide.

I emphasise that a considerable amount of new information has recently emerged, including over the Christmas period. It is highly probable that WMP and other bodies will continue to give me information that will be relevant to my inspection. My views may therefore develop or change.

On 16 October 2025, WMP provided its preferred tactical option to members of the SAG. Later that day, the Chair of the SAG wrote to the Chief Operating Officer of Aston Villa FC, advising that the club should reduce to zero the ticket allocation to Maccabi Tel Aviv fans.

Based on what I have seen so far, I am satisfied that WMP recognised that this was a high-risk fixture, the policing of which would involve added complexity because of national and international events. From the outset, the force clearly knew the fixture would attract wide-ranging protests.

The fixture's significance was further heightened by the 2 October 2025 terrorist attack on Manchester's Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation.

However, I am concerned that in some respects, the force either didn't fully appreciate – or its response didn't demonstrate that it appreciated – the extent to which national and international context would lead to far-reaching consequences if the fixture and wider associated events were not policed effectively. I am not convinced that the force fully considered the consequences of its preferred tactical option. It focused on reducing the risk of short-term disorder and long-term damage to local community relations due to the presence of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans. It lacked the necessary foresight to recognise the long-term, global consequences.

The force's gold strategy and silver operational plans initially reflected a genuine desire to accommodate Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters. As is usual practice for international fixtures, WMP approached counterparts with experience of policing the fans of the club involved. In this case, they spoke to police in the Netherlands to gain their perspective on policing the November 2024 Ajax v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture. Following this meeting, and having reviewed a number of official Dutch reports, the force changed its position in respect of accommodating away supporters.

On 1 October 2025, WMP and Dutch police commanders held an online video meeting, which was carried out in English. We haven't been able to establish exactly what the Dutch police said or how the WMP attendee interpreted it. This is because:

- the meeting wasn't recorded;
- relevant documentation and interviewees' accounts vary; and
- the WMP attendee told us he made a handwritten record of the meeting, then converted it into an email (which we have reviewed), and then disposed of the handwritten record.

It is clear that there was a significant level of disorder in respect of the Ajax v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture in Amsterdam. It is also clear that WMP sought and obtained additional information about other Maccabi Tel Aviv fixtures. But I note that WMP spoke only to Dutch police. It appears that the force didn't speak to policing counterparts in other jurisdictions where Maccabi Tel Aviv had more recently played European fixtures.

Assessment, information and intelligence WMP provided to the SAG

On 7 October 2025, the WMP silver commander provided an oral briefing to the SAG. This briefing included a broader range of information and intelligence than that which the Dutch police are reported to have given WMP. Apart from one discrepancy introduced by another WMP attendee (about the number of Palestinian flags being burned at the Ajax fixture), I am satisfied that the silver commander's initial oral briefing to the SAG wasn't materially inaccurate.

However, on 10 October 2025, the WMP gold commander at that time wrote a letter to the Chair of the SAG. That letter contains some statements that are inaccurate. It also contains a lack of balance regarding the behaviour of different groups in Amsterdam. It appears that on 24 October 2025, the silver commander – with approval from the most senior level of the force – repeated these inaccurate statements in a written report to the SAG. That report also contains further inaccuracies.

On pages 5 to 6 of this letter, I have detailed some of these inaccuracies.

On 16 October 2025, other representatives of WMP gave the SAG another oral briefing. At that meeting, the SAG confirmed its advice to reduce to zero the ticket allocation to away fans. The force's 16 October 2025 oral briefing didn't repeat the inaccuracies of the 10 October 2025 letter, and it didn't include the same lack of balance. It also didn't introduce the further inaccuracies that appeared in the 24 October 2025 report. But those inaccuracies would of course have been in the gold and silver commanders' minds when they decided to recommend the force's preferred tactical option.

