The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

A review of practice

May 2015
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

© – College of Policing Limited (2015)

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Non-Commercial College Licence v1.1 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence visit
http://www.college.police.uk/Legal/Documents/Non_Commercial_College_License.pdf

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this publication or to request copies in accessible formats please contact Uniform Operations Support on +44 (0) 1480 334567 or uos.courseadmin@college.pnn.police.uk
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 4

Part 1 An overview of the review .................................................................................................. 5
  Method ........................................................................................................................................... 5
  Selection of participants ............................................................................................................... 5
  Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 6

Part 2 A summary of key themes ................................................................................................. 7
  Section 1 ....................................................................................................................................... 7
    Pre event ...................................................................................................................................... 7
    During event ............................................................................................................................... 9
    Post event ................................................................................................................................... 10
  Section 2 ....................................................................................................................................... 10
    Reducing disorder ..................................................................................................................... 10
    Facilitating peaceful protest ...................................................................................................... 11
    Balancing human rights ............................................................................................................ 12
  Section 3 ....................................................................................................................................... 14
    Nomenclature of "protestors" ....................................................................................................... 14
    Providing a gateway ................................................................................................................... 15
    Information v intelligence ........................................................................................................... 17
    The qualities of a PLT officer ...................................................................................................... 19
    Continuity v welfare consideration ............................................................................................ 21
    A tactical option ......................................................................................................................... 22

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 25
Introduction

The role of Police Liaison Teams (PLT) was developed after Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) concluded that “the police have been deficient in communicating with protesters”\(^1\) and recommended that “the police should seek to inform themselves about the culture and general conduct of particular protest crowds”\(^2\). PLT were first deployed as such in 2012, initially as Protest Liaison Teams, and were included in Authorised Professional Practice (APP) as a tactical option in 2014, described as police officers who provide a “link between the police, protest organisers and protestors by focusing on negotiation, mediation, initiation, communication and sensing”\(^3\).

Since the first deployments, PLT have been trained and deployed in many force areas in the UK and at a variety of events. There has been limited research into the deployment of PLT, however two significant pieces have been conducted, by Stott, Scothern and Gorringe (2013)\(^4\) and Waddington (2012)\(^5\). Both pieces were undertaken prior to the inclusion of PLT in APP.

In order to provide consideration into the contribution that PLT have made, in November 2014, the National Police Public Order and Public Safety Working Group commissioned a review of practice into the use of PLT to be undertaken by the College of Policing Public Order and Public Safety Team.

This report outlines the review activity undertaken in order to build an evidence base on current practice, and provides analysis of the findings and further considerations in the deployment and use of PLT in the UK.

---

The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

Part 1  An overview of the review

The practice review examined the role of PLT during three phases of events on which they had been deployed; pre, during and post protest events. Participants were also asked to provide their analysis of the contribution that the use of PLT had made to the facilitation of peaceful protest, the reduction of disorder and the balancing of human rights during protest events within the UK?

Method
Primary data for analysis was gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews with members of four key groups;

- public order commanders who have deployed PLT at events
- PLT who have been deployed at protests events
- members of protest / demonstration / action groups who have liaised with PLT pre, during and / or post events
- employees of local businesses who have liaised with PLT pre, during and / or post events

This method provided an opportunity to examine different perspectives of those involved in the process of being engaging in and managing protest events by gathering views of four very different experiences of the same events.

Selection of participants
The selection criteria ensured that participants were able to provide experiential evidence from a whole range of types of events at which PLT had been deployed, including activist actions, climate camps, large marches, football matches, long standing protest camps and occupations, and for a whole range of reasons, political views and causes. Each participant was specifically selected due to their wealth experience of involvement in protest events where PLTs were deployed.

Some had been involved in events where protests had lasted for several months during which time PLTs had been engaged throughout, but all interviewees had been involved in numerous events either as a commander, PLT, protestor6 or business member.

6 The name “protestor” was itself open to conjecture during review (see Nomenclature of “protestors” p.14). The term “protestor” is used throughout this report as a collective noun to encompass all the individuals and groups identified in this review.
Participants were also selected to provide a sample from a wide range of geographical areas, and included police officers and members of the public from the following police force areas:

- Cheshire
- Gloucestershire
- Greater Manchester
- Humberside
- Merseyside
- Metropolitan
- Sussex
- West Midlands

A total of 26 participants were interviewed, consisting of 10 public order commanders (gold, silver and bronze), 9 PLTs, 5 protestors and 2 business members.

