HMICFRS

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

An inspection of the police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024

Tranche 2: use of an intelligence-led approach, tackling online content and social media, and crime investigations

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Foreword

On Monday 29 July 2024, three young girls, Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice Da Silva Aguiar, were murdered in a knife attack in Southport. Following these tragic events, widespread unrest and serious disorder broke out in many towns and cities across the UK.

On 6 September 2024, the Home Secretary commissioned me to carry out a rapid review into the policing response to the disorder, to identify lessons for the future. The commission divided the work into two tranches (parts).

On 18 December 2024, we published our report on the first part of this work, 'An inspection of the police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 1'.

The Tranche 1 report set out our findings on these areas:

- the police service's public order public safety (POPS) capacity and capabilities;
- the police service's ability to mobilise police officers across police force areas to respond to the disorder; and
- how the well-being and resilience of officers might be affected by repeated exposure to incidents of disorder.

We concluded that the national mobilisation of POPS resources, combined with the quick identification and prosecution of offenders, was instrumental in ending the disorder and restoring peace to our towns and cities. Officers displayed immense bravery. Many sustained injuries, and some were hospitalised. The professionalism of those who led the response deserves credit. But the systems and processes the police service uses need to change.

Since 2021, the police have dealt with notable incidents of serious disorder in Kent, Leeds, South Wales, London, Merseyside, Rochdale and Rotherham. Many cities in the UK have experienced protest and serious disorder, some of which was violent and involved people with extreme beliefs. In our Tranche 1 report we highlighted how the police service's intelligence assessments didn't sufficiently predict the threat this rising tide of serious disorder posed.

The police service needs robust systems to collect, analyse and share intelligence about people who seek to co-ordinate, incite or take part in disorder-related offences. These systems would help the police service to anticipate serious violence and disorder, and to mobilise resources to multiple seats of disorder quickly and efficiently.

In our Tranche 1 report, we made several recommendations that, if implemented, would improve the police service's response to widespread serious disorder in the future.

This is our Tranche 2 report. It sets out our findings on the police service's:

- use of an intelligence-led approach;
- arrangements for tackling online content and social media; and
- crime investigations.

Tranche 2 of our review considered incidents of disorder from before and after the murders in Southport on Monday 29 July 2024. Our terms of reference didn't include how the police and other agencies managed the risk posed by the Southport murderer, which is the subject of a public inquiry.

Our findings and recommendations in Tranche 2 are based on a wide range of evidence. We drew on evidence gathered during Tranche 1, including from the eight police forces we inspected and regional and national policing bodies that dealt with the disorder in July and August 2024.

For our Tranche 2 review, we also considered evidence from five more police forces, which had experience of dealing with incidents of disorder since 2021. We wanted to understand how they assessed and responded to social media and other online content.

In Tranche 1, we held over 140 interviews and focus groups with more than 200 police officers and police staff at force, regional and national level. We also heard evidence from other interested parties, such as government bodies and criminal justice partners.

In Tranche 2, we held a further 70 interviews and focus groups with more than 130 police officers and police staff. Many we spoke with had been present at incidents of disorder or had carried out police command roles during the disorder.

So that this review considered evidence and opinions from a wide range of sources, we also interviewed other interested parties. These included representatives from national and regional bodies responsible for technical areas of policing, specifically, intelligence, investigations, communications and technology. We compared our judgments from those interviews with our findings in other areas of policing.

In Tranche 2, we also collected evidence from interviews with a team of academics specialising in open source research, two global online service providers, Ofcom (the regulator for communications services) and other government bodies that had oversight of online information or intelligence during the disorder.

In total, across both tranches of our review, we scrutinised over 700 reports and other documents. These included police forces' POPS strategic risk assessments, intelligence reports, community impact assessments, online content and social media communication strategies, and investigation materials. We also examined over 4,370 pieces of evidence, in accordance with our terms of reference.

Disappointingly, we found that the police service didn't sufficiently prioritise intelligence on disorder, even though the Strategic Policing Requirement includes it as one of the most significant threats to public safety. We also found that forces didn't always monitor, collect, classify or use disorder-related intelligence effectively. This inhibits their ability to identify disorder-related risk at local, regional and national levels. And it is part of the reason the police service didn't react to changes in public sentiments before the disorder in Southport.

During our inspection, we found no conclusive or compelling evidence that the 2024 disorder was deliberately premeditated and co-ordinated by any specific group or network. Most people who took part in the disorder lived locally. Before the 2024 disorder, many of them hadn't been convicted of disorder-related offences. The police arrested 147 children, some as young as 11 years old. The oldest person arrested and convicted for assault was a man aged 81. The events that led to their arrests mainly involved public expressions of disaffection, online and on the streets of UK towns and cities. The murders of three young girls in Southport triggered these events. But they turned into widespread and often serious disorder because of many other complex factors.

The police service shouldn't be caught off guard again. It should improve its disorder-related intelligence systems and processes. It needs to develop a more cohesive intelligence network that informs and supports the police response to simmering tension and unrest. This would reduce the likelihood of it developing into widespread disorder.

I must reinforce the importance and value of neighbourhood policing. In my report 'State of policing: the annual assessment of policing in England and Wales 2023', I highlighted how neighbourhood policing is the most effective way to build community confidence. As officers establish positive relationships with communities, they develop a deeper understanding of people's mood and sentiments. Obtaining community information and intelligence in this way is vital because existing systems and networks don't help forces to gather, classify, analyse or share intelligence about disorder well enough.

Public safety isn't just a priority for policing. Section 6 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 reinforces this and places duties on other agencies to act to keep the

public safe. We found that many agencies worked together well during the disorder. They played their part in supporting the police in keeping communities safe and bringing offenders to justice. But not all agencies communicated effectively or worked together well, which increased the risk of disorder. All agencies must share information effectively, so they can keep people safe.

Traditional neighbourhood policing models are based on face-to-face work with communities. But the emergence of virtual communities, who use social media and other online platforms as their main method of communication, has created additional challenges and demands for policing.

The risk online content poses to public order and safety has increased since the widespread disorder in 2011. The disorder in 2024 shows that policing needs to act now and be more responsive to those risks. It must recognise that online content could contain vital intelligence.

Worldwide, a vast amount of online content is created each day. The police should also improve their online communications to fill any information void or to challenge false narratives or fake news. This is especially important when harmful or false content goes viral. The police service needs to better appreciate that fast-moving events require it to respond with an accurate counter-narrative, innovative in its approach and wide-reaching in terms of its audience. Policing can't be passive when public safety is at risk.

The Online Safety Act 2023 is a complex piece of legislation. The provisions and powers within it are only partly in force. The Act is being implemented in three phases and is expected to be fully in force in 2026.

Ofcom is the independent regulator for communications services. It has published a "roadmap" to regulation that sets out its overall approach. Since 17 March 2025, Ofcom can enforce online service providers' safety duties.

The Act doesn't give Ofcom or the police the power to remove illegal content themselves. But it imposes obligations on online service providers to mitigate the risk of harm from illegal content.

In accordance with their safety duties, online service providers must have systems in place to identify and remove illegal content. They must also swiftly remove any illegal content they are alerted to, including illegal content related to the provocation of violence under section 4 of the Public Order Act 1986. This is included as a priority offence in the Online Safety Act 2023.

It is too early for us to reach any conclusions on how effectively the Online Safety Act 2023 and Ofcom will support the police service during rapidly evolving serious disorder. But unless regulation and enforcement of illegal content is strengthened, and the capability is established for its immediate removal, the provisions of the Act will have little or no bearing on the real-time effects of online

content related to rapidly evolving serious disorder. In the context of a national emergency, such as the widespread disorder that took place in summer 2024, once content is posted the potential harm is near instant.

In our review, we found that some police forces are still investigating crimes related to the disorder. This reduces their capacity to investigate other crimes. The investigative capacity and capability for POPS incidents need to improve. At the time of our review, these didn't form part of the POPS-related elements of the Strategic Policing Requirement. The police service needs to revise and improve its approach, to better support investigations into disorder. This would make sure that forces aren't "bent out of shape" for prolonged periods.

Positively, we found that most forces investigated offences quickly, professionally and thoroughly. By 22 January 2025, the police had made 1,804 arrests and 1,071 people had been charged with criminal offences. The police service worked effectively with other parts of the criminal justice system, including the Crown Prosecution Service and HM Courts & Tribunals Service. Together, their prompt actions to bring offenders to justice undoubtedly had a deterrent effect.

The findings and recommendations from this review are only a starting point. I realise that implementing the recommendations may not be easy. But the police service must be able to deal with the consequences of harmful information that spreads rapidly online. This is an area that the police service and the Government must prioritise. If they implement these recommendations successfully, they would improve how the police gather and assess intelligence, respond to harmful online content and investigate disorder.

I urge the police service to act now to keep the public safe. It has not acted quickly enough to address recommendations we have made in our previous reports and other agencies have made in theirs. I am disappointed that the police service still hadn't held a national debrief to learn lessons, more than nine months after the disorder happened. Inaction detracts from the good work the police did during the disorder, and it harms the service's reputation.

The recent sentencing of the offender who committed the Southport murders to 52 years' imprisonment serves to remind us of that dreadful day in July 2024. Many people's lives were forever changed that day. In publishing this report, I express my deepest sympathy to the families of Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice Da Silva Aguiar. My thoughts are also with the many others affected.

Sir Andy Cooke QPM DL

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

Introduction

Background

On Monday 29 July 2024, three young girls, Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice Da Silva Aguiar, were murdered in a knife attack in Southport. Following these tragic events, widespread unrest and serious disorder broke out in many towns and cities across the UK. The levels of violence, criminal damage and assaults on police officers were extreme. The police service didn't expect disorder to develop so rapidly.

At first, the police responded to incidents of disorder at local and regional levels. Forces collaborated quickly as the violence escalated. After several days of extensive violence, the police service decided it had to respond more widely to stop the disorder, especially in the north of England.

By Monday 5 August 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) had decided to mobilise public order public safety (POPS) trained officers across the UK. The police called this Operation Navette. By Wednesday 7 August 2024, the National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC) and the NPCC were actively managing the national mobilisation process.

National mobilisation continued until Sunday 18 August 2024. The NPCC reports that Operation Navette was the largest mobilisation of POPS officers since 2011. We learned that forces deployed 1,622 police support units, amounting to about 40,000 days worked.

Police officers, police staff and volunteers supported the response, including in call handling, custody, investigation, local policing, operational planning and criminal justice departments.

On Saturday 10 August 2024, deployments of police officers were at their highest. This coincided with the start of the English Football League season. NPoCC's data shows that the police service deployed 6,675 POPS officers that day. Its national resourcing co-ordination cell managed the distribution of resources throughout the UK. The Metropolitan Police Service deployed officers to north-east and north-west England, forces from Wales supported south-west forces and Police Scotland supported the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Operation Navette drew on other support, including from regional organised crime units (ROCUs), regional information and co-ordination centres (RICCs), Counter Terrorism Policing and the National Crime Agency.

By Monday 19 August 2024, the threat of violence had subsided, so the NPCC moved Operation Navette into a recovery phase. In each force, chief constables managed the return to normal policing operations.

On 6 September 2024, the Home Secretary commissioned HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary to carry out "a rapid review of the cross-policing response to the disorder to better prepare policing for the future". This commission established terms of reference for two tranches of work.

On 18 December 2024, we published our Tranche 1 report, 'An inspection of the police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 1'. It set out our findings about the police service's response to the incidents of disorder at a force, regional and national level. It dealt with the themes of POPS capacity and capability, mobilisation and well-being. We included recommendations and lessons that the police service needs to learn quickly.

This is our Tranche 2 report. It sets out our findings and recommendations about how the police managed intelligence, online content including misinformation and disinformation, and investigations into the disorder.

Terminology in this report

Our reports contain references to, among other things, 'national' definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes.

In some instances, 'national' means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland, or the whole of the United Kingdom.

A timeline of events

Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice Da Silva Aguiar are murdered in Southport, Merseyside.

Peaceful vigil takes place in Southport.
Several hours later, disorder takes place near to scene.
A police van is set alight; 71 police officers are injured.

Wednesday 31 July

Disorder occurs in Hartlepool, Aldershot, London and Manchester. Some hotels housing asylum seekers and mosques are attacked.
In London, 100 people are arrested.

Thursday 1 August

Prime Minister holds roundtable meeting with the police and partners to discuss the disorder.
NPoCC contacts RICCs' mobilisation leads, advising them of the potential for further disorder and requesting 10 percent of the POPS Strategic Policing Requirement.

Friday 2 August

Disorder occurs in Liverpool and Sunderland.
The chair of the NPCC writes to the Prime Minister summarising what was agreed at the roundtable meeting. The letter includes plans to "scale up our coordination and resources in the coming days" and requests "support for policing".

Saturday 3 August

Disorder occurs in Liverpool, Blackpool, Hull, Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds, Belfast, Manchester, Blackburn, Preston, Nottingham, Plymouth and Newcastle.
The NPCC's POPS lead decides that NPoCC needs to prepare to activate the national mobilisation plan.

Sunday 4 August

Offenders attack hotels housing asylum seekers in Rotherham and Tamworth.
Disorder occurs in Middlesbrough, Bolton and Weymouth.
The NPCC sets up a national command structure. NPoCC prepares a national coordination framework.

Monday 5 August

Disorder occurs in Belfast, Darlington, Birmingham and Plymouth; 107 police officers are injured.
The NPCC's gold commander approves NPoCC's national coordination framework.

Wednesday 7 August

Thousands of people participate in protests across England.
The NPCC implements the POPS national mobilisation plan (Operation Navette).
Gold command and meeting structures are established to support the response phase of national mobilisation.

Operation Navette moves from response to recovery phase.
In total, 302 police officers were injured and 54 were hospitalised during the disorders.
No national police debrief takes place.

Monday 19 August

Friday 6 September

The Home Secretary formally commissions HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary to carry out "a rapid review of the cross-policing response to the disorder to better prepare policing for the future".

The offender pleads guilty to the murders of Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice Da Silva Aguiar. He is later sentenced to a minimum of 52 years in jail for their murders.

Monday 20 January

Police intelligence assessments didn't correctly assess the risk to public safety from a rising tide of disorder

In our Tranche 1 report, we said:

> "intelligence assessments didn't predict the rising tide of violent disorder well enough. These assessments influence the timeliness of national mobilisation decisions."

The police strategic risk assessments (SRAs) at the time of the disorder graded the threat of disorder as "low". But since 2021 the police had dealt with notable incidents of serious disorder in Merseyside, Rotherham, South Wales, London, Leeds, Kent and Rochdale. Many cities in the UK had recently experienced protests and counter-protests, some of which had been violent and involved people with more extreme beliefs.

National police intelligence assessments didn't correctly assess the risk and threat to public safety from a rising tide of disorder. Grading the threat and risk of disorder as "low" was wrong and influenced the timeliness of national mobilisation decisions. But we found that some forces were in a better position to anticipate disorder, accurately assess community tensions and plan their responses accordingly. This was due to proper briefing, debriefing and lessons being learnt at the local level.

We reviewed how some forces responded to the rising tide of disorder that predated events in summer 2024. We found that many of those forces had learned lessons from their previous experiences. All had improved their neighbourhood policing arrangements. Many had also improved how they collect and assess community

intelligence and information. Senior officers in those forces felt that the improvements helped them to anticipate and prevent serious disorder in 2024.

Police intelligence networks and processes that deal with disorder are fragmented

The absence of a police intelligence network to specifically deal with disorder is a problem. Without a cohesive and properly joined-up approach to intelligence on disorder, the police cannot accurately assess the strategic risk of disorder.

There is no clear police strategy or plan to manage intelligence on the risk of widespread disorder. It isn't clear to us which part of the police intelligence network is responsible for managing intelligence about disorder-related risks.

We also found that many forces were unclear about the role and responsibilities of NPoCC strategic intelligence and briefing (SIB) in a national emergency, such as the widespread disorder in summer 2024. And it is clear to us that SIB doesn't have enough capability and capacity to take a more real-time lead role in disorder-related intelligence functions.

The wider police intelligence network is fragmented when it comes to dealing with intelligence on disorder. There are several separate intelligence functions, departments and teams across the police service that deal with aspects of intelligence on disorder. But each has developed its own processes in response to specific crime types, policing themes or individual priorities. They each apply different priorities and use different terminology to inform risk assessments aligned to their core functions.

We found that from the outset of the widespread national disorder, the police service didn't have an effective strategy or plan that brought the network together for a common purpose. This made monitoring, gathering, analysing and sharing intelligence on the disorder slow and piecemeal. In turn this made developing disorder-related intelligence to help operational decision-making far more difficult.

The police service needs to have a better intelligence strategy or plan in place. At a time of national emergency, this plan should be clear and obvious to all. Instead, as one senior intelligence officer described, the police service "wrote the manual as it happened".

National risk assessments for public disorder need to be updated in response to changing threats

Intelligence on disorder isn't a priority for the police service. This was evident in the POPS SRAs in 2023 and 2024 that graded the threat of disorder at a national level as "low". As we stated in our Tranche 1 report, this was one of the reasons the service failed to effectively respond to the rising tide of disorder before events in Southport, and the widespread disorder afterwards.

The lack of prioritisation and inadequate risk assessment is also clear in Government assessments and commentary in its National Risk Register about "the most serious risks facing the United Kingdom". The National Risk Register 2023 (published in August 2023, a year before the summer 2024 disorder) stated:

> "Public disorder is a highly unpredictable risk. Although the majority of protests in the UK remain peaceful, on rare occasions these events can escalate towards conflict. The primary driver may be long-standing grievances, or it could occur as a spontaneous response to a single incident. Peaceful protests are not considered a form of public disorder, and the right to protest is enshrined in UK law."

On 16 January 2025, the National Risk Register 2025 (published within six months of the 2024 disorder) described the risk in identical words.

The foreword to the National Risk Register 2025 also states:

> "The risks we face are ever changing, and our assessments must keep pace. Events last year underscored the importance of anticipating and understanding these risks. Whether that was disorder on the streets or the impact of severe weather."

We are concerned that the National Risk Register 2025 doesn't adequately reflect the future risk of disorder at the national strategic level. Despite the statement in the foreword, it doesn't consider the serious disorder of summer 2024.

We spoke with representatives from the Cabinet Office and the Home Office about these concerns. We learned that the next risk assessment in September 2025 will consider the impact of the 2024 disorder. This is too late. The national risk assessment process needs to be more dynamic. In a complex and ever-changing society, it must keep pace. Otherwise, the National Risk Register's accuracy and value are reduced.

The police lack specialist capacity and capability to deal with information and intelligence on serious disorder

In our Tranche 1 report, we said:

> "On Thursday 1 August 2024, after two days of violence across England and three days after the tragedy that triggered it, the Prime Minister chaired a discussion about the disorder with senior police and other public service leaders. The next day the NPCC wrote to the Prime Minister, clarifying what was agreed."

We concluded that:

> "It is clear that the police service knew there were gaps in its intelligence about violent disorder, and it sought specialist support from the Government. This is a complex area, and we intend to explore it in depth during the second part of this review."

The NPCC asked for the Government's open source intelligence capacity and capability and its counter disinformation cell (which operated during the General Election) to be made available. The aim was to help the police manage the effects of illegal or harmful online content.

This was the right thing to do because the police service needed help. It didn't have the right capacity and capability to monitor, collect, analyse or share specialist or more confidential types of intelligence.

The police service and government intelligence functions need to revise how they work together on intelligence capacity and capabilities during national emergencies. In this case, the response to widespread disorder.

The police service needs to learn the lessons from the 2011 and 2024 disorders and improve its management of intelligence

In our 2011 report 'The rules of engagement: A review of the August 2011 disorders', we said there were significant gaps in police intelligence systems and processes. We concluded that:

> "Local and national intelligence systems did not – and (in their current designs) could not – anticipate the spread of the August disorders. At a local level, some forces relied on conventional police intelligence (i.e. information which has been assessed and corroborated) as a predictor of disorder."

We recommended that the police service should:

> "aggregate the collection, management and dissemination of public order intelligence and information by creating a central all source hub, which would act as a radar for the Police Service and put them on the front foot by scanning the wider environment to look for precursor signs and signals, from both open source material and police databases".

We said the all source hub could:

- "act as the central repository for the data required to complete a national Public Order and Public Safety Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment;
- provide strategic intelligence products to help identify potential public order threats;
- monitor the availability of trained public order assets in police forces;
- provide a fast-time strategic briefing unit function in the event of disorder, and be identifiable as the national single point that can provide information quickly to the Police Service;
- act as a centre of excellence for the analysis of social media in public disorder scenarios; and
- link police control rooms to enable rapid communication and contact with key decision makers."

Since our recommendations in 2011, the police service has made some progress in reviewing its intelligence-led approaches to disorder. For example, it has established NPoCC and SIB.

But we found that the police service hadn't fully implemented our recommendations, or those in reports from other agencies. As a result, it has missed opportunities to improve its capacity, capability and approach when dealing with intelligence and information on disorder.

The police service needs to properly classify and prioritise intelligence on disorder. And intelligence capacity and capability across the police network need to be better aligned. If this is achieved, the police service should be better prepared for future disorder. It will also be able to properly assess the strategic risk of disorder at national, regional and local levels.

The causes of the widespread disorder in 2024 were complex

Taking all our evidence into account, we conclude that the causes of the widespread disorder were extremely complex. It isn't possible to attribute the cause to one single factor.

Some people, including politicians, and many media outlets have suggested that the disorder was the result of well-organised and co-ordinated action by extremist groups. Others stated that the disorder was caused by deliberate, targeted disinformation from a variety of sources.