We have reviewed recordings of the oral briefings that WMP gave to the SAG on 7 and 16 October 2025. We have also reviewed the WMP's written communications of 10 October and 24 October 2025. Based on this evidence, it is clear that the force based its assessment of threat and risk, and its preferred tactical options, on the potential for wide-ranging protests relating to national and international events, as well as on the risk from football-related violence.

To be clear, I have found no evidence to support a view that antisemitism played any part in WMP stating that its preferred tactical option was to reduce to zero the ticket allocation to Maccabi Tel Aviv fans.

In this letter, I conclude that there was an imbalance in the weight of evidence that WMP presented to the SAG in respect of the previous behaviour of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans. I have formed the view that confirmation bias, in relation to the anticipated behaviour of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans and the potential disorder their presence might cause, influenced both the content and strength of assessments WMP gave to the SAG.

Furthermore, the cumulative effect of several of the force's actions shouldn't be underestimated. I will return to these topics in the wider inspection. They include:

- the way the silver commander and others asserted the force's [risk assessment](#) and preferred tactical option, and the terms they used to make those assertions;
- the details the WMP gold commander provided to the Chair of the SAG on 10 October 2025; and
- the unusually high number of WMP representatives at the SAG meetings, and their seniority.

After the 16 October 2025 oral briefing, and in preparation for an additional SAG meeting requested by the gold commander to be held on 24 October 2025, the Chair of the SAG asked WMP to provide a written report that set out the information and intelligence on which WMP based its risk assessment. This was arranged in the wake of significant public criticism about the outcome of the previous SAG discussion on 16 October 2025. The WMP silver commander prepared that report in time for the meeting with the SAG on 24 October 2025. That report contained substantially more material than the force had previously given the SAG in its oral briefings.

At its meeting on 16 October 2025, the SAG decided to reduce to zero the ticket allocation to away fans. However, I am concerned about the accuracy of the written report that WMP gave the Chair of the SAG for the meeting on 24 October 2025. The Chair stated that the SAG would rely on that report as “a wholly fresh consideration of the issue”. It contained several inaccuracies (some of which had appeared earlier, in the 10 October 2025 letter from the WMP gold commander). These inaccuracies included the following:

1. “The most recent match Maccabi Tel Aviv played in the UK was against West Ham United in the UEFA Europa Conference League group stage on 9th November 2023”

As has been widely reported, there was no such fixture. When we spoke to the Chief Constable of WMP, he told us that the force didn’t use artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of the SAG report. During his appearance at the Home Affairs Committee on 6 January 2026, he confirmed this point. However, we heard contradictory evidence from a different WMP interviewee. This interviewee told us in clear terms that the erroneous statement was the result of a search the force carried out using Microsoft Copilot. This search tool uses AI. The interviewee described the error as “an AI hallucination”.

2. “The police response saw 5,000 officers deployed over a number of days”

We have found no evidence to substantiate this statement, which was about the number of officers deployed in the Netherlands at the November 2024 Ajax v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture. According to WMP records, Dutch police commanders briefed the force that approximately 2,000 officers had been deployed at that fixture. The same Dutch police commanders told our inspectors that they had deployed 1,200 officers. They also told us that, in their briefing to WMP, they said they understood that 5,000 officers had been deployed in Paris for an Israeli national team fixture.

3. “Over 200 [of the 2,800 Israeli fans who travelled to the November 2024 Ajax fixture] were linked to the Israeli Defence Forces”

This is a conflation of multiple sources of information and is incorrectly stated as fact.

4. “The day before the [Ajax] fixture saw approximately 500–600 Maccabi fans apparently intentionally targeting Muslim communities”

There is evidence that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans targeted Muslims and pro-Palestinians, but they targeted individuals rather than residential communities. The Dutch police told us that Amsterdam’s Muslim residential communities are generally outside the city centre and that there was no significant disorder outside the city centre.

5. “[The 500–600 Maccabi fans] tearing down Palestine flags”

This exaggerates the information the Dutch police told us they provided to WMP and the evidence available from official reports. The Dutch police told us one Palestinian flag had been pulled down. In official Dutch reports, there are three recorded incidents involving flags. I believe it would have been more appropriate to have accurately specified these three incidents, given their inflammatory nature.