The interviews were undertaken between December 2014 and April 2015. During the interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences of how PLT had been deployed during the three phases of pre, during and post protest events in which they had been involved, and the advantages and disadvantages that they perceived. Participants were also asked specifically to evaluate the contribution that they felt that the use of PLT had made to facilitating peaceful protest, reducing disorder and balancing of human rights during protest events.

**Analysis**

With the written consent of every participant, each interview was voice recorded before qualitative analysis of the data was conducted. The responses have been coded and grouped to highlight key themes that emerged from across the interviews.

In analysing the responses, the limitations of the sample size of participants must be recognised when drawing conclusions from the review. Caution should also be engaged in recognising the potential for participants to demonstrate bias. The sample group consisted of police commanders and PLT who had deployed PLT or been deployed as a PLT officer on numerous occasions and their support for the role should be taken into account in considering responses. It
must also be recognised that the participating protestors and business members may not represent all protest or business voices.

Part 2 A summary of key themes

The following section summarises the key themes identified. The findings are grouped in the first section into the areas of pre, during and post event deployment. The second section provides an overview of the responses provided regarding the contribution that the use of PLT has made, and the final section contains considerations that emerged out of the review.

Section 1

Pre event

Throughout all of the review, the reoccurring theme from participants was that pre event engagement was the most important element in the use of PLT. Almost all participants shared the strongly held view from their experiences that there was significant value in pre event deployment; one PLT simply commented “you get the pre event part right, you’ll make the event part go much more smoothly”.

PLTs and commanders explained that pre event engagement allowed the opportunities to build two way relationships. A business member and several protestors remarked that this process provides them with a point of contact and gives them confidence to know how the police will respond to their needs. Most participants said that this engagement facilitates better communication, and allows all groups to voice what they are hoping to achieve in the event. A commander explained further that this allows everyone to consider what success looks like for them, in order to manage the expectations of all. The perception of many was that this process can take a long time to build. One PLT shared their experience regarding their approach to an event and how they learned from their experiences;

"It took a long time to build it [the relationship with protestors] up...We started off last year with groups of people that just absolutely didn’t trust us
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

whatever, didn’t want to engage with us. We’d got it so wrong the year before, we’d not got the liaison process properly done. We didn’t give it the attention we needed, I don’t think we gave it the respect it required. But now that they can see that we have, and that we value it, and that we value them as a community, it’s had a massive turn around.”

This process reportedly allowed commanders to provide a no surprises approach and to talk with protestors at a very early stage about unacceptable behaviour that they would not tolerate. Using the PLT to get a “look and feel of the event” allowed a commander to “better understand your protest communities which enables you to resource them more responsibly”.

One commander summed up their view that “there are sound business reasons to have PLT”. This approach had reportedly on occasions led to a significant reduction in the number of PSUs deployed and the need for mutual aid. Several commanders and PLTs provided examples of events that they had policed where a PLT-led pre engagement approach had, in their opinion, been a significant factor in greatly reducing the number of resources required for the event with those deployed on a similar event on previous occasions where there had not been PLT pre engagement.

The majority of the protestors interviewed for this review similarly supported the use of pre engagement with PLT and how they bought into the process. One protestor commented, “My view was always to let the police know what we were doing so there were no surprises”. This allowed them to brief their own group and give them assurances about how the police would respond to them. One protestor however stated that their "personal experience is that you just never engage before an action”. Their rationale provided was that their action may “push the boundaries” and therefore not engaging is the best way for them to ensure this, unless engagement afforded them “benefit”.

The two businesses members also commented on the benefits of pre engagement, allowing them to understand the issues, being educated as to what action protest group actions will be acceptable, and this allowed businesses to manage the welfare of their own employees, and allowed the company to carry on with their own business.
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

One PLT highlighted issues that they had encountered when they had been deployed on events having not been given the opportunity to engage pre event. This, they explained, meant that they had to try and formulate relationships on the day of the event, at a time when protest organisers were focussed on their own issues. The PLT felt in these situations, their presence was of little benefit and even a hindrance to protestors. Their conclusion was to support the widely held view that PLT pre engagement was vital in the policing of protest events.