However, we found that the causal factors were more complex than were initially evident. Some of the main reasons for the widespread disorder were social deprivation, austerity and the economic downturn, political policies and decisions on migration and asylum, and decreasing trust and confidence in policing.

What is clear, in common with the recent policing history of disorder, is that an unprecedented event triggered the initial disorder. In this case, the murders of three young girls in Southport, compounded by some of the harmful online reporting that followed.

The volume of this online content, and the overwhelming speed at which it was shared, further influenced widespread disorder. It served as a call to arms for large groups of disillusioned people.

In March 2024, '[The Khan Review. Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach]' reported:

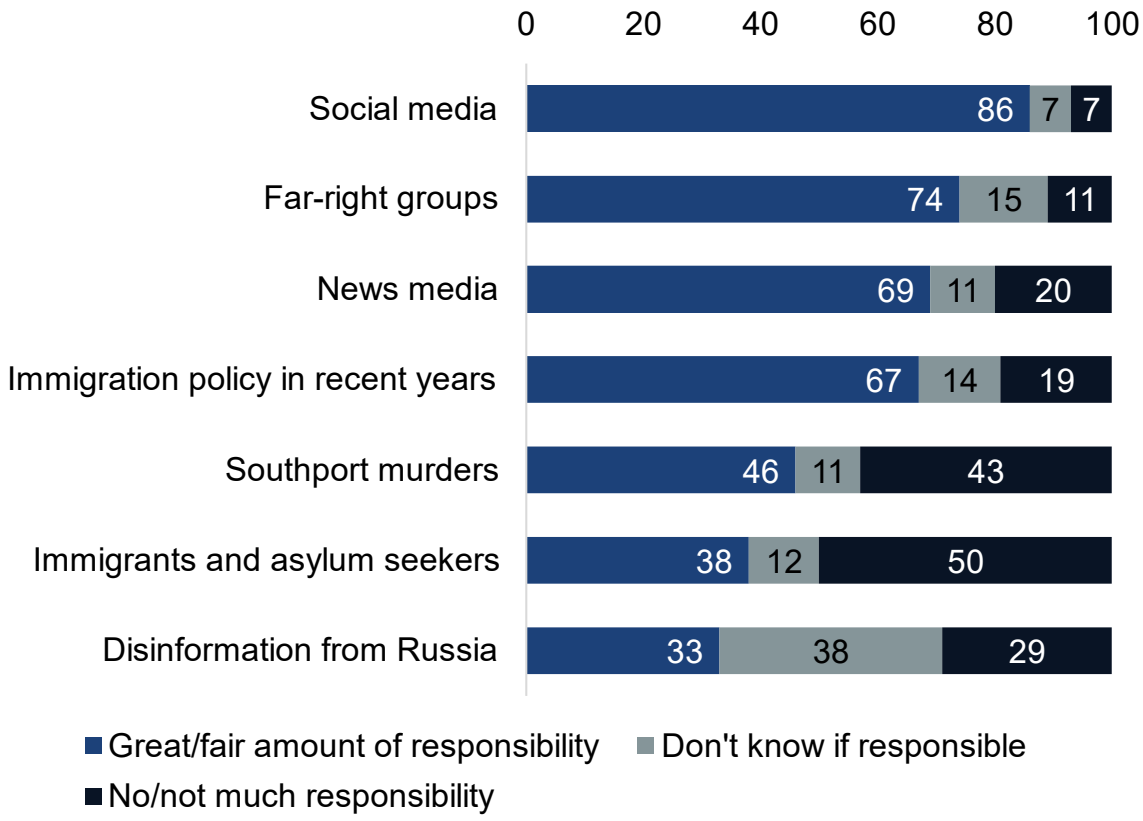
> "Disillusionment with democracy, the emergence and growth of social media and artificial intelligence, the spread of disinformation and deep fakes, and the mainstreaming of extremism has profound consequences for democratic nations. How we preserve social cohesion while preventing, managing, and responding

to these challenges is fast becoming one of the most important questions of our time."

We also reviewed a variety of other sources, some of which we summarise below.

On 8 August 2024, YouGov published a survey, 'The public reaction to the 2024 riots'. Its survey fieldwork took place on 5 and 6 August 2024, immediately after the first week of widespread disorder in the UK. On the question of who is responsible for the riots, the survey headline was: "Rioters, social media and far-right groups most to blame for unrest, but two-thirds say news media and immigration policy also responsible".

Figure 1: Proportion of the public who believe the following factors to be responsible for the disorder



Source: YouGov

In January 2025, the Children's Commissioner for England published a report 'Children's involvement in the 2024 riots'. The report stated that 147 children were arrested, which is about 8 percent of the 1,804 arrests made. It also said:

> "Many children described making a split-second decision, their involvement being largely spontaneous and unconsidered, driven by curiosity or the thrill of the moment to see what was going on in their community. Others described a deep distrust of the police and the opportunity to retaliate against a previous interaction.

> What these conversations do not support is the prevailing narrative that emerged from the riots which was subsequently accepted: that online misinformation, racism or other right-wing influences were to blame for why young people were enticed to join in the aggression."

On 8 February 2025, a Big Issue article, '"They united the public in opposition to hatred": What have we learned six months on from UK riots?', stated that poverty was a contributory factor to the disorder:

> "the rioting was not caused by people simply swayed by anti-immigration rhetoric. There was a high correlation between areas impacted and high levels of poverty."

Evidence obtained during our review is consistent with many of the findings and arguments in these surveys, reports and articles. No single issue or factor caused the disorder to spread. The causes are varied and complex. But the police service and politicians cannot ignore them if they are to try to prevent widespread disorder in the future.

The police service hasn't kept up with the challenges of online content

The police service simply hasn't kept pace with the fast-developing nature of online communications. In general, forces haven't invested enough in resources and technology. This means many forces have limited capability to effectively manage and respond to online content.

The police service hasn't fully responded to recommendations made in a variety of previous inspection reports and reviews. As a result, at the time of the disorder it hadn't sufficiently developed its capability to effectively respond to online content.

The head of communications in one force remarked on the continuing changes to how social media is used and the increasing power that online content possesses:

> "A decade ago, the narratives which cut through were likely to be based on evidence, on professional journalistic integrity and on fundamental truth.
>
> Today, whoever can tell the best story first, powered by the most emotive and compelling content, wins the day. And there is no prize for second place."

The police service can't fully control or counter the speed and volume of online content, whether the content is legitimate or presents a risk.

But what is clear to us, and other social media commentators and academic researchers, is that the police service must do more to communicate online and fill the information void with the truth. Forces must provide a true narrative online to reach people who may be searching for information. They must be robust in countering online content that contains misinformation or disinformation. They must challenge

illegal or harmful content and communicate to the public how they will respond to and act against those who commit online offences.

The police service must communicate the facts. Repeatedly, continuously and effectively as circumstances change and develop. If not, others will take over the narrative with overwhelming amounts of online content. And some of this may be false or harmful to the police response and the communities the police are there to protect.

The same head of communications also said forces need to be “relentless in their briefings to correct inaccurate or misleading content”.

Online posts about the disorder, including misinformation and disinformation, came from a range of sources. The information we reviewed suggested that disaffected individuals, influencers or groups, rather than criminal factions or extremists, were those predominantly responsible for inciting people to act violently and take part in disorder.

The police service doesn’t have a cohesive approach to handling online content in relation to disorder. The NPCC’s 2019 ‘Social Media Project: Target operating model’ was only published as guidance. It wasn’t implemented by all forces and is already outdated. In the absence of any police power to remove illegal online content at its source, the strength of the police voice and influence becomes even more important. The police service must not remain silent. It must respond quickly. Some forces showed that this is possible.

Legislation, regulation and enforcement in relation to illegal online content must improve to support policing

The Online Safety Act 2023 is complex. The provisions and powers within it are only partly in place. The Act is being implemented in three phases. It is expected to be fully in force in 2026. Ofcom is the independent regulator for communications services. It has published a “roadmap” to regulation, setting out its overall approach.

The Act requires providers to implement systems and processes to reduce the risk that their services are being used to post illegal content, and to remove such content when they are alerted to it. These new safety duties are now in effect. Since 17 March 2025, Ofcom can enforce them. But the Act doesn’t give Ofcom or the police the power to remove illegal online content.

The Act is still being implemented, so we cannot draw any firm conclusions on its impact. But we are concerned that in practice the Act may make no significant difference to the police service’s ability to respond to online content connected to rapidly evolving serious disorder.

It is clear to us that Ofcom, and the provisions of the Act, will have little or no bearing on the real-time effects of online content in such cases. In the context of a national emergency, once content is posted online the potential for harm is nearly instant.

The provisions and effectiveness of the Online Safety Act 2023 have recently received widespread comment in the national media and from politicians and lawyers.

On 31 January 2025, LBC News published an article with the headline 'Online safety laws should be urgently updated to stop repeat of last year's riots, leaked Home Office review states'.

Since the disorder, the Home Secretary has challenged online service providers to act lawfully and in the spirit of the Online Safety Act 2023. On 21 January 2025, the Daily Mail reported 'Yvette Cooper urges social media firms to take down "dangerous" online material blamed for fuelling Southport killer's sick obsession with violence'.

And on 2 February 2025, the Telegraph reported 'Terror videos that inspired Southport killer still online as social media giants fail to act' and 'Home Secretary "angry" that companies have failed in their "moral responsibility"'.

On the same day, BBC News published an article headlined 'Disgraceful that videos seen by Southport killer still online, says Cooper'.

But the Online Safety Act 2023, in its current state, provides little support or assistance to the police service to monitor, prevent and detect crimes committed by UK users on global online platforms.

Some forces were more "bent out of shape" than others by the disorder

Forces that dealt with large or many simultaneous outbreaks of disorder have had to manage the greatest number of investigations. They have faced a formidable task.

Some senior police officers we spoke with felt that the investigative workload following the disorder wasn't shared equally. Others felt that national mobilisation mutual aid arrangements to support investigations weren't clear.

We found that investigative officers weren't included in the POPS-related elements of the Strategic Policing Requirement. This means forces aren't obliged to supply them, even when the national mobilisation plan is activated. It wasn't clear to us, the NPCC or the forces we spoke with where responsibility lies for deploying investigative resources as part of mutual aid arrangements.

As a result, individual chief constables had to decide whether to request or release investigative resources to support other forces. This contributed to serious investigative pressure across some forces during and after the disorder, particularly those that made many arrests.

The Chief Constable of Merseyside Police told us:

> "Some forces are bent out of shape, and some aren't. Whilst some forces were focused on the national disorders and national policing requirement, other forces were able to concentrate on local deliverables [police services] such as call taking, response times and outcomes. Not all forces moved staff onto 12-hour shifts in support of a national response."

Following the disorder, a senior investigating officer in another force said:

> "A better national system for distributing investigative resources across the country or regions is needed to spread this disproportionate impact more fairly."

We stated in our Tranche 1 report that a plan must be put in place to support investigations during a national emergency. And that when such resources are required, chief constables should all support the plan and not be able to derogate from it.

Some senior officers we spoke with in Tranche 2 of our review had strong views that the police service needed to adopt a more collaborative approach to the national co-ordination of POPS incidents. Others stated that this approach needed to be more prescriptive.

One officer proposed that the national mobilisation co-ordinator should be able to direct the release and deployment of force resources in support of a national response to serious disorder. He said this should be part of a "group insurance" policy that every force must contribute to at times of need.

Similarly, another chief officer we interviewed stated: "Operational independence is about independence from the Home Secretary telling us where to put our officers, it's not about acting as islands."

Police investigators and the Crown Prosecution Service worked together effectively to arrest and prosecute offenders

The police worked rapidly and effectively to investigate crimes associated with the disorder. They quickly brought many offenders to justice for their crimes. NPCC data shows that police arrested 1,804 people during Operation Navette in response to the disorder. Forces brought 1,071 charges against suspects.

Forces told us that they received good support from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS). During the disorder, some courts sat for longer periods and at weekends. We learned of many examples where senior prosecutors worked long hours to help bring offenders to justice quickly.

Our terms of reference don't include a review of other parts of the criminal justice system. We looked at how effectively the police service and criminal justice partners worked together to respond to the disorder. It was clear to us that criminal

justice partners recognised the scale of serious disorder across the country. They made sure that criminal justice processes were used effectively to manage an extremely high level of demand.

One senior police officer we spoke with said: “This was a unique point in time. All elements of the criminal justice system were aligned.”

A representative from the Police Federation of England and Wales told us “The speed of process, and length of sentences had a huge deterrent effect and potentially prevented further disorder.”

The efforts of everyone working within the criminal justice system to bring offenders to justice, quickly and positively, undoubtedly had a deterrent effect.

In the case of R v Sussex Justices (1924), Lord Hewart stated in his judgment that it is “of fundamental importance that justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done”. And 100 years later, we can see that the criminal justice system has operated effectively to bring offenders to justice for disorder-related crimes.

About us

His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services to make communities safer. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask and publish the answers in accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

Our commission

On 6 September 2024, the Home Secretary commissioned HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary to carry out a rapid review into the policing response to the disorder that happened across the UK in July and August 2024. The Home Secretary asked for work to be done quickly “to understand the lessons that must collectively be learnt from these events”.

The commission divided the work into two parts (or tranches). On 20 December 2024, we reported on Tranche 1 of this work, reviewing the police service’s capacity and capability, co-ordination and mobilisation, and the well-being of officers.

This report relates to Tranche 2 of our review. Its terms of reference are set out below.

Terms of reference

In our review, we will examine the police service’s arrangements for rapidly learning lessons from these outbreaks of serious disorder. We will also assess how well prepared it is to respond to future similar outbreaks.

The police service's use of an intelligence-led approach

We will assess:

- how the police service gathered and managed relevant intelligence about emerging threats of serious disorder from different sources, including those that are online and within communities; the likely value of these sources when the police service is responding to a rapidly developing situation; and the national structures and processes the police service used to collate, analyse and share intelligence; and
- the extent to which the police service recognised rising community tensions before the disorder and reacted to changes in intelligence during the disorder.

The police service's arrangements for tackling online content and social media

We will assess:

- how the police service monitors, assesses and responds to social media and online content, and how it deals with the consequences of social media content that contains misinformation and/or disinformation;
- the methods the police service can use to correct misinformation and disinformation rapidly;
- how the police service can counter and/or act against people who use social media to influence and incite others to take part in disorder;
- how the police service co-ordinates its public communications so they are consistent and effective; and
- how the police service identifies misinformation and disinformation that promotes and incites violence and refers it to technology companies so they can take appropriate action, and whether current systems and processes help the police to deal with harmful online content.

Crime investigations

We will assess:

- how dealing with the disorder affected forces' capacity and capability to maintain effective policing services, investigate crime, and support victims and witnesses;
- how forces responded to the additional investigative demand arising from the disorder;
- the effectiveness of national police arrangements in support of these investigations; and
- how the police service and criminal justice system partners worked together to bring offenders to justice.

Methodology

During both tranches of our review, we gathered a wide range of views from the police service and other organisations. We reviewed eight police forces in Tranche 1, and five in Tranche 2.

We spoke with a wide range of national and regional bodies with responsibility for mobilisation, intelligence, investigations, training and officers' well-being. These bodies include the NPCC, NPoCC, RICCs, ROCUs, the College of Policing and the CPS.

We also spoke with representatives of The National Police Wellbeing Service, the Chief Police Officers' Staff Association, the Police Superintendents' Association, the Police Federation of England and Wales and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners.

In Tranche 1, we selected eight forces in which serious disorder took place in summer 2024, and interviewed officers in different roles within those forces. We interviewed officers and reviewed documents that showed how the police service responded to the disorder. Many of the officers we spoke with were directly involved in policing the scenes of disorder.

We also held over 140 interviews and focus groups with more than 200 officers and police staff at force, regional and national levels. And we interviewed several people from other organisations, including the CPS, police staff associations and the College of Policing.

In Tranche 2, we selected five other forces that had experience of tackling serious disorder before summer 2024. We wanted to understand what these forces had learned from their experience, and how they investigated disorder-related crimes, their intelligence-led approaches and how they assessed information and responded to online content.

For our Tranche 2 review, we carried out interviews with a wide range of people and organisations, including:

- police investigators and intelligence specialists;
- police communication professionals;
- online analytical companies;
- governmental online specialists;
- online service providers; and
- the independent regulator of communications services, Ofcom.

We also held 70 interviews and focus groups with more than 130 officers and police staff at force, regional and national levels.

This means that in total we held over 210 interviews, involving more than 330 people. We are grateful for the support we have received and continue to receive.

We also scrutinised more than 700 documents and gathered and assessed over 4,370 pieces of evidence across both tranches. And we reviewed over 350 media articles to help inform our findings using the widest range of information and evidence.

We gathered data from various sources, including the NPCC and HMCTS, for inclusion in this report. The data was analysed and underwent extensive quality assurance. The data we have included was correct at the time of publication of this report.

In our Tranche 2 recommendations, we have highlighted what the police service could quickly do to improve:

- its use of intelligence-led approaches;
- how it deals with potentially harmful online content; and
- criminal investigations into serious disorder.

Our findings and recommendations are based on the evidence we found. They highlight what immediate action the police service should take to improve its response to disorder. But it should be noted that implementing some of these recommendations might come at a significant financial cost. It would require investment in police capacity, capability and IT systems and infrastructure. This is made more complex by so many forces operating independently of one another. So we have recommended where additional problem-solving capacity and capability could be shared or built into existing networks, particularly at a regional and national level.

Making recommendations that aren't realistic and proportionate wouldn't be helpful. And trying to replicate new technology and additional resources across the 43 forces in England and Wales wouldn't be practical. So we have taken a pragmatic approach to an area that now requires more research and development, and better problem-solving approaches.

Our recommendations provide a sensible starting point for this future work, debate and investment. But there are things the police service can do now to improve public safety, and that of police officers when they are required to respond to serious disorder in the future.

The police service's use of an intelligence-led approach

We wanted to understand how police forces collect, assess and use intelligence to help them deal with disorder. We visited eight police forces in Tranche 1 of our inspection and five police forces in Tranche 2. We drew on the evidence we gathered from all 13 forces, as well as evidence from police regional intelligence teams and relevant national units.

We considered:

- how the police service has responded to our previous recommendations on public order and public safety (POPS) intelligence;
- the police's approach to managing intelligence about serious disorder;
- the differing approaches forces use;
- how forces have learned from dealing with previous incidents of serious disorder; and
- the intelligence support provided to operational commanders.

We cannot overstate how important accurate and timely intelligence is to the effective policing of disorder. Information and intelligence underpins the national decision model. This is a framework the police service uses to help decide on the best response to incidents, including public disorder. But despite our previous recommendations, police forces haven't sufficiently prioritised action to better understand the risks associated with disorder.

In our 2024 report 'An inspection of the police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 1', we said the police service had failed to accurately assess the threat posed by a rising tide of disorder before the murders in Southport. This failure meant that the service wasn't as prepared as it should have been to deal with the threats posed to public safety.

We found that inaccurate assessments and a fragmented approach to gathering intelligence on disorder hampered the police response.

The police service hasn't learned important lessons about the public order public safety intelligence requirement

We found that the police service managed intelligence about disorder in a disjointed and fragmented way, despite our recommendations in the reports we published in 2011 and 2021.

In our 2011 report, 'The rules of engagement: A review of the August 2011 disorders', we said:

> "The police have much to learn about social media, and the quickly shifting modern communications of today. With some notable individual exceptions, the power of this kind of media … is not well understood and less well managed."

And that:

> "Police forces tried to monitor social media, but were on the whole overwhelmed by the amount of information available. This reflects a gap in how the police interact with social media for intelligence purposes."

We recommended that there should be "a new national framework for resolving public disorder". We said the framework would be supported by "A central information 'all source' hub, which would help police in anticipating and dealing with disorder."

In 2021, in 'Getting the balance right? An inspection of how effectively the police deal with protests', we said forces should improve the quality of:

- "police intelligence on protests, particularly intelligence about those who seek to bring about political or social change in a way that involves unlawful behaviour or criminality"; and
- "the protest-related intelligence they provide to the National Police Coordination Centre's Strategic Intelligence and Briefing team. And this team should ensure that its intelligence collection process is fit for purpose."

The police service has made some progress against these recommendations. For example, in 2013, in response to our recommendation for an 'all source' hub, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) created the National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC) to oversee the national plan for POPS mobilisation. And in 2020, NPoCC established an intelligence capability, known as the strategic intelligence and briefing (SIB) team.

SIB's responsibilities include collating and circulating intelligence about aggravated activism and protests that have the potential to cause disorder or significant disruption on a regional or national scale. It is also responsible for assessing the risk of disorder.

We conclude that the police service needs to do more. These national, regional and force level arrangements failed to help the service recognise and act on information to assess the risk and threat of disorder more accurately.

The police service didn't fully respond to the recommendations we made in 2011 and 2021, or to relevant recommendations made by others. Had it done so, it might have been in a much stronger position to deal with the effects of online content and to respond to emerging intelligence during the disorder.

The police service's management of intelligence about serious disorder is fragmented

In our Tranche 1 report, we stated that the police approach to managing disorder was fragmented. Our findings in Tranche 2 of our review have only strengthened that conclusion.

We were concerned to find that strategic assessments the police service relied on came to the wrong conclusions. The assessments failed to recognise the threat of disorder in the period leading up to events in Southport.

With a few exceptions, forces haven't invested enough time and resources in understanding the risk from serious disorder. Or in identifying individuals and groups who might incite, promote and organise disorder.

We found that many forces didn't routinely prioritise gathering intelligence on disorder. When they did, it was typically categorised under a wide variety of terms. This causes confusion and inconsistency. For example, the police POPS strategic risk assessment (SRA) primarily categorises intelligence collection on disorder under the term "cultural nationalism".