6. “[The 500–600 Maccabi fans] committing... serious assaults on Muslim taxi drivers”

This overstates the evidence. One of the official Dutch reports contains a reference to a single report of an assault on one taxi driver. Other taxi cars and motor scooters were attacked and damaged, but it is unclear if they were occupied at the time.

7. “[The 500–600 Maccabi fans] throwing innocent members of the public into the river”

This is inaccurate. The Dutch police told us that one Maccabi Tel Aviv supporter was thrown into a canal, apparently by members of a pro-Palestinian group. The official Dutch reports, which were assessed by WMP, confirm this.

8. “Several [Dutch police] officers were injured during the sustained confrontation”

This also overstates the evidence. The Dutch police told us that one officer had sustained hearing loss during the disorder. This is supported by the official Dutch reports that we were told WMP assessed in its planning.

Also, the 10 October 2025 letter from the WMP gold commander to the Chair of the SAG refers to Maccabi Tel Aviv fans at the Ajax fixture “setting fire to Palestinian flags”. From our interview with the Dutch police, and from a letter from the Mayor of Amsterdam to the city’s municipal authority, we understand that there was only one report of a person attempting to set fire to a single Palestinian flag.

I do not seek to downplay the level of disorder that the Dutch police experienced at the Ajax fixture. However, I am of the opinion that in its written communication, WMP portrayed the level of disorder at that fixture, and the part played by Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters, as greater than it really was. My conclusion is similar to that of Lord Mann, who in his evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on 1 December 2025 said that the problem in Amsterdam had been “greatly exaggerated”.

Regardless of any misunderstanding about what the Dutch police said, I have concluded that WMP overstated the extent to which the disorder at that fixture was attributable to the Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters.

All of this leads me to conclude that confirmation bias, in relation to the behaviour of the Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, played a part in the way WMP reached its preferred tactical option, and the strength with which it presented it to the SAG. In effect, the emphasis with which the force made the case gave the SAG members little or no option but to accept that reducing to zero the ticket allocation for away fans was the only viable course of action to protect the public. In these circumstances, banning away supporters was a wholly exceptional decision. The recommendation to the SAG should have been subject to greater challenge and consideration within WMP.

I have further concerns about the way WMP handled intelligence material. In respect of the written report that WMP gave the SAG on 24 October 2025, I have found that:

- not all the information and intelligence in the report had passed through the force's dedicated intelligence structure; and
- the intelligence bronze commander wasn't involved in the report's preparation.

As a result, the force didn't properly validate all the material it subsequently relied on. This is of significant concern, given that the SAG intended to use it for a wholly new consideration of the risk. The Chair of the SAG had asked that information made available to the SAG be "robust and capable of carrying the weight which may be placed on it".

I am especially concerned about the way WMP handled sensitive intelligence when it created and disseminated the 24 October 2025 report. The report contained material that the force should have redacted before presenting it to the SAG. This error is significant. The recordings of discussions at the SAG meeting of 16 October 2025 clearly show that some SAG members believed that information about the SAG's impending decision had been leaked to the media. The report was then leaked to the media.

Media reporting in relation to information provided by the Dutch police

On 23 November 2025, an article in 'The Sunday Times' raised questions about the accuracy of the information and intelligence WMP had presented at SAG meetings. According to the article, 'The Sunday Times' had received a copy of a document prepared by the WMP silver commander, and the newspaper had spoken to the Dutch police about some of the details the document contained. As far as I have been able to determine, the article is referring to the silver commander's written report of 24 October 2025, rather than the oral briefings WMP gave the SAG on 7 and 16 October 2025. The original decision to restrict to zero the ticket allocation for away fans was made during those oral briefings.