The practicality of formulating pre event engagement was also discussed by participants and the responses are summarised later in this report (see Section 3: Providing a gateway, p.15).

During event

The focus on the use of PLT during events centred on continuing the longer term approach to the relationship between PLT and protest groups to engender trust between the groups. Concentrating on the event to the detriment of this relationship was thought by one commander to provide a threat to PLT. One commander summarised this; "It's all about the long term not the day".

Commanders commented on their tactical deployment of PLT, with several comparing how they had policed large events and marches in the past with numerous PSUs, and now on similar event, the resources consisted primarily of PLTs policing the march and PSUs deployed away from the event addressing consequential issues. One commander described this as the PLTs being the inward facing resources and the PSUs outwards facing. Another explained that the opening tactic is often that only PLTs come into contact with the protest groups.

Having PLT in the groups was thought, by commanders, to provide them with a better understanding of the dynamics. "The perception of what's going on from inside the crowd is very different to the perception when you're outside looking in."

PLTs apparently allowed communication to be maintained in an ever evolving situation. This reportedly led to numerous examples of where the relationship resolved potential issues. One PLT shared their experience of an event where a new group of protestors were briefed by the existing group, "Please understand
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

we have a very good relationship with the police here. We don’t want that spoiled and so please abide by the rules that we give you”. Business members valued this communication link. One said, "If we know about a situation we inform people [staff members] so there is no surprises”. This allows business to manage expectations and gives staff confidence during a changing scenario.

Protestors also explained the value of relationships to them, and a key was having in the PLT a single point of contact, rather than having "eighteen different coppers trying to speak to you”. The PLT were said to provide them with feedback regarding the ongoing situation so they knew what to expect. One commented, "I can’t see any negatives to having good relationships with the police liaisons – it works every which way”. Another commented, "On an individual level, I actually respect and really like a lot of the PLOs. They’re interesting people. Because you have built up that relationship, that’s their job, to build a relationship with you. Now it isn’t about sub versifying, subverting your goals or aims, it’s not about that. It’s about how you work together to facilitate your human right to protest”.

Post event
The role of PLT post event was described in terms of maintaining a relationship with groups, with participants often reaffirming that post event became pre event for the next one. Providing feedback was seen as a two way process and a part of building on an ongoing relationship. Businesses also described the need for them to understand the response of protestors to their actions so that they could avoid “provoking” them.

Some protestors stated that they would be keener to provide feedback post event rather than to engage before. In how they might provide feedback, they suggested the use of an anonymous on-line survey, which they felt would give them a voice, and might be something that they themselves could tweet or Facebook to provoke a good response.

Section 2
Reducing disorder
The overwhelming widespread view of participants interviewed for this review was that the use of PLT have contributed to reducing disorder. When asked for
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

rationale, many provided examples of how the policing of events had changed over a period of time. Events that had in the past resulted in conflict had been policed differently, utilising a PLT approach, and this had been the catalyst to reducing disorder. Often the reason given was the lack of need to deploy PSUs, where in the past this would be the first response.

An understanding of crowd psychology was evident in this process. One commander commented, "The police are very good at unknowingly winding people up. And just like our presence can defuse, it can also enflame". Examples were provided by PLTs of crowds self-policing. Where in the past protest stewards leaders would not engage with the police, now stewards and PLT had stood side by side to prevent flashpoints erupting with individuals in the group. Another commander quantified the contribution by stated, "I think they have assisted significantly in stopping general protestors being drawn into disorder".

The relationship between groups and PLT was also described by protestors as a contributing factor, with one protestors commenting that "it’s the familiar face" that "definitely calms things down". One PLT explained their role allowed them to reassure commanders that something that is not a part of their plan isn’t necessarily bad. This communication allows a reduction into the "the level which we need to go in and leads to some understanding of how we’re going to work".

The use of PLT was seen by many as being a contributory factor in a different approach to the policing of protest, summarised by one commander;

"I think we are genuinely changing the way we police protest, with all the benefits that that brings in terms of the human rights compliance, reduction in police resources on protest, reduction in the times that we have to revert to the threat and use of force or the use of force in relation to events and tactics, try to encourage self-policing and all the academic theory that goes with that, we have got evidence of that happening”.

