

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

February 2014



Background

The Metropolitan Police are seeking permission to purchase water cannon for use on London's streets. The Mayor of London has stated that he supports this plan in principle, but is currently conducting a consultation to canvas public views. Following the consultation, the decision will be referred to the Home Secretary: water cannon is not currently authorised for use in England and Wales, and authorisation would need to be given before the purchase could go ahead. No further authorisation would be needed for the deployment of these weapons: this decision would rest with the relevant Chief Constable.

Both civil liberties groups and senior police officers have expressed deep concerns about the introduction of water cannon, yet it risks being rushed through with minimal consultation. This briefing summarises these concerns, showing that water cannon is:

- unpopular – including with the police,
- dangerous,
- ineffective against riots,
- expensive, and
- contrary to the British model of policing.

Water cannon is unpopular – including with the police

- The introduction of water cannon is not only opposed by civil liberties groups: numerous senior figures in policing have expressed serious concerns about the plans.
- **Five out of the six largest police authorities have said they don't want water cannon** and would be unwilling share the cost.
- Several Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have come out against the plans. Tony Lloyd, PCC for Greater Manchester, has said that “**no convincing argument has been made about how water cannons could improve policing or community safety**”. Bob Jones, PCC for the West Midlands, said they would be “as much use as a chocolate teapot.”
- The former Met Police Commissioner, Lord Blair, has also said he believes a good case has not yet been made for the use of water cannon outside Northern Ireland.¹
- **The London Assembly voted against the plans**, and 37,000 people have signed a petition against them.² Over 200 Londoners attended a consultative meeting about the plans at City Hall, with the vast majority expressing strong concern, and not a single one voicing support.
- In a recent Lords debate, Lord Harris, Chair of the APPG on Policing, said: “I have the gravest reservations as to why we are even talking about this”.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26226926>

² <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/35000-sign-petition-against-water-cannon-9134156.html>

Water cannon is dangerous

- The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)'s briefing on the plans acknowledges that **“water cannon are capable of causing serious injury or even death”**.³ This may include direct damage to internal organs and loss of hearing, as well as indirect injuries from displaced street furniture or debris.
- **German pensioner Dietrich Wagner was blinded by water cannon** deployed at an environmental protest. Wagner recently travelled to London to warn against the dangers of introducing water cannon in the UK.
- Liberty describe water cannon as “inflammatory, militaristic and brutal” and **“liable to cause panic, in addition to pain and distress”**. According to experts they consulted, water cannon do not simply drench their targets, but effectively suffocate them through water particles in their air.⁴
- As the Home Affairs Select Committee has noted, since water cannon is an indiscriminate weapon, it also **carries a high risk of injuring innocent bystanders**.
- The Metropolitan Police and ACPO claim that the use of water cannon in Northern Ireland has not resulted in any injuries. However, a review by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory of water cannon use in Northern Ireland and elsewhere concluded that, although there were no “clinical case reports ... in the peer-reviewed literature”, “there is good evidence from other sources that **serious injuries have been sustained by people subjected to the force of water cannon jets**”.⁵
- Concerns have also been raised that the combination of water cannon and kettling could result in serious conditions such as hypothermia.⁶

Water cannon is ineffective against riots

The London riots of August 2011 have formed the backdrop and justification for the Metropolitan Police's request to purchase water cannon. However, it is widely accepted that water cannon are ineffective and unsuitable for this kind of situation.

- ACPO's own briefing acknowledges that **“water cannon have limited use in relation to ‘agile’ disorder** such as the dynamic looting that was witnessed in August 2011”.
- In the wake of the 2011 riots, senior figures including **Bernard Hogan Howe**,⁷ **Theresa May**⁸ and **Hugh Orde**⁹ publicly said that using water cannon would have been inappropriate and unhelpful.

³ ACPO Briefing, ‘National Water Cannon Asset’, available at <http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ACPO%20Water%20Cannon%20Briefing%20Document%2C%20an%202014.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-water-cannon-has-no-place-on-londons-streets-9093391.html>

⁵ ACPO Briefing, ‘National Water Cannon Asset’

⁶ Dr Chris Cocking, ‘Dousing Disorder or Fanning the Flames? A study of the possible psychological and physiological effects of water cannon’, February 2014.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16325438>

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8690466/London-riots-Theresa-May-rejects-calls-for-water-cannon.html>

- Indeed, water cannon has the potential to make such situations worse rather than better: ACPO's briefing admits that **"its presence alone can be inflammatory"**.
- Bob Jones, Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for the West Midlands, has also suggested that "if anything a water cannon could have been more of a liability, as an asset that scarce police resources would have been needed to protect."
- **The Home Affairs Select Committee's report on the riots said that "it would have been inappropriate as well as dangerous to have employed water cannon ... We agree with our witnesses, including senior police officers, that such use could have escalated and inflamed the situation further."** No new evidence has emerged to alter this position.

In reality, **water cannon would be much more likely to be used against protesters than in situations like the 2011 riots.** ACPO's briefing notes that "there is no intelligence to suggest that there is an increased likelihood of serious disorder within England and Wales. However, it would be fair to assume that the ongoing and potential future austerity measures are likely to lead to continued protest." This has profoundly disturbing implications for the right to peaceful protest. It also means that attempts to link these plans to the riots are disingenuous.

Water cannon is a waste of money

- The £100,000 cost of the current proposal is only an interim solution which involves buying second-hand equipment from the German Federal Police to 'fill the gap' during the 18-24 months it would take to purchase new water cannon.
- ACPO estimates that **"typically water cannon cost from £600k to £1 million each"**.
- Police forces outside London are unwilling to contribute to these costs. For example, Jane Kennedy, PCC for Merseyside, has said, "I would not want to see precious resources diverted to purchase such vehicles when their value is yet to be proven."¹⁰
- Bernard Hogan Howe himself commented in 2011: **"Of course these things are expensive, most of the time they just sit there doing nothing."**¹¹

Water cannon will undermine the British model of policing

- **Chief Constable David Shaw, who is leading the water cannon project for police services nationally, has admitted its use "feels very un-British".**¹² In a letter to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), he said: "It is recognised that the introduction of water cannon represents **one of the most significant changes to operational policing** since the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners".
- In the wake of the 2011 riots, Theresa May rejected calls for the weapon to be introduced, saying, **"The way we police in Britain is not through use of water cannon. The way we police in Britain is through consent of communities."**

⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/water-cannons-baton-rounds-hugh-orde>

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/feb/04/police-forces-opposed-to-water-cannon>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16325438>

¹² <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/feb/04/police-forces-opposed-to-water-cannon>

- In a Lords debate on water cannon, Lord Paddick, who served in the Metropolitan police for 30 years, said: “Licensing the use of water cannon, their purchase and use on the UK mainland would be **disproportionate and damaging to the reputation of the police service**. Whichever way we look at it, water cannon are just not worth it.”¹³

Suggested next steps

We are asking concerned parliamentarians to:

- Sign our open letter expressing concern about the plans
- Table the following question for Home Office questions (10th March, tabling deadline 4th March):

“To ask the Home Secretary what plans she has to license the use of water cannon in England and Wales.”
- Sign EDM 984, ‘Water Cannon’

Further information

For more information and suggested written questions, please contact:

Christine Berry | Parliamentary Co-ordinator, No to Water Cannon | christine.berry@cantab.net | 07877 294 992

¹³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/140212-0001.htm#140212154000573>