The 2024 POPS SRA defines cultural nationalism as:

> "Strategic protest that opposes any activity to be in opposition to traditional British national identity, values or cultural and historical beliefs. This can include anti-immigration themes along with anti-Islam, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation matters."

This definition is complicated. It doesn't explicitly reference disorder, or people who may commit it and why they do so. If the police service had used this term in the context of the 2024 disorder, it is unlikely that it would have gathered much intelligence on the types of people at risk of becoming involved.

Most forces we reviewed don't categorise intelligence on disorder in this way. Many intelligence officers and staff we spoke with weren't even familiar with the term "cultural nationalism". The definition and categorisation don't help the service in prioritising or collecting intelligence on disorder.

Forces need to better prioritise intelligence on disorder. To support this, the police service needs to revise the definitions, categories and classifications for collecting intelligence on disorder. Until this happens, the service won't be able to accurately assess the risk of disorder.

Strategic assessments didn't accurately evaluate the risk of disorder

In our Tranche 1 report, we said we were concerned that police intelligence assessments at all levels didn't sufficiently predict a rising tide of disorder. We concluded that:

> "intelligence assessments didn't predict the rising tide of violent disorder well enough. These assessments influence the timeliness of national mobilisation decisions."

We reviewed the Government's National Risk Register and the POPS SRA. We found that both came to the wrong conclusion.

The risk score for the likelihood of disorder hasn't been updated in the National Risk Register 2025 despite the 2024 disorder

The National Risk Register is a publicly available version of the National Security Risk Assessment. It lists the Government's assessment of the likelihood and potential impact of a broad range of risks that may directly affect the UK and its interests, including disorder. Before the 2024 Southport murders and the disorder that followed, the National Risk Register 2023 concluded that disorder is a "highly unpredictable risk".

Large-scale, widespread and, in some cases, serious disorder took place across the UK in July and August 2024.

On 16 January 2025, a full six months after that serious disorder, the Government published the National Risk Register 2025. It described the risk of a "reasonable worst-case scenario" involving large-scale disorder that would have a significant effect on the emergency services and government. The register applies a score to represent the likelihood of a reasonable worst-case scenario happening, with 1 representing the lowest likelihood and 5 the highest. The register scored the likelihood of disorder as 3 and categorised its impact as "limited".

The National Risk Register 2025 stated:

> "Public disorder is a highly unpredictable risk. Although the majority of protests in the UK remain peaceful, on rare occasions these events can escalate towards conflict. The primary driver may be long-standing grievances, or it could occur as a spontaneous response to a single incident. Peaceful protests are not considered a form of public disorder, and the right to protest is enshrined in UK law."

These are exactly the same words and risk assessment used two years ago in the National Risk Register 2023. Despite the events of July and August 2024 and previous incidents of disorder, the register's assessment of the likelihood and impact of disorder remains unchanged. This defies logical explanation, given that parts of the UK saw the worst outbreaks of serious disorder since 2011.

The national risk assessment process needs to be more dynamic. In a complex and ever-changing society, it must keep pace. Otherwise, the National Risk Register's accuracy and value are reduced.

Some public order public safety strategic risk assessments aren't thorough or accurate enough

The police service produces its own strategic assessments of the risks associated with POPS twice a year. It prepares POPS SRAs at force, regional and national levels.

In our Tranche 1 report, we concluded:

> "intelligence assessments didn't predict the rising tide of violent disorder well enough. These assessments influence the timeliness of national mobilisation decisions."

And that:

> "the police service must be able to anticipate serious violence and disorder. And it needs to enhance its plans at force, regional and national levels, so it can mobilise resources to multiple seats of disorder quickly and efficiently".

In Tranche 2 of our review, we examined 14 POPS SRAs prepared at force, regional and national levels. All were prepared before the disorder in summer 2024. We were concerned at the lack of thoroughness and the inaccuracy of some of those assessments.

But we were reassured to find that Merseyside Police reviewed and amended its POPS SRA after the first disorder in Southport. This helped the force to plan and prepare in anticipation of further disorder in the force area. It is unclear whether all forces have taken this approach.

SIB uses force and regional assessments to prepare the national POPS SRA. It describes risk levels for ten themes associated with public events, protest activity and disorder. These include "cultural nationalism", "anti-fascism" and "internationally inspired activity". All have an impact on how the police service assesses the risk of disorder. But the categories are inconsistent with those Counter Terrorism Policing uses, which further contributes to a confused picture.

In its national POPS SRA published in autumn 2023, the police service described the risk of violent disorder as "low". In the next national POPS SRA, produced in spring 2024, it identified an upturn in "cultural nationalism". It found that anti-immigration views and issues of asylum were triggers for protests and disorder and described a moderate increase in activity by "extreme right-wing groups".

The police service noted in the spring 2024 SRA that there had been "significant recorded activity linked to anti-immigration causes and hotels housing asylum seekers".

And that:

> "Social media platforms continue to be a frequently used tool to advertise events and share anti-immigration content, such as reports of crimes allegedly committed by asylum seekers, aimed at triggering emotive responses."

But it still graded the threat of violent disorder as "low".

In our Tranche 1 report, we stated that a series of violent incidents and disorders across the UK over the last two years should have influenced the police service's assessments of risk. And resulted in a heightened risk assessment.

Some national media outlets expressed similar views, although with very different emphasis and conclusions. For example, in September 2024, the Guardian stated in its article, 'UK police risk assessment before riots said far-right threat probably "minimal"', that:

> "Documents from December 2023 show that police instead prioritised the pro-Palestinian movement, environmental protests, football matches and animal rights activism as potentially threatening public order."

One chief constable we interviewed reflected that:

> "The community tension and intelligence piece, and misinformation, is something we've never experienced before. We all noticed this creeping up, that this moment was inevitable. The policing system didn't step up. The indicators were there, that the country was entering into a heightened state but there was no national co-ordination for the police response. We need to be more proactive, not just a couple of people writing tension reports. We need to agree what mobilisation will look like. We were in too much of a reactionary state."

We conclude that Government and police service strategic assessments haven't accurately assessed the risk posed to public safety from disorder. And we are concerned that neither have been updated since the disorder in summer 2024.

The police service needs to improve how it classifies and collects intelligence on disorder

The police service categorises the risks associated with public order and public safety under ten themes. Those most likely to lead to disorder include "cultural nationalism", "anti-fascism" and "internationally inspired activity". The police service also uses terms such as "domestic extremism" and "aggravated activism" to describe the behaviour of individuals and groups who may pose a risk to public safety. We are concerned that having too many categories creates a lack of clarity on the requirement for intelligence on disorder.

We found that many forces were confused by the intelligence classifications and requirements for disorder, particularly regarding the term “cultural nationalism”.

The police service didn’t really understand how to categorise those who didn’t conform to the existing definitions. Most notably those who are simply drawn to violence but without any ideology or any shared grievance.

Forces we reviewed didn’t understand these intelligence categories well enough. This includes some officers and staff who work in force intelligence departments. A lack of understanding compromises the quality of intelligence about those who intend to incite, co-ordinate or take part in disorder. We conclude that this may have contributed to incorrect assessments of the risks posed, and the lack of intelligence that frustrated police commanders.

NPoCC has reviewed the term “cultural nationalism” with the aim of standardising its description and giving clear guidance to forces. Any description should also recognise the growing number of people who follow no ideology but are drawn to violence.

This should also help concentrate local intelligence gathering on people likely to resort to disorder in pursuit of an ideology or grievance and improve forces’ understanding of tensions within affected communities.

If the police service is clearer about the classifications for disorder-related intelligence, and works better to share, review and identify people likely to be drawn to disorder, it will dramatically improve its understanding of the risk. We conclude that the police service needs to review its classification and collection requirements for intelligence on disorder and afford it a higher priority. This will help it to identify and divert those people most at risk of becoming involved in crime or disorder at an early stage.

The police service assessed the threat of disorder as “low”

We wanted to understand why the police service had assessed the threat as “low” before the outbreak of disorder in 2024.

We reviewed several reports from the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) and the National Community Tension Team (NCTT). JTAC describes domestic terrorism in its reports but they understandably contain little assessment of disorder. In its reports, the NCTT assesses factors that could affect levels of community tension; these reports are compiled from tension and hate crime data submitted by forces.

The NCTT doesn’t collect data about people or groups that hold extreme views. So its reports are of limited value when assessing the risk of disorder. The NCTT’s assessments focus on tensions within faith-based or vulnerable communities. They don’t typically include analysis of the types of tensions that might exist in other communities. We also noted that the NCTT is understaffed. Six of the team’s nine posts were vacant at the time of our review. This inevitably reduces NCTT’s effectiveness.

We found that the police service's national POPS SRA incorrectly assessed the threat of disorder as "low". We conclude that several factors may have contributed to this assessment, including that:

- generally, information and intelligence supplied by local forces to SIB wasn't detailed enough to help develop a proper risk assessment;
- some force intelligence departments were unsure what disorder intelligence to collect because they didn't understand the classifications, particularly "cultural nationalism";
- many forces didn't routinely gather comprehensive information or intelligence from online sources;
- the police service failed to appreciate the effects of a rising tide of disorder before the Southport murders; and
- the police service didn't do enough to understand or assess the concerns and community tensions across some deprived neighbourhoods, where issues such as political isolation, poverty and anti-immigration views had led to declining trust and confidence in the police.

The police service must prioritise intelligence on disorder

In our 2021 report on how effectively the police deal with protests, we found that the police were better prepared to deal with serious disorder if they understood the risk posed by individuals and groups who might incite or organise disorder, or exploit the grievances, sentiments and alienation expressed in some communities.

Some senior police officers told us that before the 2024 disorders, they lacked strategic information and intelligence about the risks posed by people who might incite or resort to serious disorder in pursuit of their ideology or grievances.

One senior officer we spoke with was concerned that much of the intelligence material produced during the disorder was too broad and not detailed enough. This meant that opportunities to identify and manage main influencers and participants in the disorder were missed.

We found that forces that experienced high numbers of public events, protests and disorder typically prioritised POPS intelligence more strongly than others. We learned that some of those forces had introduced dedicated intelligence teams that gather, assess and use intelligence to improve their understanding of the risks they face from those intent on serious disorder.

Greater Manchester Police intelligence team

Greater Manchester Police's public order public safety (POPS) community safety intelligence team is part of its force intelligence bureau. The team has 11 members, who are intelligence officers, analysts or researchers. Each intelligence officer reviews a specific theme or themes contained in the force's POPS strategic risk assessment.

The team's analysts produce a biannual force POPS strategic risk assessment. They also help National Police Coordination Centre strategic and intelligence briefing to prepare national reports and assessments. The team prepares intelligence briefings, subject and problem profiles, and supports the force response to about 300 events and incidents each month. These include public events, such as concerts and sporting events (not including football), unlicensed music events, rallies, demonstrations and protests.

The community safety intelligence team produces daily intelligence updates and assessments which are considered at daily management meetings across the force. The team regularly updates an intelligence log. It also produces a monthly POPS assessment that identifies future events and attempts to anticipate potential risk of disorder.

For Operation Navette and Operation Greenaway (Greater Manchester Police's response to the assaults at Manchester airport on Tuesday 23 July 2024 and the protests that followed across the force area), the community safety intelligence team provided support to public order commanders throughout both operations.

We understand that not all forces can make the same commitment. But a regional model, through regional information and co-ordination centres (RICCs), might be beneficial and affordable. A regional approach to managing intelligence about disorder could help forces to recognise emerging risks so they can plan and prepare effectively.

The police service needs to improve its approach to managing intelligence on disorder

The police service takes a different approach to intelligence on terrorism than intelligence on disorder. It comes as no surprise to us that the rising tide of intelligence on disorder was missed before the disorder in 2024. We fully understand that intelligence on terrorism is a priority. But other national risks should still receive attention.

The approach to gathering intelligence about domestic terrorism is well resourced. It includes the Counter Terrorism Policing network of 11 regional counter terrorism units (CTUs). These units work to support CONTEST, the Government's strategy for countering terrorism.

CTUs collaborate with police forces and other agencies to divert people who are vulnerable to radicalisation away from terrorism. We heard how CTUs work with local forces and discuss individuals and groups, particularly those that CTUs have identified but whose offending falls below the threshold of terrorism.

But the police service hasn't implemented similar arrangements to develop and sustain its understanding of intelligence on disorder.

In January 2020, the NPCC transferred national responsibility for managing intelligence relating to protests and "cultural nationalism" from Counter Terrorism Policing to NPoCC. The aim was to help Counter Terrorism Policing to have greater focus on people whose activity potentially amounts to terrorism.

In April 2020, NPoCC created SIB to help forces better understand the risks associated with protest and disorder.

Police forces, RICCs and the United Kingdom Football Policing Unit all contribute to the preparation of national intelligence assessments, including the POPS SRA. SIB also considers assessments produced by the NCTT and JTAC when preparing the POPS SRA.

Despite this effort, the biannual POPS SRAs don't keep pace with trends in the sentiments of people or groups that may incite, co-ordinate or commit serious disorder. One intelligence officer told us: "We need to keep an eye on this [serious disorder] all the time. When we stop, we get bitten."

We conclude that there are opportunities through existing police intelligence arrangements to improve the police service's approach. And the service also needs to do more to understand and monitor shifts in public sentiments more regularly.

NPoCC proposes to develop a new digital strategic intelligence team within SIB. It would carry out internet investigations and gather intelligence from online platforms.

We acknowledge that it might be beneficial for SIB to perform these functions. But NPoCC should consider existing capabilities it can draw on to avoid duplication.

Neighbourhood policing has a vital role in gathering intelligence on disorder

A successful approach to gathering intelligence on the risk from disorder starts with neighbourhood policing.

In our report 'State of policing: the annual assessment of policing in England and Wales 2023', we said:

> "Effective neighbourhood policing is vital for preventing crime and disorder. Investigating and detecting crime will always be essential, both as a deterrent and to bring justice for victims."

The work of the police is most effective when local officers build strong working relationships with local authorities, other partner organisations and local communities. This helps them to appreciate public sentiments and the risk of disorder.

Nottinghamshire Police: Operation Aconite

In 2020, Nottinghamshire Police established a central intelligence team dedicated to overseeing the analysis and distribution of intelligence relating to disorder. This is called Operation Aconite.

We found that Operation Aconite was known and understood by officers and staff throughout the force. They collaborate with partners, neighbouring forces and the regional counter terrorism unit to understand the tensions and sentiments in communities and the risk of disorder across Nottinghamshire.

Each of the 12 neighbourhood policing teams in the force has a local intelligence officer who oversees the intelligence gathered by officers and staff.

Operation Aconite is supported by several local and force-level meetings, where the risk from "cultural nationalism" and the potential for disorder is assessed. The central team produces briefings and updates, and provides intelligence assessments for quarterly reviews of the force public order public safety (POPS) strategic risk assessment.

We heard that Operation Aconite has helped the force respond to a variety of POPS incidents that include regular protests on conflict in the Middle East and fracking.

The force told us that Operation Aconite helps to assess community mood and sentiments, and that it was helpful in the periods before and during events in Southport. The force felt that it helped manage the effects of media and online content that contributed to disorder across the UK at that time and was instrumental in recognising potential tension in local communities.

Neighbourhood policing has a key role in gathering intelligence to help forces better understand the risk and threat of disorder. Forces need a structured approach that prioritises intelligence on disorder. They also need to develop a good understanding of the risk posed by those intent on disorder.

Given its importance, we will continue to assess how neighbourhood policing teams target activities, provide a visible, reassuring presence in communities, and work together to solve problems. We will do this during our annual PEEL inspections on the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of police forces in England and Wales.

West Yorkshire Police: Harehills – Clear Hold Build

In March 2023, West Yorkshire Police introduced the CommUnity Harehills Project in the Harehills area of East Leeds to reduce violent crime and drug dealing that had blighted the community. The project is based on the Home Office's Clear Hold Build initiative. It aims to rebuild communities affected by organised crime groups and to restore relationships between residents, the police and partner agencies.

Harehills is a multicultural, transient and deprived community where 170 different languages and dialects are spoken. Through the initiative, the force built on the links formed between the police, the local authority, the key individual network and the community. The force increased the number of neighbourhood officers working in Harehills. It also provided people with a dedicated information portal and a Crimestoppers line so they could report information about crime anonymously.

Some forces assess community tensions and public sentiments better than others

We found a general lack of police analysis on where local community tension and public sentiments might indicate the potential for disorder. The disorder that followed the Southport murders suggests that some forces lacked understanding of the sentiments and tensions in some of their poorer, disenfranchised communities.

Several media articles we reviewed indicated that many of those who took part in the disorder had no previous convictions. Some of those involved in the disorder were children. Many were from communities in which social cohesion had broken down, that were politically isolated, anti-immigrant and had less trust and confidence in the police. Police forces and their partners need to do more to understand the issues affecting these communities.

We found examples where the police did this well.

The Metropolitan Police Service Counter Terrorism Strategic Engagement Team

The Metropolitan Police Service Counter Terrorism Strategic Engagement Team is comprised of ten officers. Part of its role is to review community impact assessments submitted by neighbourhood policing officers. The team analyses this information to gain insight into community mood and sentiments.

Members of the team speak with people who live and work in local communities to discuss their concerns. They also attend protests, demonstrations and meetings to understand more about influences on local community mood and sentiments. The team also consults with schools and outreach workers to help develop a better understanding of young people's views, concerns and grievances about policing and community issues. We heard that this has helped the team to gain insight into tensions within some communities in London.

Leicestershire Police had learned lessons from dealing with disorder that predated 2024. It had recognised the value of neighbourhood policing and the importance of community intelligence.

Leicestershire Police: Operation Energy

In August and September 2022, serious disorder occurred in Leicester, initially following a cricket match between India and Pakistan. Leicestershire Police later reviewed the causes. It concluded that numerous complex issues, including tensions between settled and emerging communities, had led to a breakdown of community cohesion.

The force embarked on a prevention and response plan, that formed part of a broader local partnership recovery plan, to understand more about:

- community identity and how that can fluctuate;
- the factors influencing communities and how the police and others can work together;
- the environmental and infrastructure issues that affect communities most; and
- how the police and others can improve the service they give to communities.

The force told us that it has maintained a strong neighbourhood policing focus in communities affected by the disorder. We heard how the force has developed its knowledge of community tensions by supporting its key individual network and prioritising community intelligence.

Following the disorder in Leicester, the force introduced a community cohesion unit. The force told us that it assesses community tension reports and provides briefings for neighbourhood policing teams and other units across the force. The unit oversees the force's weekly community tension assessment submissions to the National Community Tension Team.

We heard that community mood and sentiments are discussed at force and local daily management meetings.

The force told us that they learned from events in 2022. In the immediate aftermath of the Southport murders, the force set up a gold group supported by an intelligence cell. It monitored open source online posts. It also asked its key individual network to assess people's sentiments and to explain to people what the police were doing to maintain order and support communities.

The police service should make better use of online monitoring technology

It is vital that the police can effectively research online content as one option to identify people intent on inciting, organising and encouraging disorder to express a grievance.

The police service's approach to monitoring online content lacks direction and co-ordination. We found that forces had different capacities and capabilities and used a variety of technology. Forces are often restricted because they typically only monitor selected open source online platforms. They don't routinely consider or monitor online content on encrypted platforms, many of which are favoured by those seeking to incite disorder.

We found that the police service doesn't adequately plan and co-ordinate its use of online monitoring technology for disorder. This leads to varied and inconsistent approaches across the service.

We also found that when a force invested in online monitoring tools, there was often a shortage of operating licences and a lack of investment in training.

We found that some forces had limited capability and asked for the support of regional units. Other forces had invested in software to help them to routinely monitor the use of online platforms by those intent on violence.

We spoke with academics from the Security, Crime, and Intelligence Innovation Institute at Cardiff University. The institute has an open source specialist research team that has been examining the use of the internet by hostile state actors, terrorists and extremists.

One academic stated that the police service "lagged behind" other bodies, including the military, in not having a clear strategic approach to the exploitation of online content to develop an understanding of criminal networks and those intent on disorder.

Another member of the institute told us that the police "need to devote more time to monitoring the use of social media by right-wing and extreme right-wing groups" to build a comprehensive intelligence picture.

And one member described an increasingly segmented online audience that will view content that reinforces their own grievance narrative.

The police service must improve its research capability for open and encrypted online platforms. Relentless identification and assessment of online illegal content is needed to produce up-to-date and accurate intelligence profiles and assessments. These were very much lacking before the outbreak of disorder that followed the Southport murders.

Some regional intelligence structures are weak

We have highlighted the fragmented approach to managing intelligence on disorder across the police service.

We identified that RICCs made varied contributions to the developing intelligence picture. Most of them aren't resourced to support intelligence analysis. But two regions with dedicated intelligence teams told us that they had foreseen the potential for disorder. One RICC co-ordinator described some communities as "a tinderbox waiting for a spark".

Generally, RICCs drew heavily on intelligence bureaux in local forces, where POPS intelligence wasn't prioritised. This restricted their ability to understand disorder in their regions. It also contributed to the lack of information and intelligence described by many of the senior officers we interviewed.

It is clear to us that the most effective RICCs during the disorder had dedicated intelligence teams, which helped to prepare strategic intelligence reports that informed risk assessments and decision-making.

Wales regional information and co-ordination centre

The Wales regional information and co-ordination centre (RICC) covers Gwent Police, South Wales Police and Dyfed-Powys Police. With the support of the three chief constables, the Wales RICC oversees the regular public order public safety (POPS) deployments in the three forces and has the authority to deploy resources across force boundaries.

The RICC has a dedicated intelligence team that draws on its experience of policing many public events and responding to disorder.