Facilitating peaceful protest
It was evident that some all participants viewed PLTs as having played a significant part in facilitating peaceful protest. Many gave examples of incidents where the use of PLT had opened lines of communication that resulted in protestors being able to make their protests in a peaceful manner. A PLT
explained their perception; "We empowered those protest groups to manage themselves”.

One PLT described a situation that occurred in the planning of a large TUC march. A student group organiser informed the PLT that they were planning to march but instead of joining the main group, they wanted to have a feeder match and "tag on the end”. Their reasons were that they agreed with the principles of the march but not with the principles of the TUC. The PLT explained that in the past, a student group suddenly appearing would have provided concerns for commanders and may have elicited a different response. However, due to the communication provided through the PLT, the perception of the PLT being interviewed was that the aims of the student group on the day were facilitated, and the event subsequently passed off without incident.

The role of PLT has reportedly assisted in changing the view of police colleagues over the rights of an individual to peacefully protest. One PLT commented, "It’s opened my eyes as to how protest isn’t bad. And I think it’s a perception that a lot of police officers have had in the past, is because they’re protestors, they’re bad. And we’re educating police officers, and that’s helping the process of facilitating peaceful protest all the way”.

A key theme was also the perception that PLT assist in allowing the views of the majority, whose intentions are to peacefully protest, to be heard. One PLT stated, "I think, is the only effective tactic that allows the majority of people to actually have a bit of a voice and to sound off, without harmonising them to the tactics of the smaller group”. This was summarised by one commander who explained;

"I think they are managing people’s expectations, they are shaping people’s aspirations, what can be achieved, and they are setting boundaries. And it’s very important that, because the vast majority of people want to make their point, but don’t want to be arrested by the police”.

**Balancing human rights**

The Human Rights Act contains “qualified rights”, rights which can be restricted in order to protect the rights of another or the wider public interest. At protest events, conflict may be encountered between a group that want to exercise their
freedom of thought, conscience and religion\(^7\), freedom of expression\(^8\) and freedom of assembly\(^9\) and those that wish to exercise their qualified right to respect for private and family life\(^10\) and the right to the peaceful enjoyment of their possessions\(^11\). Therefore in some situations, a balance may be required of the different rights of different groups at one event.

The balancing of rights would appear to be a significant area for consideration as this may provide the flashpoint and the potential precursor to conflict which may lead to disorder. However, several participants provided limited response to the contribution of PLT in the balancing of human rights. Some protestors expressed little concern over the balancing of rights and were more concerned with how their own rights to peaceful protest were facilitated rather than considering the rights of others. Similarly, PLT were concerned with providing a voice for the group with whom they liaised. It was perceived by most participants that it was the commander’s role to make decisions over balancing rights. In fact one commander commented, "That’s probably an area that we can still build on”.

However, there were several participants who provided experiential evidence of the positive contribution that PLT had made to assist in the balancing of human rights. A member of a business explained that PLT had helped to educate them in matters of balancing the rights of protestors and businesses by assisting them to "identify what is and isn’t acceptable, what is borderline and what is ok”.

An example of how the deployment of PLT had assisted in providing a balance of rights was provided by one commander who had commanded a protest involving a permanent camp that had lasted for several months. The commander described how they had deployed three PLTs; one to liaise with protestors, one with the company against which the protest is aimed and one with the local community. By investing in each and allowing relationships to be built with all three, this reportedly allowed the commander to balance the rights of all three, but also to communicate those decisions made to all three groups as well. The commander provided practical advice from their experience;

---

\(^7\) Article 9 of the Human Rights Act (1998)
\(^8\) Article 10 of the Human Rights Act (1998)
\(^10\) Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998)
"Separate them out. You can’t have a PLT that will look after everything. Their either a protest, community company or whatever. You can’t have one who goes between the two, because that inherently causes more suspicion with the company and the protestors”.

Interestingly, one protestors intimated that the police favour protestors over business members in balancing human rights;

Protestor: "I think possibly too much. I think the human rights of protestors are probably, certainly within this area, have become sacrosanct, over and above everything else. I think were you to speak to shopkeepers... they will tell you that the protestors were given far too... their human rights and their right to protest was given the highest priority”.

**Section 3**

The final section of this report summarises key themes that emerged during the interviews, and highlights issues that might need to be considered in the future deployment and use of PLT.