The article in 'The Sunday Times' stated that the Dutch police told the newspaper that it didn't recognise elements of the information and intelligence as presented in WMP's report. This is unsurprising. The silver commander's report is more than merely a record of what the force said it was told by the Dutch police. It contains a summary of information and intelligence from a number of sources, which the force had collated throughout the planning stages. Notwithstanding the inaccuracies set out above, only some of the material in the silver commander's written report came from the meeting on 1 October 2025 with the Dutch police.

Further concerns

I have also found that there were further shortcomings in WMP's approach to planning for and responding to the Aston Villa v Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture. These shortcomings are in four fundamental areas:

1. Lack of effective local community engagement

Well before WMP prepared its written report to the SAG, it consulted regional and national representatives of the Jewish community through the Community Security Trust (CST). But the force failed to consult representatives of the *local* Jewish community early enough, despite being warned by a CST representative that he did not speak on behalf of the local community. In fact, by the time the force did consult locally, it had already recommended to the SAG that the ticket allocation for away fans be reduced to zero. This was due to a combination of the SAG meeting being brought forward to 16 October 2025 at the request of Aston Villa FC, and the apparent delay in scheduling these community engagement meetings. As such, the views of the local Jewish community weren't reflected by WMP in its recommendation to the SAG.

Before the SAG provided its advice on 16 October 2025, the force's [community impact assessment](#) included a record of comments from a representative of the regional CST. The record says:

"He believes if Maccabi fans were banned that it would not go down well. As anticipated it would feel [like] an attack on the Jewish community whether they support Maccabi or not, [and] in light of recent events in Manchester it would appear insensitive to single out a community for this."

WMP told us that its contact with members of the local Jewish community was limited out of respect for a number of High Holy Days in the weeks prior to 16 October 2025. I don't accept this; I believe that the force missed opportunities, both before and during these religiously significant periods, to effectively engage with members of the local Jewish community.

Because of the make-up of the local population and WMP's stated inability to engage effectively with the local Jewish community, the force encountered a lack of balance in the range and strength of views it was hearing. It appears to me that the force didn't recognise this imbalance or satisfactorily take steps to redress it.

2. Imbalance in communications

The recording of the 16 October 2025 SAG meeting makes clear that the advice to reduce the ticket allocation to zero was based on a range of factors. Although the previous and potential behaviour of Maccabi fans was a significant consideration, it wasn't the only one. I am concerned that WMP didn't accurately reflect this in subsequent communications. I haven't identified any good reason for the omission, which resulted in the force presenting an imbalanced picture to officers and the public about the basis for the decision.

For example, in media interviews after the SAG decision, WMP personnel focused on Maccabi Tel Aviv fans' behaviour as the basis for the restriction on away fans, rather than focusing on the silver commander's and SAG's wider concerns about public safety and protest. One WMP officer we spoke to told us that the force had formulated its key media messages from the information and intelligence in the silver commander's SAG report. This is another example in which the force's failure to identify inaccuracies in the information and intelligence resulted in misleading public statements.

Also, a WMP press release dated 16 October 2025 highlighted the force's "support for all affected communities" and reaffirmed the force's "zero-tolerance stance on hate crime in all its forms". But the release also stated: "This decision is based on current intelligence and previous incidents, including violent clashes and hate crime offences that occurred during the 2024 UEFA Europa League match between Ajax and Maccabi Tel-Aviv in Amsterdam." In this release, the force made no mention of other relevant factors it knew about, such as the potential risk to Maccabi fans or the likelihood of wider protest, counter-protest or disorder. The force told us it decided to take this approach in an effort to avoid increasing local community tension.

My concern goes further than public statements. We have also reviewed a video-recorded briefing that the WMP silver commander prepared for officers policing the fixture. Although this briefing referred to a wide range of operational detail, in his opening statements, the silver commander said: "The decisions were made solely in the interest of public safety and were [made] specifically regarding the behaviour of travelling Maccabi fans."

Based on the evidence I have seen, I consider that these aspects of the force's communication, both internal and external, amount to carelessness rather than any deliberate distortion. But that doesn't mean the imbalance WMP presented was any less problematic, including for public confidence in the force's policing response, particularly as a more nuanced picture became available, which has since happened.