Before the disorder that followed the Southport murders, the Wales RICC had been monitoring high levels of community tension in several disorder hotspots. We learned that this action was partly a response to lessons learned from serious disorder in Mayhill (Swansea) in 2021 and Ely (Cardiff) in 2023.

The Wales RICC intelligence cell used community assessments prepared by the three forces to better understand community tensions and sentiments across the region. This helped the RICC to predict seats of disorder when it found out that the person suspected of committing the murders in Southport was from Cardiff. It quickly set up a command structure and deployed resources to cover known potential hotspots in advance of any disorder.

The RICC oversees the production of POPS strategic risk assessments across the three forces and regularly produces intelligence updates, known as the common recognised intelligence picture. Local forces use this to identify potential seats of disorder and to deploy resources to reduce the likelihood of disorder.

The structure and working arrangements of the Wales RICC provide a positive example for other RICCs to follow.

The intelligence available to POPS commanders during the disorder varied considerably

At a force level

We are concerned that some forces were slow to appreciate the scale of the disorder. We learned that many forces didn't provide POPS commanders with the information and intelligence they needed, or didn't provide it quickly enough. For example, one force didn't establish an effective real-time intelligence capability until two days after the most serious disorder had ended.

The College of Policing carried out a survey with all forces to understand their responses to the disorder. One respondent expressed concern about a lack of capacity to monitor intelligence:

> "My role was to confirm the intelligence that was coming in using open sources. I was the only person doing this for the whole force. I was also meant to be looking for forward-facing intelligence, but due to the volume of calls we were getting in about protests/riots I didn't have the capacity to look for forward-facing intelligence. When I spoke to my line manager about this, I wasn't supported because I was told that there wasn't anybody else available to help me do this."

However, some forces did have effective arrangements in place to provide POPS commanders with timely and relevant intelligence. We found examples where intelligence analysts and researchers helped to identify potential seats of disorder. They used a wide range of intelligence sources, including open source media, to

identify active individuals and groups. This helped them to anticipate where disorder might take place. It also helped some POPS commanders to take positive action against people who were using online platforms to encourage others to take part in disorder and criminality.

But some forces couldn't review online content in this way, so they had to ask for support from other forces or regions. Every force needs the capability to effectively monitor and assess online content at a force level. Only then will forces be able to provide POPS commanders with up-to-date information and intelligence.

For example, Merseyside Police intelligence personnel effectively used well-established links with regional organised crime units (ROCUs) and regional CTUs to get the widest possible range of available information. This helped the force to gain a fuller understanding of the intelligence picture linked to the Southport murders and the disorder that followed.

POPS commanders deployed in the Greater Manchester Police area were supported by an intelligence cell drawn from the dedicated POPS intelligence team in the force intelligence bureau. The cell produced regular bulletins together with target and problem profiles.

Some forces assessed their risk of disorder as low. Forces need to take greater account of disorder taking place in neighbouring force areas and across the UK. They shouldn't rely solely on local assessments that categorise the risk of disorder as low. This, together with the absence of an accurate national risk assessment, may have been a factor in some forces' unpreparedness for the levels of disorder that arose.

Many forces were unable to manage extremely high volumes of calls about the disorder. Some calls were requests for service, others were to report crime or provide information. Many forces struggled to effectively manage and prioritise calls and information. Some became very concerned that important information was being overlooked or not assessed quickly enough. It meant that POPS commanders might not have received important intelligence or that they received it too late.

At a regional level

Regional CTUs and ROCUs provided specialist resources and tactics to support local forces and the Operation Navette intelligence oversight group.

In the immediate aftermath of the Southport murders, the North West CTU and ROCU supported Merseyside Police. They then provided specialist support during the subsequent disorder to strengthen the force's online investigation and intelligence management capability. The force told us that this helped it to identify individuals and groups who represented a high risk of criminality and disorder. It shared information and intelligence on the disorder with other forces to help with their risk assessments.

In another example, the pan-London CTU placed a senior officer in the Metropolitan Police Service control room. The officer supported the force in analysing intelligence and identifying potentially high-profile individuals and groups.

But we found that ROCUs and CTUs didn't typically consider intelligence on disorder. We spoke with several officers and staff from these units, and they told us they lacked understanding of disorder risks. ROCUs did play a part in helping forces to build an effective disorder intelligence picture following the summer 2024 disorder. But ROCUs are primarily funded for cross-border serious and organised crime (SOC), so this isn't standard practice. Many ROCU representatives we spoke with thought that it should be. But they don't have the funding to do this work.

We conclude that local forces will need to draw more heavily on specialist support and covert tactics, often contained within ROCUs and CTUs, if they are to effectively target people intent on disorder. The police service will need to consider how forces can routinely access this support.

We learned that the police service is reviewing the National Intelligence Model. The review is being led by the NPCC lead for intelligence. We welcome this review and suggest that it considers how the management of intelligence on disorder can be improved, including how specialist tactics are used.

At a national level

We are concerned that there was a lack of a recognised national intelligence process to support Operation Navette. Responding to national widespread serious disorder is not the time to design a new intelligence process from scratch. The police service needs clear terms of reference and systems for implementing an intelligence capability in support of a national POPS operation.

We learned that the national co-ordinating gold commander had no immediate intelligence support. It appeared to us that the police service gave little consideration to the need for such a capability at any point before the disorder started to escalate. A lack of established protocols meant that even where national intelligence requirements emerged, arrangements were implemented in an unplanned and unstructured way.

One senior officer we spoke with felt that national POPS intelligence structures needed to improve. He described how there was no service-wide understanding of who had responsibility for the intelligence capability and response. He noted that as the disorder increased across the country, intelligence structures were insufficient to provide a national overview and guide co-ordination of the overall response. Another officer described this process as being "really clunky".

We recognise that many police officers and intelligence personnel tried hard to co-ordinate an effective national intelligence response to the disorder. For example, during the first few days of the disorder, SIB produced disorder-related national

intelligence assessments. It also set the national intelligence requirement to support those forces responding to the disorder. At the peak of the disorder, SIB was producing intelligence assessments and briefing updates every two hours.

One SIB senior intelligence officer also told us that SIB sent all five of its intelligence officers to some of the forces most affected by disorder, to provide specialist intelligence support to police POPS commanders. But they said this level of resourcing and support wasn't sustainable.

SIB explained that it couldn't sustain its support for forces because it received an overwhelming number of data requests from government departments, forces and other agencies. This additional demand quickly eroded SIB's ability to provide the necessary intelligence support to POPS commanders. It also told us it had to reprioritise some of its work to meet this demand.

The Eastern ROCU, Counter Terrorism Policing and the National Crime Agency (NCA) made early attempts to co-ordinate intelligence. They worked to identify individuals and groups most likely to pose the greatest risk during the disorder, including those linked to organised crime. The North East ROCU took responsibility for undercover online operations to help identify people across the UK who were organising or inciting the disorder. We learned that this work identified 200 pieces of intelligence as potential lines of enquiry.

On 6 August 2024, the NPCC set up the first Operation Navette intelligence oversight group. This was six days after the first outbreak of disorder in Southport. The group was "designed to bring together the relevant intelligence functions in support of the Operation Navette Gold Group". It sought to co-ordinate intelligence-gathering activity between forces, regional units and national agencies.

We recognise the hard work and determination of those who set up the oversight group and intelligence cell, in fast-moving and extremely demanding circumstances.

The National Crime Agency and Counter Terrorism Policing have held debriefs on the 2024 disorder

We examined what the police service has done to develop its understanding of disorder, and how forces have gathered more intelligence since the disorder.

The National Crime Agency debrief identified the need to improve the management of disorder-related intelligence

On 22 August 2024, the NPCC lead for serious and organised crime commissioned the NCA to debrief the ROCU response to Operation Navette. The debrief also reviewed how well police agencies and departments worked together during the disorder.

On 26 September 2024, we observed a debrief session led by the NCA. Representatives from ROCUs in England and Wales, Counter Terrorism Policing, the NCA, the NPCC and NPoCC took part in the debrief.

The purpose of the debrief was to:

- identify learning, good practice and areas for development while it is fresh in people's memories;
- identify and address any immediate causes of concern;
- make sure the SOC/ROCU network is prepared for any re-mobilisation or new mobilisation for future events;
- make sure senior leads and subject matter experts are able to contribute to the national debriefing process from an informed and evidence-based perspective;
- better understand other parts of the policing and wider response to Operation Navette; and
- assist and inform the national debriefing process.

The debrief identified that there were no arrangements in place for a national bronze intelligence role to support the Operation Navette national gold commander.

Those at the debrief discussed the challenges of co-ordinating the online work different forces and agencies carried out. Some highlighted the potential for duplication and the risk of compromising online covert tactics.

One senior intelligence officer described the "frantic calls" between police officers tasked with organising a national intelligence capability for the disorder. Another senior officer commented that the police service "wrote the manual as it happened".

The debrief concluded that better co-ordination was needed to make sure that the police service can effectively analyse online content to gather intelligence on those who incite and encourage disorder. The NCA, Counter Terrorism Policing and ROCUs were able to provide specialist support to forces. But this was often at the expense of other operations as resources were diverted to Operation Navette.

Those attending the debrief felt that, once established, the national intelligence oversight group and intelligence team functioned well.

We conclude that these arrangements should have been in place as soon as the rising tide of disorder became clear. Effective intelligence arrangements should form part of the POPS national mobilisation plan.

The Counter Terrorism Policing debrief made recommendations for improved intelligence arrangements and information management

On 22 November 2024, Counter Terrorism Policing carried out a debrief of its response to Operation Navette. Representatives from across Counter Terrorism Policing, ROCUs, the NCA and the NPCC took part in the debrief.

The purpose of the debrief was to:

- examine how Counter Terrorism Policing worked with other intelligence agencies to support Operation Navette to develop suitable intelligence arrangements;
- assess whether existing Counter Terrorism Policing command and control arrangements worked alongside police forces and other agencies in responding to a non-terrorist incident; and
- consider how Counter Terrorism Policing can work with others to make sure public messaging on its role in national incidents such as Operation Navette is timely and informative.

The debrief report made seven recommendations and identified three areas of effective practice. These covered operational response; command, control and coordination; countering misinformation; public messaging; and protective security.

The police missed intelligence opportunities by not always debriefing people arrested during the disorder

We are concerned that forces missed opportunities to secure intelligence from people arrested or interviewed in connection with the disorder. We learned that many forces didn't carry out intelligence interviews. These would have helped forces to better understand intelligence on disorder, and more effectively inform local and national risk assessments.

We recognise that many forces needed to manage large numbers of suspects and investigations. But investigators had ready opportunities to understand suspects' reasons and motivation for taking part in the disorder.

One officer we spoke with suggested that the police and other agencies should make every effort to debrief those convicted of offences committed during the disorder, many of whom will be facing imprisonment for the first time.

Recommendation 1

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables should create a plan and begin work to improve how the police service collects, analyses and communicates intelligence about disorder. They should plan to:

- establish clear and resilient intelligence networks, functions and processes to help the police service respond to national emergencies involving disorder more effectively;
- test these arrangements once they have been established;
- give National Police Coordination Centre strategic intelligence and briefing greater capacity and capability to support the police service in recognising, analysing and responding to information and intelligence on disorder, particularly at times of national emergency;
- prioritise the collection, analysis and distribution of intelligence on disorder and community tension;
- make sure that frequent, accurate and comprehensive strategic intelligence assessments on the threat and risk of disorder are reflected in public order public safety strategic risk assessments;
- revise how the police service classifies and collects intelligence on disorder to help it to better assess the threats posed, including whether intelligence categories such as "cultural nationalism" and "domestic extremism" are relevant and understood across policing;
- make sure each police region has an intelligence team or function that can assess the threat of disorder, which we suggest could be part of each regional information and co-ordination centre; and
- make sure that neighbourhood policing teams perform a central role in helping forces to better understand community mood, sentiments and tension.

The police service's arrangements for tackling online content and social media

We reviewed the challenges the police service faced in understanding and managing the risk posed by online content.

Forces generally lack the capacity and capability to deal with online content effectively, particularly during a national emergency on the scale of the disorder in 2024. Online content during the 2024 disorder quickly overwhelmed forces and presented significant risk.

The police service needs to develop better communication strategies, so that it can deal with online content more effectively, especially illegal content.

We examined the Online Safety Act 2023, which was enacted to regulate online platforms and service providers. We assessed the extent to which the Act can help the police service in addressing risks to public safety posed by online content.

We learned that arrangements for liaison and support between the police service, government departments and online service providers also need to be improved.

The police service hasn't responded adequately to recommendations in previous reports

The police service hasn't fully responded to recommendations in a variety of previous inspections and reviews. As a result, it lacks the capacity and capability it needs to effectively manage online content.

During widespread disorder in 2011, people posted online content that incited others to commit crime, including attacking people, the police and property. In our report 'The rules of engagement: A review of the August 2011 disorders', we said the police service needed to do more to monitor and understand the intelligence that could be gained from monitoring and analysing online content.

We stated:

> "Local and national intelligence systems did not – and … could not – anticipate the spread of the August disorders. At a local level, some forces relied on conventional police intelligence … as a predictor of disorder".

We said the police service should implement a new national framework for resolving disorder. We recommended that the framework should be supported by a central information 'all source' hub to help with anticipating and dealing with disorder. The hub would:

> "act as a radar for the Police Service and put them on the front foot by scanning the wider environment to look for precursor signs and signals, from both open source material and police databases".

The National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC) has responded to this recommendation. An all source hub is now in place in strategic and intelligence briefing (SIB). But we are concerned that SIB still doesn't have enough capacity and capability to effectively analyse and manage potential intelligence contained within online platforms and social media sites.

In 2019, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) issued its 'Social Media Project: Target operating model' guidance to forces. It set out how to develop "an effective social media operation for contact and engagement". The model was designed to improve how the police used online platforms to communicate with the public.

But many forces we spoke with told us they hadn't implemented the NPCC model. Most weren't even aware of the guidance. It became clear to us that the model hadn't been properly implemented across the police service. We also learned that the guidance doesn't deal with operational policing issues such as disorder. In view of the recent disorder, new guidance may be required.

In 2021, in our report 'Getting the balance right? An inspection of how effectively the police deal with protests', we said the police service should:

> "improve the quality of police intelligence on protests, particularly intelligence about those who seek to bring about political or social change in a way that involves unlawful behaviour or criminality".

And that forces should:

> "improve the quality of the protest-related intelligence they provide to the National Police Coordination Centre's Strategic Intelligence and Briefing team".

In 2023, the College of Policing published its 'Independent external review of Lancashire Constabulary's operational response to reported missing person Nicola Bulley'. The review assessed the degree to which online content influenced the investigation, police action and the public's understanding of events. It also considered how effectively the force monitored, assessed and managed the effect of online content.

The College of Policing recommended:

> "The NPCC lead for communications should consider how lessons from the case regarding the impact of social media on police investigations can be learned across policing, including how the use of tools such as a 24/7 digital desk and social media monitoring can support accurate judgements on the relevance, scale and sentiment of social media interest."

It also identified that forces needed to improve their communication responses across online platforms. It stated that the police service should be better prepared to monitor and assess "the relevance, scale and sentiment of social media".

Our review of the police response to the 2024 disorder confirms that this position still holds true. The police service still has a long way to go in establishing systems and processes to support the effective management of and response to online content.

We conclude that the police service is ill-equipped to manage the effects of online content, particularly during rapid and widespread disorder across the country.

Misinformation and disinformation online presented challenges for the police service during the disorder

Some online content may be untrue, unverified or based on opinion rather than fact. People may not realise the content they are posting is inaccurate. But some people may knowingly and deliberately post content that is untrue or inaccurate.

On 16 March 2023, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) published 'Counter-Disinformation Unit – open source information collection and analysis: privacy notice'. This defined misinformation as "incorrect or misleading information" and disinformation as "information which is deliberately created to cause harm".

On 31 October 2024, a policing news website called Police 1 published an article, 'The battle against misinformation and disinformation campaigns: Is your police department prepared?'. It stated:

> "In today's digital age, misinformation and disinformation on social media have become critical challenges, especially for law enforcement. With the rise of artificial intelligence … it has become even easier for malicious users to craft and spread false narratives, create deepfakes and produce misleading content on social media. Misinformation can fuel public hostility toward the police, heighten risks to officer safety and disrupt overall police operations. Such distortions of fact can also lead to unjust and disparate outcomes in policing and undermine public trust in law enforcement."

It proposed:

> "To address these risks, forward-thinking police leaders must adopt proactive strategies. A key consideration would be to establish a Misinformation/ Disinformation Unit within their organizations. This unit would be charged with identifying false information, fact-checking claims, and creating counter-narratives to restore trust between police and the community."

And it suggested that:

> "The challenges of modern policing require leaders to proactively address these types of threats … to ensure communities receive fair and just policing in a society that is increasingly shaped by social media and digital communication."

On 4 August 2024, in an NPCC article, 'Public order lead confirms arrests and denounces disinformation', the NPCC lead for public order said:

> "Disinformation is a huge driver of this appalling violence and we know a lot of those attending these so-called protests are doing so in direct response to what they've read online."

On 27–28 January 2025, the NPCC held its national intelligence conference. During the conference, the chair of the NPCC acknowledged that in the context of Southport and policing's capability to manage misinformation and disinformation, forces are "not geared or constructed to respond".

One force head of communications we spoke with during our review said this was a "new battleground" for policing.

Another head of communications said the police service had "no proper answer" for managing misinformation and disinformation.

One senior officer we spoke with thought that some people felt online content validated their sense of dissatisfaction or unhappiness with the police service and other public bodies. And that this could encourage active protest and confrontation, sometimes including violence towards police officers.

Some misinformation and disinformation remains accessible online for prolonged periods, sometimes indefinitely. Most online service providers have agreements with their users and codes of conduct or policies on content. Agreements usually rely on reciprocal promises or contracts. The user agrees not to use the platforms for communicating illegal content, and in turn the service provider agrees to allow legal content and support freedom of speech.

Illegal or harmful content can have adverse and far-reaching consequences if it goes unchecked or unchallenged. Illegal online content that incites and encourages disorder should be removed quickly.

We acknowledge that a delicate balance exists between safeguarding the public, protecting freedom of expression and individual rights, and outright censorship. The Online Safety Act 2023 is a new set of laws put in place to make online service providers more responsible for user safety. We summarise the Act's provisions and definitions in more detail in our section on 'Ofcom and the Online Safety Act 2023'.

But it is clear to us that the police service needs to improve considerably in this area. Online content, including misinformation and disinformation, can present a serious risk to policing and public safety. We aren't at all convinced that the police service has kept up with this challenge, despite the likely rapid increase of this risk in the future.

The police service needs to improve its response to illegal and harmful online content

We found that the police service struggled to manage illegal and harmful online content, including misinformation and disinformation, for a variety of reasons. We weren't convinced that the police service had an effective plan or process to respond to the challenges this type of content presents.

Public spaces refers to accessible online platforms where comments can be viewed openly. Private spaces refers to restricted or private platforms where access can be limited. Content can appear online instantaneously within both public and private spaces.

Forces can access both open and closed or encrypted networks. They can use different policing tactics and commercial tools to work with the public to identify harmful or illegal content and to better understand community sentiments. But the way this is done varies across forces.

Some forces have access to software products for identifying illegal or harmful content. But not all those forces have enough trained personnel. Many of the forces that do have these products don't use them regularly, which reduces their effectiveness.

When properly resourced and tasked, forces can use this technology to help identify illegal or harmful online content. But there are limitations in the effectiveness of this capability because of the speed and volume of comments and information spreading across online platforms.

We found that some forces were able to identify illegal and harmful online content, but arrangements to seek its removal by online service providers weren't widely understood and so often weren't used. This could be improved with better understanding of the processes the police can use to report illegal or harmful material and liaise with online service providers over its removal.

We heard how, during the disorder, some forces did identify illegal and harmful content but didn't approach online service providers to remove it. Instead, in most cases, they recorded details of the content to an evidential standard, and then sought to use it to bring offenders to justice.

The police service was overwhelmed by the quantity and rate of spread of online content

Once a comment is made or a narrative is created online, it is very difficult for the police service to influence its reach and effect. This is the case for all online content, not just content that is false or incorrect.

One chief constable stated that:

> "there are good examples of how forces coped with misinformation. However, I doubt that any organisation, let alone policing, can ever be ahead of dealing with misinformation to prevent issues developing in the first place."

One police head of communications told us that policing needs to have better arrangements for managing illegal and harmful content.

Similarly, a senior officer we spoke with in one force said he was "nervous about the force's ability to react aggressively to social media". He also said: "Police need to stop it, get ahead, and contradict it, but we are not quite there."

It was clear to us that the speed and volume of online activity during the disorder was overwhelming to many forces.

The police service is often too slow in understanding and managing the risk associated with online content

We found that most forces didn't proactively and effectively respond to illegal or harmful online content through their communication and media teams. An NPCC representative expressed concern about the difficult challenges for policing in dealing with misinformation and disinformation. They noted a general lack of confidence across the police service to counter false narratives.

We found that forces weren't always recognising the potential risk of illegal and harmful online content quickly enough. As a result, forces lost valuable time in understanding and responding to any associated risk. Forces have a responsibility to review, understand and analyse the risk posed by online content. They also need to be proactive in their responses. Otherwise, there is a risk that they will lose control of the message.

We are also concerned that most forces aren't giving enough priority to responding to risk using effective communications and information management. This allows people online to fill the information void, which often increases the risk and places forces under additional operational pressure.

On 2 February 2022, the journal The Communication Review published an article, 'Social media amplification loops and false alarms: Towards a Sociotechnical understanding of misinformation during emergencies'. This highlighted how important it is to confirm the facts in the face of shock and uncertainty. It referred to "information holes":

> "These holes are collaboratively filled on social media by both organizations and the public, and risk becoming exploited by manipulators, for whom mis- and disinformation is an end in itself."