**Nomenclature of “protestors”**

It became apparent throughout the review that nomenclature was of significance to those that are often collectively referred to as “protestors”. This was evident both from protestors interviewed and through the experiences of PLT in engaging with protestors, several of which related issues they had encountered with the labelling of groups of people exercising their right to protest.

All five protestors interviewed implied that the label of protestor was a barrier to engagement with the group, as those liaising had not grasped an understanding of who they were and what they stood for. One participant made their stance clear, stating that they were not a protestor, but an "activist”. Another explained, "I would not describe myself as a protester particularly – maybe a demonstrator”. Yet another simply said, "I am someone who has a point of view”.

A wide range of names were in evidence through the review that were used either by the individuals interviews to refer to themselves, or were terms that PLT had used to refer to the group with whom they were liaising. These
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

included; "protectors", "occupiers", "the community", "eco farmers", someone who is "politically", "an individual", "campaigners" and "activists". A commander summarised his approach in ensuring that they did not create a barrier to engagement with the groups with whom they were liaising by stating; "We'll call them whatever they ask us to call them".

Consideration might therefore be given to nomenclature, and an awareness that the generic term "protestor" may not be helpful to some with whom PLT seek to engage but moreover may create a barrier to engagement.

Providing a gateway
Several commanders and PLTs participants explained the formal process that they had experienced which had been implemented to ensure engagement with groups pre event, by "providing a gateway" for protestors to have access to PLT. Some have implemented a team consisting of a number of permanent PLT offices. For the Metropolitan Police Service, this was described in the establishing of the "Police Liaison Gateway Team" which consisted of a Sergeant and three Constables. However participants from three other police forces described their processes in having a full time response to provide accessibility to facilitate pre event communication. One PLT described it as such;

"We have to make sure we have an open door, that’s the first thing. We have to make sure we have a gateway, permanently. That doesn’t mean to say that I’m sitting at the other end of a phone. That doesn’t meant to say that I can’t do other roles, but what it means is that permanently, via the media access points that we have, i.e. email, twitter and mobile phone... however you do it, there’s got to be that one point."

The use of a team or single point of contact as the formalised access point or "gateway" for protestors and business members to contact the police pre event was advocated by all those participants that had experienced the process in their police force. The perceived benefits were that this allowed clear accessibility via media such as through email, Facebook and Twitter, which could be advertised. Having a dedicated "gateway" was also thought to mean that forces could be proactive in contacting protestors and businesses themselves, through open source websites, to offer a point of contact with the police. This had provided
much positive feedback from those that had implemented this process. The "gateway" reportedly provided a consistency in approach and facilitated the building up of relationships between the police and protestors and businesses.

A number of commanders were keen to explain that implementing a "gateway" should not be restricted to larger forces and indeed participants from several smaller forces in terms of number of staff described successfully setting up a "gateway" process. The process varied due to the demands of the force. Some explained that their "gateway" was often their officer’s secondary role, "rolling in the background". Depending on the nature of the event and need for engagement, it would be the gold commander who would consider when this liaison needs to become the primary role, and when it becomes the only role for that officer. What was apparent, however, was that all participants who had experienced having a process in place expressed their opinions that this better equipped the force to engage with protest and business groups pre event and allowed access for groups to approach the police as “repeat customers”. One PLT explained that this was key for short notice events;

"A lot of protest activity, it’s not like football where you get a fixtures list three months in advance... The news tonight can mean I’ve got a protests tomorrow. And how do you deal with that? And you’ve got to be able to respond quite efficiently to that”.

Participants who had experience of working in “gateway” roles explained that the key was that the PLT would always work to a commander, confirming with the commander if they wanted engagement and agreeing parameters, acceptable and unacceptable outcomes and any key messages. Commanders also advocated the use of a "gateway". One commented "It’s almost an invest to save because you get the money back through not having to put resourcing on the event”, and another compared the cost of engaging one PLT against using numerous PSUs in response to an ongoing protest they had policed.

**Consideration** might therefore be given to exploring processes that provide an open "gateway" process to provide access to officers dedicated to facilitating peaceful protest, and that these processes are more robustly tested and explored as to their effect.
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

In formalising such a process, several participants also suggested that there might be a regional or even national approach to pre event engagement. This was gleaned from the experience of some who had commanded large events requiring mutual aid, where they had used PLT "cross border", bringing the benefits of deploying PLTs with the groups with whom they had already built strong relationships. Commanders were said to be able during such events to deploy PLT several month prior to the event in other force areas at events in order for the PLT to meet groups, introduce themselves and initialise communication.