3. Poor record keeping and retention

I have already commented on WMP disposing of the original record of the meeting with the Dutch police. I also have a general concern about the force's record keeping and retention of important information.

We weren't provided with any evidence that WMP officers had made contemporaneous notes in relation to a number of key documents. Instead, they made records a considerable time after the event to which they related. This practice creates the risk of records being unavailable promptly enough, and/or becoming inaccurate, incomplete or otherwise unreliable. The importance of record keeping is explained in several parts of the [College of Policing's authorised professional practice](#).

4. Shortcomings in the command structure, including a failure to declare a critical incident

Given the wider context in which the fixture took place, and the additional complexities that WMP was evidently aware of, I am concerned that the force didn't set up a sufficiently robust command structure during the planning phase. As I have set out, the consequences of not doing this led to shortcomings in intelligence handling, ineffective engagement with the local Jewish community, poor record keeping, and an imbalance in the force's communications.

The shortcomings in the command structure were also apparent in the force's decision not to declare a [critical incident](#), even after public concerns mounted. This is contrary to authorised professional practice.

Declaring a critical incident should have brought about a more rigorous and informed approach, including closer involvement of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The absence of proactive briefings by the force to the Police and Crime Commissioner limited his ability to respond appropriately when it became clear that public trust and confidence were at risk.

Declaring a critical incident may also have prompted the force to explore special grant funding at an early stage. It is clear that WMP initially considered a range of tactical options to mitigate the risks associated with travelling Maccabi supporters, many of which were included in a report by Lord Mann. However, during the planning stage, certainty of such funding may have prevented the force from discounting the widest range of tactical options and allowed it to more fully explore the range of mitigations.

The evidence I have seen so far suggests that these shortcomings are symptomatic of a force not applying the necessary strategic oversight and not paying enough attention to important matters of detail, including at the most senior levels. These things are surprising. Senior officers told us that they had recognised the fixture's wider significance. However, I am concerned about an apparent lack of foresight in respect of the predictable repercussions of a number of their decisions, including, but not limited to, the force's recommendation to reduce the ticket allocation to zero. In this respect and others, my view is that the force could and should have prepared more effectively.

I have already raised a point about confirmation bias. However, in respect of any individual officers, the evidence I have seen doesn't point to their actions having been influenced by political interference, antisemitism, any other lack of impartiality, or malign intent.

Wider observation

The Chief Constable of WMP told us that he made you aware that the force had recommended that the Maccabi Tel Aviv ticket allocation should be reduced to zero, but that it was ultimately a decision for the SAG when it next met. This was at the end of a meeting on another topic on 8 October 2025. The record of the conversation in the minutes of that meeting states that banning away fans was being considered.

There is, of course, a fine line for officials and politicians to tread when deciding what to say, to whom and when. It is a topic on which I have commented in previous reports, most recently in [our inspection of activism and impartiality in policing](#). In that report, I said:

“In all but the most extreme and unusual of circumstances, MPs and councillors should be very mindful not to publicly criticise, interfere with or otherwise try to influence any decisions in advance of the police implementing them.”

In circumstances where the implications of a decision extend far beyond a force boundary, the important issue of operational independence needs to be carefully considered. I intend to cover this in more detail in my final report.

Next steps

As I have already set out, we have more to do. We have further interviews to carry out with WMP personnel, mainly bronze commanders and community inspectors. We also wish to speak to other local community representatives.

In respect of the broader inspection, we will then move on to fieldwork in six other police forces (Avon and Somerset Constabulary, Cumbria Constabulary, Leicestershire Police, Greater Manchester Police, South Wales Police and Sussex Police).

I intend to offer you a further briefing before I leave office at the end of March 2026. In the interim, if you would like me to elaborate on any of the points in this letter, I would be happy to provide you with an oral briefing.

Yours sincerely,



Sir Andy Cooke QPM DL

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services