It also stated:

> "In the immediate aftermath of crisis events, there is a pressing demand among the public for information about what is unfolding. In such moments 'information holes' occur, people and organizations collaborate to try to fill these in real time by sharing information."

Essex Police

We learned how Essex Police responded to online content connected to the disorder. The force told us that it had established a misinformation desk, which consisted of representatives from the force hate crime investigation team, media team and its intelligence unit.

They were placed in the force special operations room assigned to senior commanders. The force used commercial technology to help identify online content, which it assessed alongside other intelligence. This helped it to identify and understand community sentiments and potential disorder.

We learned that the misinformation desk identified up to 35 protests being discussed online as potentially taking place within the force area. It was able to determine that this was misinformation.

It worked with partners in the force strategic co-ordination group to communicate with local communities at speed to minimise the risk of the public mobilising to participate in disorder.

The force considers that its approach helped to avoid the serious disorder that was seen in other parts of the country.

Essex Police's approach shows how the force prioritised managing its online risk. The force deliberately brought together intelligence and force communications personnel to deal with illegal and harmful online content.

But we found that in most cases forces didn't sufficiently prioritise this type of response. This can allow others to adversely influence information and messages, and place forces at increased operational risk.

The police service hasn't kept pace with the fast-developing nature of online communications

Since the 1980s, technology has transformed people's ability to communicate. But the police and the law haven't kept up. Communication processes and rules have changed.

Forces must be able to understand, assess, manage and respond to the potential risk arising from online content, especially during national emergencies. A single post can reach millions of people in just a few seconds.

Online content has the potential to compromise public safety, especially if it contains illegal or harmful content. But the police service hasn't typically kept pace with the fast-developing nature of online communications.

A head of communications in one force told us:

> "A decade ago, the narratives which cut-through were likely to be based on evidence, on professional journalistic integrity and on fundamental truth. Today, whoever can tell the best story first, powered by the most emotive and compelling content wins the day."

But there has been a general lack of investment in technology across the police service, and forces manage risk in different ways. We are therefore concerned that many forces have limited capability to effectively manage the potential effects of online content, and to respond accordingly.

There has been a huge increase in online service providers and users in a relatively short time

In 1987, a company called Bolt introduced the first purely social networking website, called SixDegrees. Soon afterwards, companies such as Yahoo, Microsoft and LinkedIn set up their own online platforms. By the early 2000s, online platforms included Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

By 1995, around 16 million people (0.5 percent of the world's population) were using the internet. By 2012, 2.75 billion people (39 percent of the world's population) were using it. Communication is instant and has global reach.

As at October 2024, data from Statista shows that there were about 5.52 billion internet users (67.5 percent of the world's population) and 5.2 billion people (63.8 percent) using social media. Statista's data suggests that globally people's use had almost doubled in 12 years.

Although figures from different sources vary, as at October 2024, Statista's data indicated that the world's top five online service providers were:

- Facebook: 3 billion users (56 million users in the UK)
- YouTube: 2.7 billion users (56 million users in the UK)
- WhatsApp: 2.4 billion users (41 million users in the UK)
- Instagram: 2.35 billion users (35 million users in the UK)
- TikTok: 1.8 billion users (23 million users in the UK)

On 6 December 2024, Emergency Services Times published an article, 'Emergency services need a multi-channel approach to communication', in which it summarised a recent webinar:

> "young people spend six hours a day online (that's twice the time compared with their parents' generation) and rarely make a call, preferring to use TikTok and SnapChat instead. The Ofcom survey found that both featured in the top ten of sites most visited by the 18–24 year olds, with 60% (3.2m) of this cohort visiting both Snapchat and TikTok in the month of May [2024] alone."

Online content can quickly influence public actions, so the police service needs to respond rapidly and effectively

Online platforms provide a means to post, view and share information quickly and widely. When people consume or share information, they need to be able to interpret and analyse it to determine if that information is inflammatory or false. This means they need basic online literacy skills. If they don't have these skills, they could be misled and manipulated.

Online platforms can invoke strong sentiments and feelings, influence people's behaviour and mobilise them to act. The serious disorder in 2024 shows the power and reach of these platforms.

The impact of online content can be instant and widespread, whether the information is true or false. When something illegal or harmful spreads quickly and widely, it is difficult to restrict or contain it. Unless forces monitor the widest range of online platforms and respond rapidly to a receptive audience, they will face problems.

Forces must be able to quickly respond with accurate counter-narratives that challenge online content and represent the truth. But we found that many forces didn't give this enough priority, and any remedial action by online providers was often too late to have any meaningful effect. The harm was already done.

The potential effects of online content on policing operations were well known before the disorder in summer 2024

Vast numbers of users, and an ever-growing and ever-changing user base, make it difficult to police the internet for illegal or harmful content. In our review, we assessed how online communications caused significant challenges for policing even before the widespread disorder in 2024.

For example, as at October 2024, TikTok had about 1.8 billion users worldwide, and 23 million users in the UK, according to Statista data. Out of all the people who went online in the UK, 42 percent visited TikTok. About 36 percent of users were aged 18–24 years and 34 percent were aged 24–34 years, meaning that about 70 percent of its users were under the age of 35. Its reach is extensive.

On 9 August 2023, disorder took place on Oxford Street, London. Information circulated on TikTok and other online platforms led to young people gathering. Offences including shoplifting were committed. The Metropolitan Police Service made several arrests and issued a dispersal order covering London's West End.

The Independent later reported '[How a TikTok craze led to five hours of chaos on London's busiest shopping street]'. It referred to "a growing trend on social media calling for riots and looting in JD Sports":

> "The widely shared posts on TikTok and Snapchat began trending under the tag 'Oxford Circus JD robbery', with youths encouraging others to congregate at 3pm and loot stores along the street."

Later that day, the Independent published a follow-up article, '[TikTok disorder spreads to Southend as teens in balaclavas stopped by police]', with a secondary headline 'Essex Police set up a dispersal zone just a day after teenagers caused mayhem on Oxford Street'. It stated:

> "Video clips show teenagers running away from police, while officers try to break up groups who had gathered on the beach to cause trouble. One user later posted on TikTok that 'Part 2' would take place on Thursday."

People posted illegal and harmful content on TikTok to incite offences, including disorder. And that disorder spread from London to Southend. It caused two police forces to act to protect the public.

This highlights how, even before the widespread disorder in 2024, the public misuse of an online platform can present significant risks to public safety.

The true or false nature of online content isn't the only risk factor for policing and public safety

The accuracy of the information involved often has little or no bearing on the actual risk to policing operations or public safety. People can view and share accurate information just as quickly as posts that contain misinformation or disinformation. It is the nature of the content, its intent and its rate of spread that determines the risk and should determine the rigour of the police response.

A single potentially harmful post can spread rapidly and place a force under serious operational pressure. Forces must be able to quickly identify such a risk and respond accordingly.

But we found that forces were largely under-resourced and ill-equipped to effectively respond to risk posed by online content.

The police service needs to be better prepared and resourced to monitor, analyse and respond to online content

We cannot overstate the importance of the police service understanding the risk to public safety caused by people deliberately posting or spreading illegal or harmful online content.

On 13 March 2025, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, published an article 'Classification of Extreme Violence used at Southport in July 2024'. He stated:

> "In the digital era, if the police do not take the lead in providing clear, accurate and sober details about an attack like Southport, others will. Social media is a source of news for many people and near-silence in the face of horrific events of major public interest is no longer an option."

Risk can escalate quickly. So it is important that forces have the capacity and capability to dynamically monitor and analyse online content. Ideally, this resource should be available 24 hours a day. At the very least, forces should be able to rapidly allocate resources to monitor online content during high-risk events, including national emergencies. This will help them to understand the risk to public safety and to respond effectively. But we found that many forces weren't able to effectively respond in this way. This had a direct impact on some forces' ability to manage risk posed by online content during the disorder.

We acknowledge that the immediacy and accessibility of online content makes policing more difficult. But our review confirmed that the police service needs to be better prepared and resourced to monitor, analyse, use and respond to online content.

Online content had a significant influence on people after the Southport murders

Online posts were a main cause for the seriousness and escalation of disorder

After the Southport murders, people created many online posts and shared them widely. Some purported to provide details about the offender, including his name and immigration status. Many posts were invitations or incitement to others to take part in the disorder.

Serious disorder took place within a short space of time. The accessibility of related online content, much of which was untrue, contributed to the disorder and the speed of its spread and escalation across the UK.

The rapid spread of online content and its impact was highlighted in several media reports. On 31 July 2024, a BBC News report, 'Did social media fan the flames of riot in Southport?', discussed how social media posts influenced the disorder after the events in Southport. It pointed out how X allows:

> "its paid blue-tick users to earn a portion of ad revenue for their posts. Their posts are more likely to be recommended on people's feeds, and they may be incentivised to post more controversial or sensational content to boost their views."

It highlighted that "Because the issue was picking up so much engagement, it was promoted further by X's algorithm" and "posts on X sharing the fake name were actively promoted to users and racked up millions of views".

And it noted:

> "The fact that some of those at the rally decided to target a Southport Mosque suggests that they may have been influenced by the unfounded online accusations that this had been an Islamist terror attack. The police themselves pointed to disinformation online as playing a part in the violence."

On 31 July 2024, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue published an article, 'From rumours to riots: How online misinformation fuelled violence in the aftermath of the Southport attack'. It reported that by 3pm on the day after the Southport murders, the false name that had been shared online had received over 30,000 mentions on X from 18,000 unique accounts. And it commented that the disorder in Southport showed the consequences of posting unchecked and false information.

On 2 August 2024, BBC News reported 'Violent Southport protests reveal organising tactics of the far-right'. It stated that BBC analysis of activity on mainstream social media and in smaller public groups showed a clear pattern of influencers driving a message for people to gather for protests but that no single organising force was at work:

> "Not everyone attending these protests or posting about the Southport attacks holds fringe views, supports rioting or has links to far-right groups. The protests also appeared to draw in people concerned about violent crime or misled by the misinformation that the attack was linked to illegal immigration."

On 25 October 2024, BBC News reported 'How a deleted LinkedIn post was weaponised and seen by millions before the Southport riot'. It included details of a post that was uploaded to the online platform LinkedIn. The post in question had alleged that a "migrant" was responsible for the murders and that it was time to "close the borders". The post ended with the phrase "enough is enough".

The BBC News report continued:

> "[the] post was only seen by a few hundred people and it was later taken down. LinkedIn told us the post had been removed because it didn't meet its policies on 'harmful or false content'.
>
> However, by then it had been copied and posted elsewhere and, within a few hours, had been viewed more than two million times on social media …
>
> We found that on X, within an hour of the original post, a screenshot had been posted by an account calling for mass deportations. This would go on to have more than 130,000 views in total."

The media reports on cases of offenders who misused different online platforms included:

- 13 August 2024: BBC News article 'Man who called for hotel attack jailed'. The offender posted on Facebook over a nine-day period "with an intention to incite severe violence".
- 14 October 2024: BBC News article 'Teenager who livestreamed mosque attack detained'. He had livestreamed the disorder on TikTok and "yelled encouragement to a gang intent on attacking a mosque".
- 6 January 2025: BBC News article 'Taxi driver who stoked Southport riots jailed'. His posts were described as a "catalyst for the riots that broke out".

Taken together, these examples show how quickly online content spread, and the risk it posed to public safety.

A large amount of online content about the disorder originated outside the UK

We reviewed national media reports that stated some individuals responsible for inciting or influencing the disorder didn't live in the UK. For example, at 5.51pm on 29 July 2024, the Channel3 Now website based in Pakistan uploaded a post to X that included a false name attributed to the then 17-year-old suspect.

The post also claimed that the suspect had arrived in the UK by a small boat in 2023 and was known to the UK security service. The post received nearly two million views before being removed.

Most offenders lived close to the scenes of disorder and many were children

Police and criminal justice partners effectively brought offenders to justice quickly

We found that the police service acted effectively to investigate offences and bring people to justice. The police service and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) were effective in identifying and prosecuting people who incited or co-ordinated violent crime and disorder through online posts.

Many forces told us that the speed of some prosecutions and length of some sentences contributed to the disorder coming to an end. For example:

- Merseyside Police arrested a man who posted illegal content on his Telegram channel, called Southport Wake Up. The offender was sentenced to seven and a half years' imprisonment for various criminal offences.
- Nottinghamshire Police arrested a man who published material on his Facebook account over a nine-day period that supported and incited violence against asylum seekers and their hotel accommodation. He was jailed for one year and eight months after pleading guilty to publishing and distributing written material to stir up racial hatred.
- Durham Constabulary arrested an 18-year-old man who on 5 August 2024 had shouted racial slurs and incited violence as he filmed the violence and disorder in Darlington. He was imprisoned for 15 months.
- West Yorkshire Police arrested a man for publishing material on his Facebook account advocating an attack on a hotel in Leeds where asylum seekers were living.

Most offenders were local to the disorder and had no connection to extremism

Online posts connected to the disorder, including a large quantity of misinformation or disinformation, came from a range of sources. This included people who had no previous criminal history relating to extremist or nationalist views.

Most offenders lived locally to the scenes of disorder. We found that it was mostly disaffected individuals, influencers or groups that incited people to act violently and take part in disorder, rather than criminal factions or extremists. And it was mainly unrelated to their ideology or political views.

On 20 October 2024, the Manchester Evening News published an article, 'Fuelled by anger and inspired by lies they took to the streets to cause trouble', identifying 52 people charged in connection with disorder in Manchester and Bolton. Of those charged, only three weren't based locally to the scenes of disorder.

Several other forces we reviewed stated that most offenders involved in the disorder were local people and not extremists or serial violent criminals.

A representative we spoke with from one counter terrorism unit said there was "no indication that there had been any co-ordinated activity by any terrorist group of any sort".

On 28 January 2025, the Children's Commissioner for England published a report, 'Children's involvement in the 2024 riots'. It confirmed that many children and young people became offenders and were criminalised for the first time.

It noted that 147 children had been arrested in connection with the riots by 4 September 2024, with 84 charged and 73 cases concluded by 31 October 2024. Children's involvement was largely spontaneous. Many of them hadn't had previous contact with the criminal justice system. There was no evidence to suggest that children's participation in the disorder was politically motivated:

> "Many children described making a split-second decision, their involvement being largely spontaneous and unconsidered, driven by curiosity or the thrill of the moment to see what was going on in their community. Others described a deep distrust of the police and the opportunity to retaliate against a previous interaction."

The outcomes of many court cases that we reviewed also indicate that people brought to justice often didn't have a criminal history relating to violence, disorder or extremist ideologies.

We have tried to obtain data about offenders who were brought to justice. But other than basic arrest and conviction data, we haven't been able to acquire more detail. The police service and other agencies haven't analysed the data or carried out an intelligence-based review of the 2024 disorder.

We learned that at the start of August 2024, soon after events in Southport, the police service set up Operation Shadow to try and identify people and groups inciting or co-ordinating disorder at a national level. Operation Shadow was led by the Eastern regional organised crime unit (ROCU) and co-ordinated intelligence and suspect identification work carried out by the National Crime Agency, ROCUs and Counter Terrorism Policing.

The operation cross-checked databases and investigations to identify individuals and groups presenting the greatest risk. It included an assessment of individuals and groups likely to be violent and with access to firearms. We heard the operation didn't identify any people that met this threshold.

Forces must be able to understand the potential risk of online content and respond effectively

The police must prioritise intelligence on community mood and sentiments

Forces must have the capacity and capability to fully understand the potential risk of online content. This includes content that is accurate and content that is false or incorrect.

Forces and their partners should have processes in place to gather information and intelligence from local communities to identify changes in mood and sentiments. Forces should also have proactive and constant oversight of online content to help recognise and respond to intelligence indicating a rise in tension.

But we found most forces didn't sufficiently prioritise community sentiments and intelligence on disorder. This adversely affected the police service's response to events after the Southport murders. We comment further on this in the chapter on the police service's use of an intelligence-led approach.

The police must be able to effectively respond to online content or others may control the narrative

False and incorrect information circulated online presented forces with challenges during the disorder. It is therefore vital that forces understand the potential risk of online content and respond appropriately.

Many people posted online comments about the murders in Southport, and false information was posted on X about the offender.

On the evening of 29 July 2024, Merseyside Police released a statement. It said:

> "A 17-year-old male from Banks in Lancashire, who was from Cardiff, has been arrested on suspicion of murder and attempted murder and has been taken to a police station where he will be interviewed by detectives."

The Chief Constable of Merseyside Police reiterated this information at a press conference that same evening. At that time, speculation and disinformation were influencing community sentiments, with online posts filling the gaps to the questions people were seeking answers to.

At 8:05pm that evening, Merseyside Police issued a further press statement confirming that the suspect was "born in Cardiff". This was to try and mitigate the harm caused by misleading online comments.

We learned that the force monitored platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok and Telegram. It used this information to prepare a community impact assessment, which helped it to identify the public's mood and sentiments. The force told us that it recognised online activity was affecting its information and intelligence picture. It tried to respond and correct misleading information, but felt it had limited success.

Merseyside Police's position was common to other forces we reviewed. All could monitor open source platforms. But few could fully monitor all platforms, particularly those that were encrypted – some of which were used to post misinformation and disinformation on events connected to Southport and the disorder afterwards.

We learned from some other forces we reviewed how they had responded to minimise local risk associated with online content.

Case study examples

Northumbria Police responded to an online post that showed an image of a mass gathering in Newcastle city centre. The force identified that the image was from a previous event. It used online platforms and uploaded CCTV images to disprove the post and show that a demonstration wasn't taking place.

Staffordshire Police responded to misinformation on an X account about an alleged stabbing. The force issued counterstatements to reassure the public that no such incident had taken place.

Nottinghamshire Police intercepted online reports of an address being circulated to meet for an immigration protest. It reported live from the location on its own online platforms and through traditional local media channels that the address had no links to immigration and was in fact an address of a vulnerable older person.

Essex Police identified online disinformation relating to potential asylum seeker accommodation protests in Essex. These mirrored online threats to protest around the country. The force immediately corrected the narrative, reassuring the public that no such event was taking place. It live-streamed footage of the suggested scene to prove that the information was false.

On 18 July 2024, West Yorkshire Police dealt with disorder in Harehills, Leeds that had been triggered by an event involving the Roma community. During a community meeting on 21 July 2024, attended by 600 people and livestreamed in Romania, local officers were told that a video of a man falling out of a window had been posted on TikTok and had been allegedly reposted by the then President of Romania. The post incorrectly linked the video to the police response. The video actually showed an unrelated incident in Leeds involving a man in distress who had climbed out of a first-floor window. The force was told that the video was later broadcast on Romanian television. The force used its key individual network and other contacts, including representatives from the Romanian consulate, to reassure the community that the post was incorrect and misleading.

As disorder became more widespread and community tension grew, the NPCC recognised that forces needed support to manage illegal and harmful online content.

On Friday 2 August 2024, the NPCC Chair wrote to the Prime Minister, requesting assistance. This request, in part, involved resources to scan online platforms for harmful content, including disinformation and misinformation.

This was the right decision, because the police service doesn't have enough capacity and capability to effectively respond to illegal and harmful online content.

Ofcom and the Online Safety Act 2023

Ofcom is the regulator for communications services and is responsible for making sure online service providers protect users from harm.

On 26 October 2023, the Online Safety Act 2023 received Royal Assent. The Act applies to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Its aim is to increase online users' safety. Ofcom has a broad range of powers to direct and enforce compliance with the Act.

Under the Online Safety Act 2023, Ofcom's role is to make online services safer for the people who use them. One of Ofcom's duties is to make sure that online service providers have effective systems in place to protect users from harm.

Some Parts of the Act haven't come into effect yet because selected offences and powers are being phased in, which means not all the legislation is enforceable. Ofcom is responsible for implementing the Act and has published a "roadmap" to regulation setting out its overall approach. The Act is expected to be implemented in full in 2026.

The Act introduces several new offences. These include sending false communications under section 179 of the Act and sending threatening communications under section 181.

The Act puts a range of new duties on social media companies and search services. It includes requiring them to implement systems and processes to reduce the risk that their services are being used for posting illegal content, and to remove such content when they are alerted to it. These new "safety duties" are now in effect and since 17 March 2025 Ofcom can enforce them.

Section 59(2) of the Online Safety Act 2023 states that "illegal content" means "content that amounts to a relevant offence". Section 59(3) explains that content (words, images, speech or sounds) amounts to a relevant offence if using, possessing, viewing, accessing, publishing or disseminating it amounts to a relevant offence. "Relevant offence" is defined in section 59(7) of the Act to include a "priority" offence. Priority offences are listed in Schedules 5, 6 and 7 of the Act.

All the priority offences specified in Schedules 5, 6 and 7 of the Act appear to be offences where the necessary elements of the 'actus reus' (guilty act) are capable of being met by posting, viewing, downloading or re-posting of content on social media.

Provocation of violence under section 4 of the Public Order Act 1986 is included as a priority offence in Schedule 7 to the Online Safety Act 2023. This offence is capable of being committed online. That is because the 'actus reus' (guilty act) of the offence can be committed by words or images alone. So, for example, a person commits an offence under section 4 of the Public Order Act 1986 if they use "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour" or "distributes or displays to another person any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting" with intent "to provoke the immediate use of unlawful violence".

However, the more serious Public Order Act 1986 offences of riot (section 1) and violent disorder (section 2) are different. These offences require "conduct" of a number of persons "at the scene" and the person convicted must be "using unlawful violence" (in the case of riot) or "using or threatening unlawful violence" (in the case of violent disorder). Therefore, they are predicated on the offender being physically present somewhere together with others and turn on their conduct in person. So, our interpretation (following legal advice) is that both these offences are not capable of being committed, for example simply by posting or viewing illegal online content.