To aid this process, some commanders expressed a desire to see the implementation of a national database of PLTs that have engagements with protest groups, to identifying PLT around the country who had had experience and built relationships with protest groups, and to provide an ability to map PLTs to certain groups. This database would assist protestors in facilitating peaceful protest wherever their protest took them. A commander explained;

"There is a vulnerability certainly with determined professional protestors, in the sense that they do it every week, that they travel around the country and meet inconsistent responses”.

Consideration might therefore be given as to the value and cost of such a national process, how it might be implemented, and how PLT might be mapped across the UK.

**Information v intelligence**

The subject of whether PLT gather information, intelligence or both during their deployments became a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. This subject was particularly significant to PLT in light of claims from NetPol, "The Network for Police Monitoring" that PLT are "spies in blue bibs"\(^{12}\) and provided a warning sign stating that "the ‘friendly’ officers in the blue bibs are only chatting to you so that they can GATHER EVIDENCE”.\(^{13}\)

The overwhelming response from participant was that PLT do gather both information and intelligence, as they are police officers deployed as such,

\(^{12}\) Reference https://netpol.org/2013/10/21/spies-in-blue-bibs/

\(^{13}\) Reference https://netpol.org/police-liaison-officers/
however their primary role is not to seek intelligence, and commanders emphasised that PLT were not tasked to gather intelligence, as this actually compromised their role. One PLT summed this up; "Intelligence is a by-product of intelligent conversation... but I’m not going to seek intelligence, because it compromises me.”

Most participants commented that there has not been clarity or consistency in how this area has been approached. One commented, "We are classically defensive about our position on this, which doesn’t actually serve us particularly well... The way I sit with it is... I’m not briefing my PLT officers to go and gather intelligence. However, if they get intelligence, then they are police officers and they put that intelligence in”. A commander stated, "[Some say that] PLT are not there to feed intelligence back. Well yes they are, and you shouldn’t be hiding that. If the protestors tell you something which is a significant impact to what’s going to happen, they must feed it back.” Another commander added, "I personally don’t think that we could kid ourselves that they [PLTs] are not in gathering intelligence. Any officer that speaks to a member of the public is gathering intelligence”.

Several participants were keen to stress the difference between PLT and Forward Intelligence Teams (FIT). A number of PLT recounted issues they had encountered in being thought of by protestors as FIT, or been tasked as commanders would FIT. Commanders also commented that the role of PLT and FIT are clearly separate; one commander descried how the two can work closely together. However, there was a concern expressed from the majority of commanders and PLT that the role of PLT might be compromised as a national tactical option if it is misused in the gathering of intelligence. One commander summed up their concerns;

"It’s [PLT] not an intelligence gathering tool per se. And I think you run a risk if you deploy PLTs with the primary aim of gathering intelligence, you kind of subvert the purpose, and I think it will cause you problems because, if we’re not honest in how we use them, at some point down the line we’ll be caught out. That will have a bad impact on that operation, but equally protestor communities talk..., and it will undermine it as a tactic and an approach for everyone else who tries to use it".
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

It was significant that all the five protestors who were interviewed also viewed intelligence gathering as a part of the role of PLT, and supported this approach. One explained that a key role of a PLT was to understand the groups within groups and treat them differently rather than them be "lumped together". They concluded, "How you differentiate that, you can only do that through information gathering, you can only do that through a PLO, and the PLO builds up the relationship". Another protestor clarified their stance;

"I think it’s their job to, actually, and I think they should be, rather than say I’m not gathering intelligence or we’re not gathering information they should say of course I’m gathering information... I’m a liaison officer... And I would have thought it’s best not to try and deny that in any way but rather to explain it".

One protestor also provided some advice for PLT in achieving a good relationship with protestors, and suggested avoiding the "type of questions asked by FIT teams", such as the intended movements and actions of the group. They suggested, "Unless there is a reason for the PLT to need to know the answer, I would suggest it better to avoid asking them, to set themselves apart from the intelligence gathering FITs".

Consideration might therefore be given to communicating the responsibilities that PLT undertake in the gathering and recording of both information and intelligence, and how to manage the conflict that these responsibilities may generate.

Consideration might further be given to clarifying the role of PLT by providing clear guidelines in the gathering and handling of intelligence, so that the role of PLT is clear and distinct from that of FIT, to provide consistency and preserve the integrity of both tactical options.

The qualities of a PLT officer

Many participants expressed their opinions that they believed there are distinct qualities that are evident in a good PLT officer. Some of the reappearing qualities identified were; having good interpersonal skills; resilient; not shy; be an active listener; have a good sense of humour. One commented, "It’s about mind set first and foremost" with the mind set of a PLT being very different to that of a PSU officer. One protestor reaffirmed this; "somebody that does not regard all
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

demonstrators or protestors as a threat but tries to try and understand their point of view and tries to understand why they are where they are”.

Being "incredibly patient, because you get people who will not talk to you” was identified by one PLT as a key quality, with one commander commenting, “They’ve got to be endlessly patient... very calm. Equally they’ve got to be firm and have the confidence to be firm.”

All groups also identified that it was very beneficial for PLTs to spend time educating themselves about the issues. One business member stressed the importance of "having back ground knowledge“ and a PLT noted that this provides a "huge amount of credence with those people because you’ve done a little bit of work and just researched why it is they are upset and why they want to protest”. A protestor commented, "It really really matters that people do their research and they know what we’re doing”.

It was also noted that selecting the right PLT to work with the right group also had an advantage in removing barriers and assisting engagement. Commanders explained their rationale in how certain PLT had been matches to engage with the right groups. One protester provided an example of a protest that had taken place against cuts to domestic abuse services, and outlined how different their response would be if a group of female PLT attended as opposed to a group of male PLT. Their response would be to recognise that the police had considered the purpose of the protest, and to them would make "much more sense and will get a much better response”. Another protestor commented that if possible the police should try and reflect the diversity of the protest event in their selection of PLT.

Consideration might therefore be given to identifying an appropriate national selection criteria to identify police officers with the desired skill set to undertake the role of PLT.

Consideration might also be given to selecting the appropriate PLT and matching them to engage with the appropriate protest group and business, wherever practicable.
Continuity v welfare consideration

Particularly for events that lasted over several weeks or even months, having continuity in the deployment of PLT was considered as of benefit. A business member said, "If we were having to deal with different people every day, we’d never get anywhere". A commander said, "I made a conscious decision early on that I wanted the same people for me doing it day in day out, to build those relationships and have those positions where they would trust them and they could be trusted back".

The perceived benefit however should be balanced against welfare considerations for those deployed as PLT. A commander summarised, "Consistency is important. I think though you’ve got to keep an eye on the effect on the PLTs as well".

PLTs themselves were quite aware of issues that may occur in such deployments. As well as the long shifts and sometimes being forgotten for refreshment breaks, it was often a different pressure that PLTs described during interviews. All PLTs that had been deployed on extended events described the pressures that the deployments placed on their mental wellbeing. One PLT commented, "In the early days, I got spoken to, and at, for hours on end about fracking and the issues about my family and how it was going to affect me and stuff". Another said, "It is quite intense when you go up there, because they do feed the same lines to you... And it does make you think... It is quite difficult when people are telling you this day in day out, it does make you start to think". A third commented, "What we’ve seen is that PLT officers enter into a depth, a level if you like of thought and processing of information that perhaps other officers don’t". A fourth PLT shared experiences of a long-term protest where he described one of his PLT colleagues as being "genuinely mortified" when the protest came to the end.

Commanders themselves were very much aware of the potential stresses on the physical and mental wellbeing of their PLT. Several commanders talked about the need to be in a position to recognise possible Stockholm syndrome issues, and managing the welfare issues of PLT who were engaged in an event for a protracted length of time. One commented, "The longer the on-going
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

relationship, the more careful you’ve got to be about management, about Stockholm syndrome, about PLTs being drawn in and then being target and just about demonstrating the whole integrity of the process”. Another participant extolled the benefit of deploying PLT supervisors to look after the welfare of PLT and ensure their needs were considered during events.

Consideration might therefore be given to providing continuity in the deployment of PLT, particularly at extended events. However this should be balanced with a recognition of the potential welfare issues that PLT may encounter.

Consideration might also be also given to exploring methods of support for PLT to ensure their mental and physical wellbeing is addressed, particularly when deployed over an extended event.