It does appear that an offence of "encouraging" riot or violent disorder under Part 2 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 could, in principle, be committed by posting illegal content online. However, as presently drafted, priority offences only include offences under Part 2 of the Serious Crime Act that involve encouraging or assisting offences listed elsewhere in the relevant Schedule.

It may be timely to explore whether the Act should include specific offences relating to 'encouraging' or 'inciting' riot or violent disorder as priority offences. This would leave people in no doubt that encouraging or inciting the commission of these offences would be "priority offences" under the Online Safety Act 2023.

Ofcom will have the power to act against online service providers who fail to remove illegal content

Codes of practice for the Act came into effect on 17 March 2025. The codes set out the steps online service providers must take to fulfil their safety duties. For instance, providers must moderate content, and when providers determine that content is illegal they must swiftly remove it. Ofcom can act against them if they fail to do this. The Act's duties apply to search services and services that allow users to post content online or to interact with each other. This includes a range of websites, apps and other services.

Many global internet and online service providers aren't owned and managed within the UK, nor are their technical operating platforms based here. This creates complex challenges for legislators, regulators and the police service.

However, the Act applies to services that have links to the UK, even if the companies providing them are outside the UK. This includes when the service has a substantial number of UK users, or when the UK is a target market, or when it is capable of being accessed by UK users, and there is a material risk of significant harm.

There were very few prosecutions connected to the disorder under the Online Safety Act 2023

Because the legislation is new, it isn't possible for us to objectively comment on its effectiveness. NPCC data shows 101 prosecutions for online offences connected to the 2024 disorder. But only three people were convicted under the two new offences created by the Online Safety Act 2023.

The enforcement and regulation of online content about disorder will have minimal effect

Illegal or harmful online content can have serious effects. Such content can spread widely and rapidly. This can increase risk and present significant challenges to the police service, especially during widespread disorder of the type experienced in summer 2024. To prevent this, content must be removed quickly.

The police service cannot address the harm caused by social media content on its own. This needs a collective effort. The police service has no power of its own to regulate or remove illegal or harmful online content. The Online Safety Act 2023 doesn't change this. The extent, spread and speed of online information during a dynamic operational situation means that forces can only manage and mitigate its effect.

The Act places a legal duty on service providers to use proportionate systems and processes to minimise the length of time that any priority illegal content is present and to remove any illegal content swiftly when they become aware of it. The Act doesn't set any specific time periods within which illegal content must be removed by providers. If providers fail to remove illegal content, Ofcom has enforcement powers and can issue a decision requiring them to do so. But it cannot block sites or remove content. It isn't clear how rapidly enforcement by Ofcom will work in practice. There is no statutory duty to remove content that is harmful but not illegal, such as misinformation. We acknowledge that a careful balance needs to be struck between freedom of expression and the removal of illegal and harmful content.

Given the approach taken in the Act, we question how effective the Act and regulation by Ofcom will be in the context of rapidly spreading disorder provoked by online content.

Ofcom needs to have enough capacity, capability and support to carry out its regulatory and enforcement responsibilities consistently and robustly, and to take enforcement action against service providers where necessary.

The Act and Ofcom's regulation need to make service providers rapidly remove illegal or other content that incites disorder, and change their algorithms to stop people sharing such content in the first place. We are concerned that neither Ofcom nor the provisions in the Act are likely to help the police in real time to prevent social media content from fuelling disorder.

It is too early for us to reach any conclusions on how effectively the Online Safety Act 2023 and Ofcom's regulation and intervention role will help the police service during rapidly evolving serious disorder. But unless regulation and enforcement of illegal content is strengthened, and the capability is established for its immediate removal, the provisions of the Act will have little or no bearing on the real-time effects of online content related to rapidly evolving serious disorder, such as the widespread disorder that took place in 2024.

Ofcom worked with online service providers during the disorder

On 7 August 2024, following a week of disorder, Ofcom published an open letter to UK online service providers, highlighting:

> "the increased risk of their platforms being used to stir up hatred, provoke violence and commit other offences under UK law, in the context of recent acts of violence in the UK".

The letter set out Ofcom's expectation that, under the video-sharing platform regulation (in place before the new legislation), service providers should make sure their systems and processes were effective in anticipating and responding to the potential spread of harmful video material stemming from the disorder. This was important because posts from some high-profile accounts reached millions of users.

On 16 October 2024, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology wrote to the chief executive of Ofcom. The letter was headed 'Tackling illegal content online and implementation of the Online Safety Act'. In the letter, the Secretary of State said:

> "In July and August, we saw how online misinformation and incitement fuelled violence and civil unrest across the UK …. One of the most alarming aspects of this unrest was how quickly and widely content spread."

He requested an update "on the assessment Ofcom has made about how illegal content, particularly disinformation, spread during the period of disorder".

On 17 October 2024, Ofcom published its response, 'Implementing the Online Safety Act: progress update'. It stated:

> "The acts of violence seen across the UK in August 2024 demonstrated that the line between online and 'real life' harms is often blurred. We saw the risks that can arise from people using social media to stir up hatred and provoke violence – both priority offences under the Act. The events underlined the importance of moving quickly to implement the new laws so that services are held accountable for properly assessing the risks on their services and taking appropriate steps to make their services safer, including taking steps to prevent content of this kind appearing and acting quickly to remove it when they become aware of it."

On 22 October 2024, the chief executive of Ofcom responded to the letter.
She described the action Ofcom took after the disorder, stating Ofcom's assessment was based on information provided by technical firms and other stakeholders.

Ofcom's key conclusions were that:

- illegal content and disinformation spread widely and quickly online following the attack;
- there was a clear connection between online activity and violent disorder seen on UK streets; and
- most online services took rapid action in response to the situation, but responses were uneven.

The letter also stated:

> "Firms told us they took a range of actions in response to these events, including:
>
> - The implementation of incident response protocols by some services. This included setting up internal cross-functional groups focused on the crisis, monitoring spikes in relevant types of harmful content, and the blocking of URLs leading to illegal and harmful content on other sites.
> - Actions to prioritise the moderation and removal of illegal and harmful material linked to the protests, and to suspend or close down accounts and channels involved in spreading such content.

- Proactive engagement with civil society and/or law enforcement partners to seek guidance. In one instance, a service proactively reached out to a civil society organisation focused on anti-Muslim hatred requesting training to improve their moderation systems and took down potentially illegal content based on a referral from law enforcement agencies."

Arrangements between government departments and online service providers must be improved

We learned that, as well as Ofcom, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and some online service providers were identifying content that could affect public safety and operational policing during the disorder.

We heard that DSIT recognised the incitement to commit violence by some individuals and shared this across government departments. But DSIT representatives we spoke with expressed concern at the lack of effective arrangements to address emerging risks with police forces.

We also learned that the NPCC appointed a liaison officer to support information sharing.

Ofcom representatives we spoke with explained how it responded to online content related to the disorder, and how it worked with online service providers. They described how Ofcom sought to understand what action providers were taking to respond to illegal and harmful content. They told us that responses varied across different companies.

For example, some service providers had capacity and capability to activate crisis response arrangements, which can identify and remove content that breaches their terms of service. We heard that some platforms activated such arrangements and removed content that included harmful content, but that not all providers acted in this way.

We spoke with representatives of TikTok, one of the largest providers of online content across the UK. They described how TikTok actively worked with contacts across government departments and UK policing to offer support through its liaison network. But they agreed that improvements need to be made in liaison and support arrangements between online service providers, the police service and government departments.

We also spoke with a Meta representative. Meta provides the online platforms for Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Meta told us that it had a dedicated team to identify and to remove content that breaks Meta's rules, including content that threatens or incites violence.

We heard that Meta had a law enforcement online request portal for police forces to request illegal or harmful content to be removed from its platforms.

We also learned that Meta had designated individual teams with representatives to liaise with the police service, Ofcom and government departments. But the Meta representative we spoke with expressed concern that communication and support arrangements in major incidents could be fragmented and difficult to access. This caused delays, which adversely affected the initial effectiveness of communication during the period of disorder. Meta told us that the company would support the introduction of an improved and mutually understood communication network between relevant organisations.

In summary, we found that the police service, government departments and online service providers were making efforts to more effectively share and develop information and intelligence. But we are concerned that arrangements to improve liaison and support aren't properly established and mutually understood. This means that recognising and managing the risk posed by online content isn't as effective as it should be.

It is vital that the police service, government departments and online content providers agree and implement clear liaison and support arrangements. Otherwise, there is a serious danger that online content that represents a risk to public safety could be missed or responded to too late. Such arrangements must be in place and understood by all relevant parties as soon as possible.

Recommendation 2

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the Home Office, should create a plan and begin work to better understand and respond to the risk associated with online content. They should plan to:

- make sure that at force, regional and national levels there is enough police capacity and capability to monitor, analyse and respond to online content;
- make sure that forces have capacity and capability to manage risk from online content through effective communication arrangements;
- identify the full range of technical solutions that the police service uses, or could use, to improve monitoring and analysis of online information and intelligence on disorder, and responses to it;
- review whether provisions within the Online Safety Act 2023 are fit for purpose to support policing in its response to disorder; and
- improve structures and arrangements for liaison and support between the police service, government departments and online service providers.

Crime investigations associated with the incidents of disorder

We reviewed how the police investigated crimes associated with the widespread disorder after the events in Southport, in particular:

- how forces maintained effective policing services, investigated crime, and supported victims and witnesses;
- how some forces responded to the additional investigative demand arising from the disorder;
- the effectiveness of national police arrangements in support of disorder investigations; and
- how the police service and criminal justice system partners worked together to bring offenders to justice.

The forces we reviewed faced significant investigative challenges in respect of their preparedness, numbers of suspects, quantities of evidential material, additional demands and costs, and availability of technology.

Despite these challenges and a range of differing investigative approaches, all the forces appointed senior investigating officers (SIOs), set up investigation teams and carried out their investigations quickly. They secured evidence and identified suspects, and offenders were brought to justice quickly and effectively.

In our review, we also considered how well the police worked with other criminal justice partners. We found that the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) worked efficiently to bring offenders to justice in difficult and challenging circumstances.

As at 22 January 2025, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) data indicates that the police service still had 236 outstanding and unidentified suspects. There were also 178 other identified offenders who they needed to arrest. This remains a significant policing commitment for those forces most affected by the disorder, in addition to normal policing activities.

In February 2025, six out of the eight forces we examined in Tranche 1 of our review told us that they retained dedicated disorder-related investigation teams to continue this work. Some forces stated that their investigations and judicial processes would

still take considerable time to conclude. One force indicated that its investigation into the disorder would extend into summer 2025.

All eight forces also provided us with an update on their estimated costs of policing the disorder and the subsequent disorder-related investigations. Taken together, the eight forces stated that the costs of the police response to disorder exceeded £15.5 million. Some were keen to highlight that this figure would increase if there were delays in the criminal justice system.

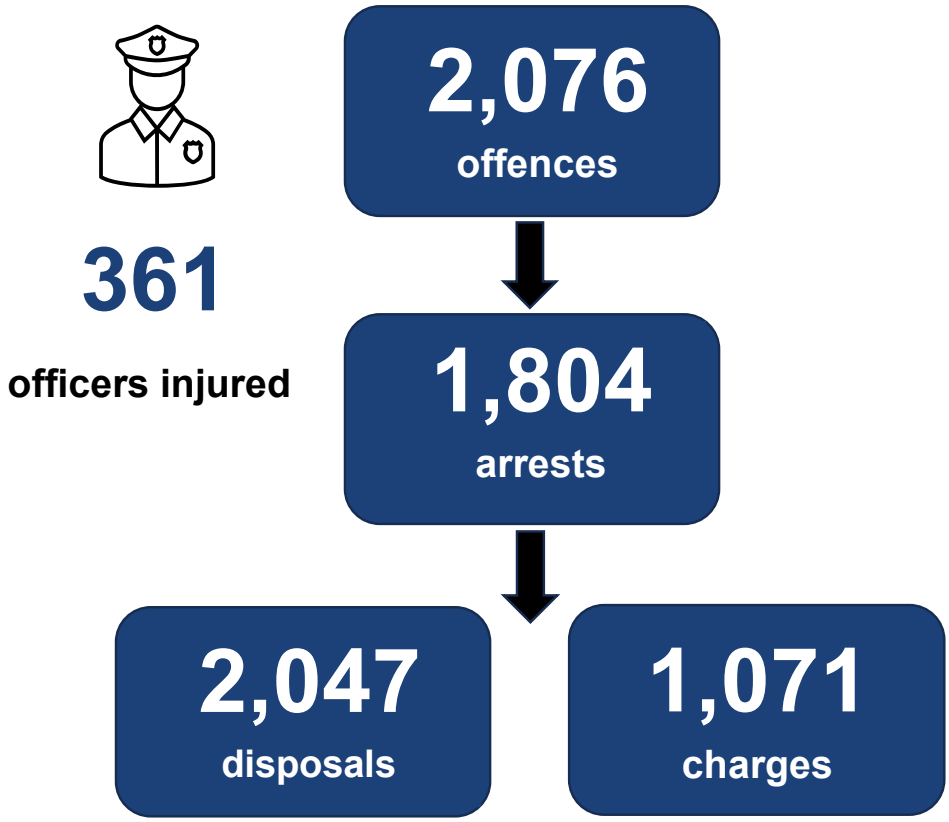
How forces maintained effective policing services, investigated crime, and supported victims and witnesses

The police brought offenders to justice quickly

The police worked quickly and effectively to investigate crimes associated with the disorder and brought many offenders to justice.

NPCC data shows that between 29 July 2024 and 22 January 2025, the police service arrested 1,804 people in connection with the disorder. Over this same period, forces brought 1,071 charges against suspects. The data also shows that 361 police officers were injured during the disorder (adjusted from the figure of 302 recorded in our Tranche 1 report).

Figure 2: Number of offences, arrests, disposals and charges made through Operation Navette in response to the disorder, as at 22 January 2025 across forces in England and Wales



Source: NPCC briefing pack

Note: One person/arrest can have multiple offences recorded and, therefore, multiple disposals. Numbers from NPCC data received on 22 January 2025. At this time, forces hadn't yet recorded all offences and disposals, so these numbers aren't final.

Some forces faced significant demands due to the scale of the disorder and the associated investigations. We found that the police service and the CPS worked effectively and efficiently together to bring offenders to justice quickly. HMCTS also faced significant demands and challenges because of the disorder. Their response didn't fall within the remit of our review. But it was clear to us that they also worked effectively and efficiently to handle the increased demands.

We haven't assessed the specific reasons for the widespread disorder ending relatively quickly. But the timeliness of convictions and length of sentences given appear to have played a significant part in deterring people from taking part in further disorder and committing crime.

We recognise the commitment and dedication of all who investigated offences and contributed to bringing offenders to justice.

The disorder has affected other police investigations and victims of crime

The disorder in summer 2024 led to many arrests. Forces secured and assessed substantial quantities of evidence as part of their investigations to bring offenders to justice. The forces most affected by the disorder had to deploy large numbers of officers and staff to investigate offences. This meant some forces had to delay or reprioritise many existing crime investigations. Some forces said investigations of other offences would be delayed by several months.

One senior police officer told us that an additional 49 officers had been deployed to deal with 270 investigations, meaning that other criminal investigations were delayed.

On 6 August 2024, the Chief Constable of Merseyside Police provided a written impact statement to the court. She stated:

> "because of the events of 30th July, 2nd & 3rd August 2024 we have now also had to set up a team of 55 staff to investigate these incidents as well as enlisting specialist investigators and digital media officers to investigate related online crime. This means that regrettably we are taking staff away from investigating other crimes reported by our communities which is affecting the timeliness of the outcomes. Although we are doing everything to minimise this it is going to impact on the service deserved by those victims of crime; the court will be mindful of the mantra that 'justice delayed' is 'justice denied'."

An SIO in another force told us that arrests that led to charge and prosecution were made early in the investigation. This had a major effect on existing investigative workloads and meant investigators had to reprioritise their work. Investigators still tried to do their very best to keep vulnerable victims and witnesses safe and informed. But the SIO said “vulnerable victims were expected to accept delayed justice”.

A head of crime in one force said that some other priority crime investigations were being delayed due to the increased investigative workload associated with the disorder. This officer told us:

> “The force recorded lower charge rates on other crimes, including PVP [protecting vulnerable people] areas such as domestic violence. This showed for around one month. Charge rates are now back to normal.”

They also told us that the number of disorder trials meant that 180 Crown Court cases had been postponed because of a lack of court time. The officer was concerned that some of the postponed trials were being listed a year ahead and into 2026, delaying justice for many victims and causing additional pressure on investigation teams. And they said in some cases the delays caused significant additional trauma, worry and fear for victims and witnesses, who often became disillusioned with the police and justice system. But investigators were doing their very best to support victims.

Another SIO was concerned that other serious disorder cases weren’t being expedited through the criminal justice system as quickly as those connected to the disorder in summer 2024. They said these delays placed an additional burden on investigators in managing prosecution case files and supporting victims and witnesses.

This SIO told us that in July 2024, just before the murders in Southport and the widespread disorder that followed, officers had arrested 14 suspects for violent disorder. The force had charged six suspects and eight were awaiting CPS charging decisions. Of those charged, none had been finalised at court. One case listed for January 2025 had already been delayed until November 2025. Another had been delayed even further, until March 2026.

An SIO in another force summed up the challenges of managing the ongoing disorder investigations: “There are daily battles with people asking for their staff back, so every day it is more challenging.”

How some forces responded to the additional investigative demand arising from the disorder

Many forces redeployed investigators from other duties and roles

We found that most forces managed investigations and the disruption caused by the disorder extremely well, despite the difficulties they faced. We learned that SIOs prioritised cases according to the threat, harm and risk that they posed. But forces investigating the most significant disorder often had to redeploy investigators away from other roles to cope with demand.

We heard how one force had paused its enquiries and case file building for a murder investigation to help it cope with the overwhelming number of disorder investigations.

A detective inspector from that force told us:

> "A large number of staff have been seconded into a force investigation team, meaning that they are not able to undertake their usual force roles. This is primarily impacting upon teams from Major Crime, CID [criminal investigation department] and PPU [public protection unit] as well as a smaller number from local policing."

Another officer described how their force suspended its proactive drug enforcement operations and redeployed investigators to support the disorder investigations.

One force head of crime put the resource challenges very simply, stating: "We have had to beg, borrow and steal investigators."

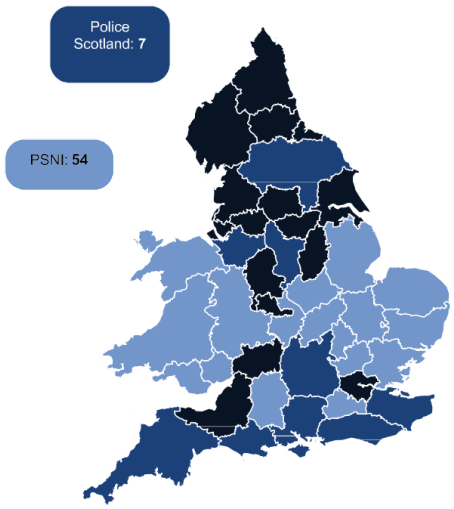
A different force reassigned several neighbourhood policing officers to its disorder investigation teams. This affected the progress of other local investigations and work involving communities.

The police arrested many suspects

In our Tranche 1 report, we said we were impressed by how police officers kept the public safe and how community members supported them. We are also impressed by the dedication and tenacity shown by those involved in identifying and prosecuting offenders. Some forces and their communities were more affected by the disorder than others, as shown by the number of arrests each force made in relation to the disorder.

Figure 3: Number of arrests made through Operation Navette in response to the disorder as at 22 January 2025 across UK forces, including Police Scotland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)

Arrests: 1,804



Force	Count
Merseyside	194
Staffordshire	193
Metropolitan Police	162
South Yorkshire	144
Greater Manchester	122
Cleveland	116
Gloucestershire	115
Humberside	104
Northumbria	101
Avon and Somerset	65
Durham	51

Force	Count
West Yorkshire	48
Lancashire	44
Cumbria	25
Nottinghamshire	22
West Midlands	22
Devon and Cornwall	19
North Yorkshire	19
Hampshire	17
Cheshire	16
Sussex	16
Derbyshire	15
Kent	14
Dorset	12
Thames Valley	11

Force	Count
West Mercia	9
Essex	8
Northamptonshire	8
South Wales	8
North Wales	7
Leicestershire	6
Lincolnshire	4
Dyfed-Powys	3
Hertfordshire	3
Surrey	3
Cambridgeshire	2
Gwent	2
Norfolk	1
Suffolk	1
Bedfordshire	0
City of London	0
Warwickshire	0
Wiltshire	0

Source: NPCC briefing pack

Nine forces made over 100 disorder-related arrests, accounting for almost 70 percent of all the arrests made during Operation Navette.

NPCC data shows that some forces faced far more significant investigative challenges than others. For example, as at 22 January 2025, Merseyside Police had made 194 disorder-related arrests (the most made by any force) and had charged 100 suspects. It had identified 49 suspects using facial recognition technology. The force still had 45 suspects to identify and 9 identified suspects to arrest.

In February 2025, we reviewed the progress of Merseyside Police's investigations. We found the force had charged 129 suspects, 105 of whom had already been prosecuted and convicted.

The police arrested people for a wide variety of offences

The NPCC provided us with data about the types of offences committed during the disorder. Some offenders committed more than one offence. The data shows that most arrests were under the Public Order Act 1986, which includes the more serious offences of riot and violent disorder. But the data doesn't break down all offence types.