A tactical option

PLT were first deployed as such in 2012, and have been included as a tactical option in Authorised Professional Practice since 2014. However, many participants were keen to provide a background to the role by sharing their experiences of deploying liaison officers prior to this time. One commander summarised, “It’s formalising what’s always been there… [PLT are] a natural progression of what is old fashioned policing, it’s talking to people”.

Commanders talked of deploying liaison officers from as early as 2002, when a football spotter was chosen to undertake the role, because they “had the gift of the gab!” Another described deploying an officer in the role of “Protest Liaison Officer” in 2008, designated as such by the wearing of an orange tabard. Another commander described deploying dialogue officers wearing light blue bibs in their force in 2010. One commander observed, “We’ve always been quite good at talking to people, even PSU cops whose mind-set does change”. However, they concluded, “What I think PLT-ing is, is the first time that we as a police service have used dialogue and engagement as a tactic. That’s the difference”.

One key theme that emerged from commanders throughout the review was that PLT is a key tactical option, but one of several tactical options; “another club in the tactical golf bag”. The skill for a public order commander is “having all the options open and being able to adapt your approach depending on what you see before you”. One commander summarised their experiences by saying, “I’m a
massive advocate of them. I just think that their use needs to be proportionate like everything else. You know, they’re not a panacea, there are times when they shouldn’t be deployed”. Another commander reinforced this view;

“If you see PLTs as being the panacea to all major ops public order policing, then you’re naive, and you’re going to come a cropper at some stage. Equally I think you would be foolish to do any major policing operation without having a PLT element within it”.

A further commander provided their observations in deploying PLT as one tactic amongst others in events;

“The differentiator is, I need the FIT officers to tell me there are your threats to the event. There’s your threat to the event, and I can make an assessment on how high level that threat is. The PLTs are a tactic, and only one tactic, but probably your starter for ten in relation to the mitigation of that threat. So as a result, contrary to the views of some FIT officers, PLTs and FITs can work closely together”.

It was clear that all the commanders interviewed highly valued the use of PLTs as a tactical option, and that they allowed commanders to be better able to make command decisions in protest events. One commander summarised;

“All the other intelligence sources, including FITs, can tell me what they can see. The PLTs can tell me what they can see, what they can hear and what they feel, ‘cos they’re operating into the crowd, and they’re actually speaking to the organisers and the people on the protest. That is really, really important”.

PLT as a tactical option has been used by some away from traditional protest events, and there were participants who advocated their use at events such as football matches. One PLT explained the benefits they had achieved in deploying PLT at European fixtures, when away fans arrive and meet up early before the game. Other opportunities have allowed PLT to enter into early engagement with the organisers of fan based forums. On one occasion, this relationship facilitated the chair of the forum for the away fans providing a piece to camera for the police of the home side force to use during the briefing of officers working the
The use of Police Liaison Teams in the policing of events

game, in order for the aims and objectives of their fans to be explained. One commander explained;

“I don’t see that necessity, the need to use PLTs all the time on all football matches and that’s partly as a recognition of the fact that football supporters are different. But we’ve used them... where we know there’s been a history of hostility, so used them with [away] fans coming to [football club] just to be a familiar face, just to be a point of contact, and to try and engage with supporters and inform them”.

Consideration might therefore be given to recognising that, where there is a perceived benefit in deploying PLT, there is a balance to be maintained between their value and ensuring that they remain as one of several tactical options, and guarding against considering PLT as a panaceas in all public order operations.

Consideration might also be given to utilising PLTs as a tactical option at other events away from protest, such as pre and during specific football matches.
Conclusion

The review conducted provided insight into the development and use of PLT over recent years from the experiences of those that have been at the forefront of deploying the tactic.

The widespread view among the commanders, PLT, protestors and business members who were interviewed for the review was that the PLT function has significantly contributed to reducing disorder, facilitating peaceful protest and balancing human rights. The value of the role of PLT as a tactical option pre event was particularly highlighted and was thought to be a major contributing factor to the facilitating of engagement, opening the channels of communication and the building of relationships, and reducing disorder.

As the role continues to develop and a national picture emerges, there are several considerations for the deployment and use of PLT contained in this report, which may assist in enhancing the contribution that PLT make in the facilitating of peaceful protest.

Mike Smith
Public Order and Public Safety
College of Policing
May 2015