Between 29 July 2024 and 22 January 2025, the data shows there were 2,076 offences linked to the disorder.

Figure 4: Number of offences linked to arrests made through Operation Navette, in response to the public disorder, between 29 July 2024 and 22 January 2025, across forces in the UK by offence type

Offence type	Number of offences
Public order	1,449
Violence without injury	172
Other	95
Possession with a weapon	88
Violence with injury	78
Criminal damage	67
Drugs	45
Burglary	31
Stalking and harassment	15
Arson	13
Violence	8
Shoplifting	5
Threats to kill	5
Burglary – business and community	3
Sexual offences	1
Theft	1
Total	**2,076**

Source: NPCC briefing pack

The police arrested people who committed disorder-related online crimes

Since the widespread disorder in 2011, technological advances and the much more widespread use of online platforms have increased the number and complexity of police investigations into online offending. This is for all crime types, not just those related to disorder.

The NPCC provided data on the arrests of offenders for a range of online offences. This shows that forces arrested 101 people for online offences connected to the disorder. No further detail or analysis of the arrests and associated convictions is available.

We sought to obtain data from HMCTS to understand more about online crimes committed in connection with the disorder. While we obtained some information, it

didn’t include any analysis of the sentences, backgrounds or personal details of those convicted of online offences.

But HMCTS case outcome data shows that three offenders were prosecuted under the Online Safety Act 2023, and three convictions were recorded. Two of the convictions were for sending false communications under section 179 of the Act. The other conviction was for sending threatening communications under section 181.

It isn’t possible to compare police disorder arrest data and offence codes with HMCTS conviction offence codes as they are different. This made analysis impractical and potentially unreliable.

Analysis is important because it would allow the police service to properly understand the nature of online offending during disorder.

Visual digital evidence presented some forces with investigative challenges and opportunities

One SIO told us that their force disorder investigation team had gathered over 1,300 pieces of visual evidence. Such a large quantity of potential evidence to review presented the force with a considerable challenge.

An SIO from a different force said their force had collected more than 4,800 pieces of visual evidence from two local seats of disorder. The force estimated it had about 3,400 hours of digital footage and evidence that investigators needed to review. Much of the footage had been taken from public and private CCTV systems and doorbell cameras, rather than mobile phones. Some recordings covered several hours. Other visual evidence involved a single photographic image. The SIO stated that reviewing all this evidence to identify offences and suspects presented the force with significant challenges in terms of resources, equipment and technology.

Another SIO stated that their force had gathered over 10,000 hours of CCTV footage linked to disorder in one city. The SIO recognised the challenge and decided to use new technology to help the force investigation team review the visual evidence more effectively. The force adopted a new software tool called BriefCam, which the SIO said had saved the force a considerable amount of time and expense, and had led to several suspects being identified.

A different SIO stated that their force had to reallocate officers from several other police teams to manage an overwhelming amount of digital visual evidence. This had a detrimental effect on other investigations. The SIO said disorder investigations were far more complicated and protracted because several suspects were charged with the most serious offence of riot under the Public Order Act 1986. This created additional challenges for the force and the CPS because more serious cases take longer to go through the judicial process. The first trials for riot were listed in court towards the end of 2025 and trials will continue into 2026. This means some of these investigations and prosecutions may take between two and three years to conclude.

The SIO said:

> "The large volumes of digital evidence did impact upon the capacity of the force in relation to BAU [business as usual] investigations. This was caused by the need to bring in additional investigative resource to service this demand."

Police investigations into the disorder are continuing

In February 2025, we further examined the progress of the forces we reviewed in Tranche 1. Six out of the eight forces stated that that they still had significant numbers of personnel assigned to investigating the disorder.

Teams consisted of officers diverted away from other core functions. These included major crime units, criminal investigation departments and district policing teams, including neighbourhood policing.

One force SIO told us that they expected investigators and other officers diverted away from their normal duties to still be dealing with disorder investigations until May or June 2025. They said the force had 40 more suspects to identify and arrest. And it was continuing to manage 61 offenders listed for trial.

Another SIO told us that the force still had to resource and deploy 32 full-time investigators and 4 sergeants as part of the disorder investigation team. The SIO anticipated that the disorder investigation team would be reduced in April 2025 but that investigations wouldn't be completed until the end of 2025.

Such resource demands and investigative challenges weren't unique to the police response in 2024. We also heard that another force had dealt with serious disorder in May 2023. The SIO for that investigation said it had a significant impact on the force at the time and continues to do so.

On 22 January 2025, the NPCC released data that shows 11 forces still had 236 unidentified suspects from the disorder who they needed to identify and arrest.

There are opportunities to better manage disorder investigations

Large-scale disorder is rare. Most forces don't have or need permanent specialist disorder investigation teams. The Metropolitan Police Service is an exception. But the police service needs to be prepared and trained to deal with large-scale disorder investigations.

One chief constable offered suggestions on how the police investigation of large-scale disorder could be more effective. He stated that, outside the Metropolitan Police Service:

> "there is very little experience of operating a post disorder investigation team. Forces have ended up having to use major crime teams to form the core of investigation structures. The tail of disorder investigation needs to be looked at in

> the same way as the response to it has been, as often the impact on communities can be as great."

And that:

> "If a model process and structure for a post disorder investigation team could be developed and agreed, then obtaining national and regional support for the resourcing of the teams would be easier to secure."

The head of crime in another force told us that its investigation team set up to deal with the disorder was largely resourced with experienced investigators. But they weren't used to dealing with public order offences and were unfamiliar with, and didn't often use, the legislation for the most serious offences of riot and violent disorder under the Public Order Act 1986.

The SIO leading the investigation team in this force considered that many public order offences were relatively straightforward in terms of law and points to prove. But they stated that it was "the scale, volume and wide range of offences, some online, that presented the real investigative challenge".

Another force SIO had acted on force learning from the 2024 disorder. The SIO allocated a detective sergeant with experience in dealing with disorder investigations to work with the force operational planning department. This allowed the investigation team and public order public safety (POPS) teams to collaborate more effectively during any pre-planned police operations. It also meant the force could respond more effectively to any future spontaneous disorder.

We explored how other forces learned from serious disorder that pre-dated the widespread disorder in 2024. We found that in 2021, one force charged several offenders with riot after serious disorder, who were prosecuted. This force held a structured debriefing process to learn from its response. As a result, it had improved how it investigated disorder and worked with the local CPS.

The same force told us it had identified the need to improve the training for SIOs. It introduced continuing professional development (CPD) training for all force SIOs so that they would be better prepared to manage disorder investigations. The force had dealt with further serious disorder in 2023. An SIO in the force said that the training had helped in managing the 2024 disorder investigations in a more structured, professional and informed way.

One senior officer we spoke with was concerned by a lack of POPS experience among SIOs, meaning POPS investigation plans might not always be as good as they should be. He proposed a national group of specialist POPS senior investigators should be established for deployment across the police service after incidents of serious disorder.

The Metropolitan Police Service was the only force we found had a specialist team dedicated to investigating disorder-related offences. The force said this put it in a strong position to respond quickly and to deal effectively with the 162 arrests they made during the 2024 disorder.

The Metropolitan Police Service has a dedicated disorder investigation team

The Metropolitan Police Service public order crime team dealt with many of the investigations from the recent disorder. Its role is dedicated to investigating protest and disorder offences. In addition to the investigations arising from the recent disorder, the team usually manages about 1,800 crime investigations a year.

We were impressed when we spoke with this team, especially in relation to the organisation of the unit. We also noted the high level of experience and knowledge within the team. The investigative arrangements and processes, and the quality of its plans, were thorough and well structured.

We appreciate that the Metropolitan Police Service experiences more disorder and protests than other forces. It would be unrealistic to recommend that every force should have a dedicated public order investigation team. But some of its practices and processes could be shared with other forces to improve how they approach disorder investigations.

The learning from the Metropolitan Police Service, and other forces that have experienced significant disorder in recent years, should be used to develop investigative guidance or an operating model to guide SIOs when necessary.

Using technology effectively helped to identify suspects

Disorder tends to happen in open public spaces. This means technology such as CCTV can record images of it. Police forces rely on these images to identify some suspects.

Some forces used innovative technology to support them in analysing imagery and evidence of people involved in the disorder. Two forces purchased a software tool called BriefCam. This allowed one force to review more than 10,000 hours of CCTV footage from disorder in a large city centre. The force said this saved it a considerable amount of time and expense. The use of this technology allowed 5 officers to review around 10,000 hours of footage in only 21 days. This force also told us that the software processed the CCTV footage with a 96 percent level of accuracy.

The same force used the software to identify an offender who wore a face covering that concealed his identity. The software was able to quickly match the suspect to an earlier time during the disorder when he wasn't wearing the face covering. Rapid identification of suspects by using this technology helped the force to quickly arrest and charge this offender.

Similarly, Merseyside Police had to review over 1,300 pieces of visual evidence, gathered through CCTV, body-worn video, online content, and drone and helicopter footage. Software made it possible to review this footage quickly, resulting in the efficient identification of many offenders.

The Metropolitan Police Service possesses some excellent investigative technological capabilities, including facial recognition monitoring. It has a team called the Voyager Unit that routinely gathers visual evidence of offending. Senior officers in the force deployed this unit during the disorder to obtain evidence.

But not all forces used facial recognition technology in this way. One force told us that it had decided not to use facial recognition technology, despite having 5,000 pieces of visual evidence to review. This force estimated that it would take investigators around 3,400 hours to review this footage. This is an inefficient approach to reviewing this type of evidence.

This is despite an area for improvement we suggested in our 2021 report, 'Getting the balance right? An inspection of how effectively the police deal with protests'.

We stated:

> "The police's use of live facial recognition technology is an area for improvement. The National Police Chiefs' Council should continue to work with the Government and other interested parties. These bodies should develop a robust framework that supports forces, allowing the use of live facial recognition in a way that improves police efficiency and effectiveness while addressing public concerns about the use of such technology."

We recognise that the use of facial recognition technology has proved controversial and gives rise to some important legal concerns. But the evidence is clear to us. Used correctly and within the law, facial recognition technology can support successful prosecutions and save the police service valuable time and money. The technology is well established in some forces, and the police service needs to use it consistently.

Forces missed opportunities to obtain intelligence from people who were arrested

We were concerned that many forces we spoke with hadn't considered how they could obtain intelligence from suspects or people arrested to learn more about their motives for becoming involved in the disorder. If done properly, the debriefing of suspects involved in disorder can yield valuable information.

For example, examining suspects' mobile phones properly on arrest is a basic element of an effective investigation. But this didn't happen routinely with those arrested in connection with the disorder.

Crimestoppers is a valuable resource but was underused during the disorder

Crimestoppers is an independent national charity that helps the public to give information about crime. There is an option to provide information anonymously if the caller prefers.

In our 2011 report 'The rules of engagement: A review of the August 2011 disorders', we highlighted how Crimestoppers can help the police in identifying offenders. Some members of the public are far more comfortable providing information anonymously through Crimestoppers than providing it to police forces directly. Crimestoppers said it had much more positive relationships and worked more proactively with some forces than others.

Crimestoppers doesn't tend to receive large numbers of reports about disorder. It told us that during July 2024, it received 29 reports about disorder offences. But Crimestoppers' data shows that, between 29 July 2024 and 11 August 2024, it received 1,135 pieces of information about people identified as potentially being involved in the disorder. Crimestoppers passed this information to the police to help identify suspects and improve the intelligence picture.

Crimestoppers is a free and valuable information and intelligence source for the police service. The information people provide might only be available to the police through Crimestoppers. But Crimestoppers told us it didn't receive much feedback from forces on the information provided during the disorder.

We were disappointed to learn that the police service didn't involve Crimestoppers in the national Operation Navette gold group. And it could have made more use of the information Crimestoppers provided in relation to the disorder. Crimestoppers could have helped forces to identify and publicise details and images of suspects, as it has done for previous incidents of disorder.

But we found that some forces did recognise the benefits of working with Crimestoppers and sought its support. Those forces used information provided by Crimestoppers to help identify suspects. Some also updated Crimestoppers on the value of the information and how it had led to the arrest of suspects and prosecution of offenders.

For example, in February 2025, Northumbria Police worked with Crimestoppers and supplied it with pictures of suspects in relation to the disorder. Crimestoppers put these images on its website. Within 24 hours, the public responded and had provided Crimestoppers with 60 reports naming people potentially involved in the disorder.

There are long-standing protocols between Crimestoppers and the police service. Police investigators could have used Crimestoppers more widely to help identify offenders. This was a missed opportunity and one the police service should consider when it reviews the lessons learned about its response to the disorder.

The effectiveness of national police arrangements in support of disorder investigations

There are no formal arrangements for mobilising investigative resources during disorder

We learned that during national mobilisation of POPS resources the National Police Coordination Centre (NPoCC) doesn't co-ordinate or control the deployment of investigators at force, regional or national levels.

The POPS Strategic Policing Requirement doesn't include investigative resources. This means forces aren't compelled to supply these resources when the national mobilisation plan is activated. It wasn't clear who is responsible for deploying investigative resources as part of national mutual aid arrangements.

The NPCC lead for investigations told us that he would support a service-wide review of the mobilisation of investigative resources in response to widespread disorder:

> "There needs to be a system or protocol which kicks in with all chief constables, when a threshold is met, for them to release investigative officers."

But he stated that he:

> "wouldn't support putting a number on it, like the 297 PSUs [police support units] required for POPS national mobilisation. But we do need to gain chief constables' support to be able to mandate the release of their investigative officers, perhaps on a ratio to their establishment."

Therefore, the decision to share investigative resources in support of other forces rests with individual chief constables. This can present difficulties.

In our Tranche 1 report, we recommended that (in consultation with the Home Office), the police service needed to review POPS elements of the Strategic Policing Requirement and add relevant specialist capabilities, beginning with investigators and intelligence resources.

At a time of national emergency, such as widespread disorder, the police service must be able to mobilise public order and investigative resources to support those forces most affected.

Some forces were more "bent out of shape" than others by the disorder

Forces that experienced the most serious or large-scale disorder managed the greatest number of investigations. They faced a formidable task. Some senior officers we spoke with felt that the investigative workload following the disorder wasn't shared equally.

The Chief Constable of Merseyside Police told us:

> "Some forces are bent out of shape, and some aren't. Whilst some forces were focused on the national disorders and national policing requirement, other forces were able to concentrate on local deliverables [police services] such as call taking, response times and outcomes. Not all forces moved staff onto 12-hour shifts in support of a national response."

During a national debrief of investigations about the disorder, one SIO said:

> "Forces that had significant disorder have had to commit large numbers of investigative resources to the post-disorder investigation and prosecution of those responsible. This commitment will be for quite some time due to the volume of offenders, investigative actions such as media viewing and the long criminal justice process. This means that these relatively small number of forces are being disproportionately impacted."

The same SIO also said:

> "A better national system for distributing investigative resources across the country or regions is needed to spread this disproportionate impact more fairly."

The police service needs to improve how it mobilises investigative resources in response to serious disorder

The police service needs to be able to mobilise more investigative resources when serious disorder takes place. And those personnel need to have wider capabilities, skills and experience. It isn't just about being able to move accredited investigators around on a short-term mutual aid basis.

Several SIOs told us of their surprise that accredited investigators appeared to be the only personnel identified or considered as being required to mobilise on a mutual aid basis. Some SIOs stated that there were limited numbers of investigators available to support those forces that needed them most.

For example, one SIO requested 20 investigators through mutual aid to support the investigation for as long as practicable. But they only managed to secure two appropriately qualified investigators for four weeks.

Several other forces also stated that there was no sustainable national plan to provide longer term investigative assistance.

One SIO told us that they needed a wider range of people with different skills to support investigations. For example, officers and staff who can take statements and review vast amounts of footage from CCTV, mobile phones, police body-worn video footage and other sources. Some SIOs were particularly critical of the lack of specialist support to help them review mobile phone evidence.

Some forces highlighted the problems associated with obtaining officers' body-worn video evidence when they were from another force. They also experienced problems storing and reviewing footage when other forces used different technologies and body-worn video devices. This meant that obtaining evidence from officers deployed on mutual aid wasn't always straightforward.

The police service needs to revise the mutual aid arrangements for supporting disorder-related investigations. It needs to clearly define what investigative capabilities are required. This could include accredited investigators, statement takers, CCTV reviewers or digital technical specialists. Existing national mobilisation plans and processes don't define this well enough.

The national mobilisation plan for investigative resources needs to be clear, consistent and fair

Some SIOs believed the distribution of investigative mutual aid and support was at times unclear, unfair and inconsistent. One SIO told us that the limited investigative support available to those forces most affected by the disorder was mobilised far too slowly. It also appeared to be allocated on a "first-come, first-served" basis.

We found that the forces most affected by the disorder were having to deal with a greater share of subsequent investigations. This is unsustainable during a national critical response. One senior police officer said the police service should operate far better as a team and chief constables should do more to support each other during a national critical incident.

We found that there was a lack of clarity at a national police level regarding who had control over or responsibility for mobilising investigative resources in response to widespread disorder.

Given this context, it isn't surprising that many SIOs we spoke with didn't fully understand what investigative resources could be requested as part of national mobilisation. Some even stated that they didn't bid for additional investigative resources because they didn't think any were available through mutual aid arrangements.

This meant that investigative resources weren't used in an efficient and effective way to help those forces most affected.

The head of crime for one force significantly affected by the disorder felt that some other forces didn't help enough:

> "those neighbouring forces that had little or no disorder themselves could have helped rather than saying 'No'. [It seemed] really unfair and had a disproportionate impact on the force. Forces should be mandated to support [others] in such circumstances."

Other forces also told us that they raised similar concerns at Operation Navette national investigative meetings. One force said there was:

> "a clear resourcing gap between the local investigative capacity available in those forces affected most by the disorder and the additional demand generated".

We found limited numbers of investigators were available through mutual aid arrangements for forces that needed them most. And while some forces received adequate investigative support at first, there was no sustainable medium to long-term national plan to assist.

The head of crime in one force summarised their concerns:

> "The current lack of a mandated requirement on forces to provide investigative mutual aid was a major impediment to the early establishment of an effective post disorder investigation team. In similar nationally recognised largescale disorder situations, a system for centrally coordinated and mandated mutual aid provisions should be put in place."

At times of national emergency such as the recent widespread disorder, the national mobilisation plan needs to be clear about what investigative resources are available. In our Tranche 1 report, we recommended that the NPCC lead for POPS (national co-ordinating gold commander) should have "The explicit authority to decide on national mobilisation numbers and to set the strategic plan that forces should follow."

Any new POPS national mobilisation plan needs to include an investigative policing requirement. It should specify the range of investigative resources and capabilities available from all forces and regions. And when such resources are deployed, chief constables should all support the plan and not be able to derogate from it.

Forces shouldn't have to rely on agency staff to support disorder investigations

Some forces employed agency staff to supplement their investigation teams. This happened because not enough investigative resources were identified or made available for deployment to forces on mutual aid. They found that agency staff were more readily available to them than help from other forces. Using them meant getting support more quickly and not having to wait for or rely on mutual aid.

Other forces were more reluctant to use agency staff because they lacked warranted police powers, such as powers of arrest and detention. And many weren't accredited investigators, were untrained or had less experience than police investigators.

Some SIOs told us that agency staff were effective in supporting longer-term resourcing needs. But, in some forces, vetting requirements led to substantial delays in recruiting and deploying agency staff to support investigations.

At times of national emergency, such as widespread disorder, there should be enough investigative capacity with the right skills and capabilities to support forces that need it the most. Especially during the early critical days and weeks in investigations.

Forces shouldn't have to resort to recruiting temporary agency staff to fill these gaps unless other reasonable options have been exhausted.

The police service doesn't have a national investigation plan for widespread disorder

The police POPS national mobilisation plan lacks a specific investigation strategy or framework. Including these would provide forces with guidance in dealing with the investigation of widespread disorder.

The NPCC lead for investigations told us that during Operation Navette there was no requirement for a national investigative response because each force was able to manage effectively at a local level. He said this was important because of their local force-level arrangements and relationships with the CPS.

He reflected that, if such widespread disorder was to happen again, he should be deployed by the police service as the national gold co-ordinator for investigations. He said: "In the absence of a national mobilisation plan for investigative resources, there is a risk of parochialism or forces trying to rely on unstructured liaison."

We learned that the NPCC appointed a national bronze commander for investigations in relation to Operation Navette. That officer held regular meetings with SIOs from forces most affected by the disorder. The purpose was to discuss the progress of investigations, to identify problems and, where possible, to standardise the investigative strategies put in place by force SIOs.

Through this meeting structure, SIOs and the investigations lead identified that there was no investigative strategy for disorder and local investigative approaches were inconsistent.

In response to this, the bronze commander for investigations produced an overall Operation Navette investigations strategy. On 13 August 2024, the strategy and guidance were circulated to all forces.

Despite this, some force SIOs were still unclear on how to investigate serious disorder. It was clear from our evidence that this strategy should have been produced and made available sooner and as part of the POPS national mobilisation plan.

We interviewed 12 SIOs from forces that had dealt with disorder before or during the widespread disorder in 2024. Many of them told us that the absence of a national investigation strategy, plan or guidance on dealing with serious disorder and associated crime made their job more difficult. It was particularly challenging for the many SIOs who had no experience of dealing with this type or scale of disorder.

Some SIOs highlighted that this wasn't just a problem for them in managing the number of investigations. One SIO said:

> "Even the force's more experienced detectives had little or no experience of investigating these types of offences, because the last time they did this was following the widespread violent disorder in 2011."

Some SIOs stated that the absence of a plan or guidance led to inconsistencies in the way some forces dealt with their investigations, prosecutions and decision-making. Others stated that the lack of a national investigation plan and details of learning from previous events meant they had to make up their own strategy, often after the disorder had happened.

One SIO stated:

> "I was appointed to deal with the post-disorder investigation on the day after it took place. Forty-three offenders had already been arrested and were in custody suites in my force and two neighbouring forces."

Others told us that the absence of guidance on the law and the scale of visual or digital evidence, especially the complexities of investigating offences of riot and violent disorder, made it harder for them.

A different SIO stated that their force "wasn't able to resource its disorder investigations at speed or set up effective investigation structures". As a result, some of the forces' initial approaches to investigations "were inefficient because they were overwhelmed by the workload".

Another SIO reflected on the 2024 disorder that:

> "Forces would benefit from having a public order review team structure that can come together when needed. Unless forces have a structure in place, they are on the back foot from the start."

The need for more structured investigative planning was also mentioned by an officer responding to a national police survey after the disorder:

> "Police put together a team to collate and review CCTV and identify suspects. They did nothing further: the subsequent arrest, searches, interviews and case building were passed to normal CID which resulted in additional demand and [required] needless handover from officers who were well-versed with the evidence to officers who were not. This caused significant, and needless, disruption to business as usual when the team set up to investigate all the incidents only did half the job."

Every force that we reviewed put an SIO in place. In the absence of any national investigation plan for disorder, the SIOs filled the gap. They set strategies and plans at a force level that helped them to deal with the disorder investigations. We found that

their leadership helped the police service to arrest suspects quickly, gather the evidence effectively and efficiently, and bring many offenders to justice rapidly. But SIOs would have been helped in this task by a national plan or guidance.

The police service experienced widespread disorder in 2011 and several forces have dealt with serious disorder during the intervening years. Given this, it is disappointing that the service was poorly prepared and ill-equipped to investigate disorder of the scale seen in 2024.

An investigative plan or guidance would have been helpful as it could include technological advancements, digital video media, facial recognition, online content and changes in the law.

At a time of national emergency such as widespread disorder, there should always be a co-ordinated investigative plan or strategy. This should form part of the POPS national mobilisation plan.

Senior investigating officers need support to help them manage large-scale public order public safety investigations

SIOs are accredited through the College of Policing's professionalising investigations programme (PIP) to level 3. This means they are qualified to investigate serious crimes.

The SIOs appointed to lead investigations into the disorder had expertise of investigative processes. But this didn't always extend to the investigation of crime relating to serious disorder or involving significant numbers of offenders.

The PIP level 3 course doesn't contain any guidance or advice on how to manage an investigation into serious disorder. The SIOs we spoke with said that before they managed investigations, they would have benefited from specific guidance.

We suggest that the police service needs to equip its senior investigators with the knowledge to manage large-scale disorder investigations as part of their training.

The NPCC lead for investigations commented that the lack of specific content on the investigation of disorder in the SIO development programme wasn't unusual, as there wasn't specific guidance on many other crime types.

He recognised that there were opportunities to improve the guidance for SIOs on managing investigations into large-scale disorder. It could be incorporated into the well-established and effective continuing professional development (CPD) process for SIOs.

He considered that there could also be merit in the police service and College of Policing working together to develop a "investigations toolkit for disorder" for all levels of accredited investigators, not just SIOs.

How the police service and criminal justice system partners worked together to bring offenders to justice

The police service and criminal justice partners worked together effectively to bring offenders to justice

Criminal justice partners recognised the scale of disorder across the UK. They helped manage the highest level of demand since the widespread serious disorder in 2011.

Forces told us that they received good support from the CPS and HMCTS. Examples include senior prosecutors working long hours to help forces bring offenders to justice quickly. Courts also sat for longer periods and at weekends.

It was clear to us that the CPS had learned from its experiences of the 2011 disorder. The CPS told us that it had also learned from more recent protests. It said it had worked hard to build better relationships with the police and all criminal justice partners.

A senior CPS lawyer said the CPS had implemented a contingency plan it had developed after the 2011 disorder and had since refined. The Director of Public Prosecutions oversaw the plan.

Part of that plan was to quickly establish a clear management structure. At a senior level, the CPS also liaised with the judiciary at an early stage to alert them to the expected numbers of offenders and the types of charges involved.

The Director of Legal Services held a weekly meeting with the senior presiding judge to keep the judiciary informed about the progress of prosecution activity.

We found that the CPS was proactive in its response to the disorder and took steps to support the police. The Director of Legal Services in the CPS instructed chief prosecutors to make early contact with their respective chief constables to make sure they worked together to bring offenders to justice.

The Director of Legal Services also said it was important to recognise the scale of the disorder and the serious nature of the offences that had been committed. The police and CPS worked well together to “deliver justice and to serve the public”. She said:

> “We need to understand and not forget the environment in which this was achieved. CPS asked the police to provide evidence in a hostile environment and they did it and did it well.”

Many senior police officers we interviewed agreed that the CPS approach worked well in building effective relationships with the police. This helped them to deal with disorder prosecutions in a more effective and timely way.

One senior police POPS commander said: “This was a unique point in time. All elements of the criminal justice system were aligned.”

Many forces were extremely positive about the CPS decisions to simplify and streamline some of their prosecution decision-making and file-building processes.

Some forces stated that the CPS was also far more flexible and proportionate in its approaches to charging decisions. For example, reducing the need for the police to produce a 'full file' before a lawyer reviewed it. Forces stated that this helped them to investigate offences more quickly and to obtain enough evidence to charge. It sped up both the police and CPS processes, especially when they anticipated that the suspect would plead guilty. In many cases, it eliminated the need for the police to bail suspects pending a CPS charging decision.

Many forces highlighted that the biggest change to normal charging processes was that police were able to speak with a CPS lawyer far more quickly than usual. One force stated that they were impressed that local CPS lawyers were more available to them and that, in many cases, they made prosecution decisions within 45 minutes. This helped the police to present key evidence to a lawyer and receive a charging decision while a suspect was in custody. This saved police time and led to offenders being brought before the courts more quickly.

Some forces told us that the CPS was also more flexible in accepting CCTV image evidence as part of the charging decision process and as evidence in court. Others stated that CPS willingness to accept abbreviated prosecution case files also resulted in a high number of early guilty pleas from offenders involved in the disorder. One force reported that out of 86 charges, only 6 defendants had offered 'not guilty' pleas.

We found another example of a case demonstrating effective criminal justice collaboration:

- On 4 August 2024, an unidentified suspect posted illegal and harmful content on Facebook. That same day, the force intelligence team found the content online and identified the suspect.
- On 5 August 2024, the force arrested the suspect and investigated the offence.
- On 6 August 2024, the police charged the suspect with an offence and the suspect was remanded in custody.
- On 9 August 2024, the suspect pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 20 months' imprisonment.

Many senior police officers and SIOs told us that the changes to the charging decision process with the CPS were instrumental in bringing offenders to justice more quickly. Others felt that the speed and nature of sentencing deterred other people from committing disorder.

Many police officers were extremely positive about working with the CPS during the disorder. Comments included:

> "The CPS were nothing but supportive."

> “The support from CPS was exceptional.”
>
> “Disorder was prevented due to our relationship with the CPS.”
>
> “We wouldn’t have been able to process the same amount of offenders without the CPS or court support.”

A representative from the Police Federation of England and Wales told us that:

> “The speed of process and length of sentences had a huge deterrent effect and potentially prevented further disorder.”

Most officers we interviewed stated that the working relationship between the police, CPS and wider criminal justice system in the immediate response to the disorder was highly effective.

But some senior police officers expressed concern and frustration that the police, CPS and HMCTS aren’t always able to bring offenders to justice in this way. And that the same speed and emphasis on justice should be given to all victims and witnesses of crime, especially the most vulnerable.

The president of the Police Superintendents’ Association told us that:

> “Positive support was felt [by the police], especially the quick changes made to CJS [criminal justice system] processes enabling effective working between CJ [criminal justice] partners, resulting in strong sentences. Now, it is not understood why we can’t work consistently like that more often for other cases and circumstances to deliver swifter justice for victims.”

And he later stated in his Police Superintendents’ Association conference address 2024 that:

> “The recent examples of ‘swift justice’ were welcomed in response to the unrest. This was the best possible deterrent against this kind of criminality and welcomed by police.
>
> I must however pose the question of how it must have felt for many victims of serious crime, who were watching this unfold, and who are waiting in excess of two years for their turn at justice?
>
> Or, those who are seeing the perpetrators of crimes being released early because of capacity issues.
>
> The criminal justice system is fundamentally broken. Head of our inspectorate, Andy Cooke, commented on this in an interview only a few days ago, in which he called it ‘dysfunctional’. He also said that neither the police, CPS or courts can “hold their head up and say: ‘We’re doing all we can’.”

A senior officer in one force summarised the importance of the police relationship with criminal justice system partners:

> "Good communication between police, CPS and the courts has been key to the prosecution of offenders in the investigation of large-scale disorder. This joined-up approach could be translated into the effective and timely investigation of other offences."

We acknowledge that the police and the CPS worked well together during the national emergency. They changed practices and processes so that offenders could be brought to justice swiftly.

We found limited data or analysis about convictions or sentences

During our review, we sought data about offenders prosecuted during the disorder to understand more about their offending and the sentences they had received. HMCTS supplied us with data it had collected on a bespoke basis about the prosecution of offenders following the disorder.

But we were unable to obtain comprehensive demographic data. For example, data that would show where people lived and where their offending took place.

We wanted to compare criminal justice outcomes for offenders involved in the disorder against outcomes for those charged with offences unconnected with those events. For example, data about the length of sentences and the timeliness of criminal justice processes from arrest to conviction and sentence. This would have helped us (and others in the criminal justice system) to understand if different agencies dealt with offences more quickly than usual. But this data and analysis isn't available in enough detail to draw meaningful conclusions.

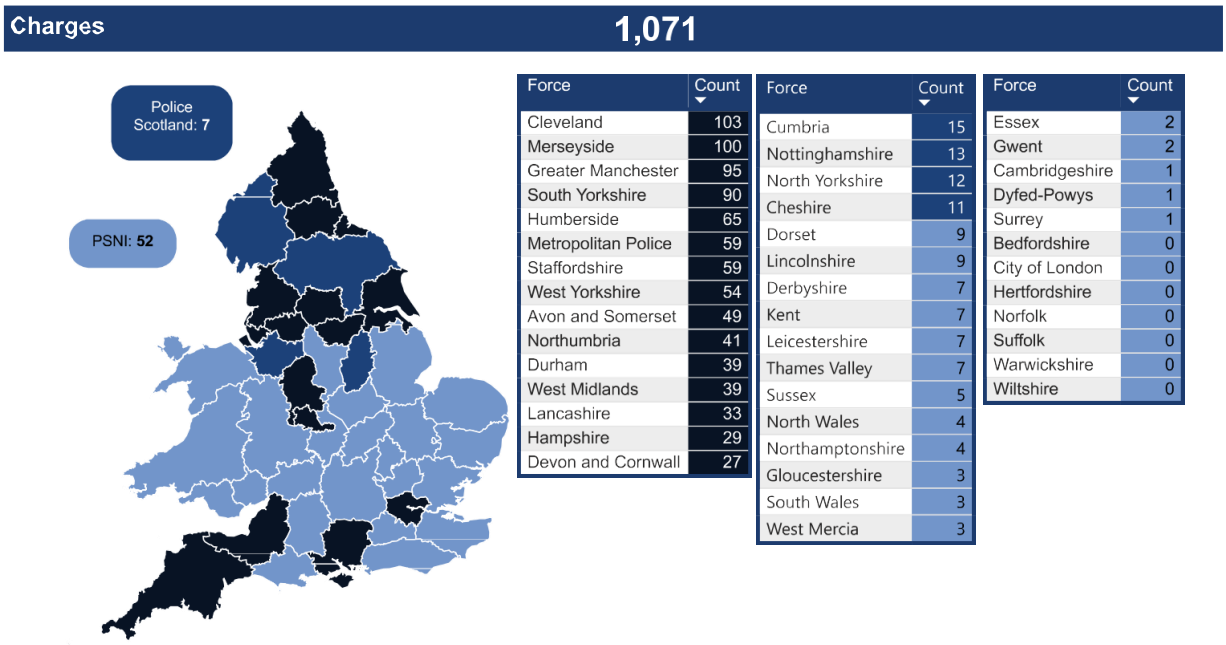
We note that, at some point in 2025, the Ministry of Justice will publish criminal justice sentencing outcomes. The data will include many of those sentenced for taking part in the disorder. This should allow comparisons to be made.

We do have police data about charges for disorder-related offences. By 22 January 2025, the police had charged 1,071 suspects with disorder-related offences. But the police service hasn't carried out any further analysis of police or criminal justice data.

Figure 5 shows how the number of charges made varies substantially across forces. Cleveland Police, Merseyside Police, Greater Manchester Police and South Yorkshire Police were among the forces who made the highest number of charges.

Surrey Police, Dyfed-Powys Police and Cambridgeshire Constabulary were among the forces with the lowest number of charges (one each). Seven forces brought no charges through Operation Navette or in response to the disorder.

Figure 5: Number of charges made through Operation Navette in response to the disorder as at 22 January 2025 across UK forces, including Police Scotland and the PSNI



Force	Count
Cleveland	103
Merseyside	100
Greater Manchester	95
South Yorkshire	90
Humberside	65
Metropolitan Police	59
Staffordshire	59
West Yorkshire	54
Avon and Somerset	49
Northumbria	41
Durham	39
West Midlands	39
Lancashire	33
Hampshire	29
Devon and Cornwall	27

Force	Count
Cumbria	15
Nottinghamshire	13
North Yorkshire	12
Cheshire	11
Dorset	9
Lincolnshire	9
Derbyshire	7
Kent	7
Leicestershire	7
Thames Valley	7
Sussex	5
North Wales	4
Northamptonshire	4
Gloucestershire	3
South Wales	3
West Mercia	3

Force	Count
Essex	2
Gwent	2
Cambridgeshire	1
Dyfed-Powys	1
Surrey	1
Bedfordshire	0
City of London	0
Hertfordshire	0
Norfolk	0
Suffolk	0
Warwickshire	0
Wiltshire	0

Source: NPCC briefing pack

Some children became involved in the disorder

In January 2025, the Children's Commissioner for England published a report, 'Children's involvement in the 2024 riots'. The report stated that the short custodial sentences some children received due to their involvement in the disorder had "profoundly disrupted their lives at a crucial moment, rather than supporting them to make better decisions".

The report highlighted how many of the young people who became involved in the disorder hadn't been in trouble with the police before. It stated:

> "Children's involvement was largely spontaneous and unconsidered. Many children had no prior experience with the criminal justice system, and all made it clear that they did not get involved due to far right, anti-immigration or racist views. The reasons why the incident they attended was organised mostly did not matter for them. Instead, they were curious to see what was happening, thought it looked fun, felt animosity towards the police, or wanted free goods."

It also said:

> "Many children spoke strongly about their hatred of the police, describing previous bad experiences and community mistrust. These children viewed the riots as an opportunity to retaliate against the police."

The Children's Commissioner's report highlights how some children's feelings of distrust and animosity towards the police influenced them to become involved in the disorder.

When the police service reviews the lessons from the disorder, it should carefully consider how it can work effectively with children and young people to improve relationships. This work may help the police and other agencies to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in future disorder.

This is important because data from the NPCC for the period 29 July 2024 to 22 January 2025 indicates that the police service arrested 236 children (under the age of 18) for 335 separate offences. Many of the arrests (78.5 percent) were for offences under the Public Order Act 1986. Of the 236 children arrested between these dates, 115 were charged with offences. As at 22 January 2025, a further 111 children were on police bail. And 55 of the children arrested by the police had been released with no further police action being taken.

HMCTS gave us data comparing the outcomes at court for adults and children [referred to as 'youths' in the data] for offences committed during the disorder.

Figure 6: Outcomes assigned (for finalised cases) to offences committed by defendants who were brought to court in relation to the disorder, as at 31 October 2024

Outcome/sentence categories	Number of times outcome assigned to adults	Number of times outcome assigned to youths	Total number of times outcome assigned
Custodial sentences	551	24	575
Suspended sentences	33	0	33
Community sentences	15	94	109
Fine	19	0	19
Conditional discharge	1	1	2
Absolute discharge	1	0	1
Acquittals	83	11	94
All other disposals	80	7	87
Total	**783**	**137**	**920**

Source: Data from HM Courts & Tribunals Service

Note: 'Acquittals' also includes discontinuances and charges withdrawn; 'all other disposals' includes compensations and ancillary orders; 'custodial sentences' refers to both extended and standard custodial sentences. This data won't match HMCTS published data, which only reports on the most serious outcome, once for each defendant. The data in this table is a count of all sentences for all offences and might include multiple sentences for one defendant.

The police service needs to learn the lessons from the 2024 disorder and make improvements

As at February 2025, the police service still hadn't held a national debrief to identify and learn lessons about the 2024 disorder. We would expect this to have been prioritised and co-ordinated by the NPCC and the College of Policing. This is a missed opportunity, considering the time that has passed since summer 2024.

The police service needs to learn the lessons from the 2024 disorder. It also needs to make changes and improvements that better prepare policing at all levels and across all disciplines.

The recommendations contained in our Tranche 1 and Tranche 2 reports should help the police service to do this. The police service now needs to act.

Recommendation 3

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the College of Policing, should create a plan and begin work to improve how the police service investigates offences associated with large-scale disorder. They should plan to:

- revise the public order public safety Strategic Policing Requirement to include and specify the range of investigative resources that can be deployed when the national mobilisation plan is activated;
- make sure that senior investigating officers receive training and guidance to better manage investigations into widespread disorder;
- make sure that there is an investigation plan or strategy that can be used by all forces at times of a national police mobilisation to disorder; and
- make sure that all forces routinely carry out structured debriefs of suspects and offenders, to obtain potential evidence or intelligence about disorder.

Annex A – Recommendations

Tranche 1

The police service's capacity and capability to respond to widespread simultaneous outbreaks of disorder

Recommendation 1

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the College of Policing and the Home Office, should create a plan and begin work to improve the police service's capacity and capability to respond to widespread serious disorder. They should plan to:

- in consultation with the Home Office, review the public order public safety (POPS)-related elements of the Strategic Policing Requirement and add relevant specialist capabilities, beginning with investigators and intelligence resources;
- complete a full assessment of the suitability and availability of personal protective equipment for all POPS trained officers, including mounted branches and dog units;
- make sure that every police force or region can rapidly deploy drones during POPS incidents;
- develop and provide guidance on the use of drones within the College of Policing's POPS authorised professional practice;
- review the range of available tactical options, equipment and technology to make sure officers can quickly and safely disperse people who take part in disorder; and
- review POPS training at all levels, including an assessment of the adequacy of the current fitness test for level 2 officers.

The National Police Coordination Centre and the mobilisation of public order public safety resources during the disorder

Recommendation 2

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the College of Policing, should create a plan and begin work to improve how the police service mobilises public order public safety (POPS) resources. They should plan to:

- give the National Police Chiefs' Council POPS lead (national co-ordinating gold commander) explicit authority to set the national strategy for POPS mobilisation, and full command and control of the deployment of tier 3 resources;
- improve the capacity and capability of all regional information and co-ordination centres, including providing better guidance and a common operating framework;
- improve the technology available to the National Police Coordination Centre, so that it can deploy and manage mutual aid more effectively and efficiently – the police service should be able to access information on the identity, number, location and nature of resources; skills available; length of deployments; and operational status of vehicles;
- prioritise a national structured debriefing process about the police response to disorder that supports rapid learning and improvement; and
- increase the police service's POPS mobilisation testing regime and take decisive action on its results.

The resilience and well-being of officers repeatedly exposed to incidents of disorder

Recommendation 3

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the College of Policing and the Home Office should create a plan and begin work to improve the well-being support the police service gives to its officers and staff. They should plan to:

- create formal protocols with ambulance services and hospital trusts for the treatment of police officers who are injured on duty;
- assess how public order public safety planning and mobilisation, at force, regional and national levels, considers and prioritises the well-being of officers and staff, such as making sure they have access to food and drink, rest and rotation, personal protective equipment and toilet facilities;
- consider whether public order public safety roles should be defined as 'high risk', particularly in police forces that face frequent, extensive and severe disorder;
- review whether officers deployed in hostile incidents need additional support on a case-by-case basis; and
- examine the level of contribution that each police force, and the Home Office, makes to police treatment and well-being centres, so that all officers and staff who need treatment can access it.

Tranche 2

The police service's use of an intelligence-led approach

Recommendation 1

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables should create a plan and begin work to improve how the police service collects, analyses and communicates intelligence about disorder. They should plan to:

- establish clear and resilient intelligence networks, functions and processes to help the police service respond to national emergencies involving disorder more effectively;
- test these arrangements, once they have been established;
- give National Police Coordination Centre strategic intelligence and briefing greater capacity and capability to support the police service in recognising, analysing and responding to information and intelligence on disorder, particularly at times of national emergency;
- prioritise the collection, analysis and distribution of intelligence on disorder and community tension;
- make sure that frequent, accurate and comprehensive strategic intelligence assessments on the threat and risk of disorder are reflected in public order public safety strategic risk assessments;
- revise how the police service classifies and collects intelligence on disorder to help it to better assess the threats posed, including whether intelligence categories such as "cultural nationalism" and "domestic extremism" are relevant and understood across policing;
- make sure each police region has an intelligence team or function that can assess the threat of disorder, which we suggest could be part of each regional information and co-ordination centre; and
- make sure that neighbourhood policing teams perform a central role in helping forces to better understand community mood, sentiments and tension.

The police service's arrangements for tackling online content and social media

Recommendation 2

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the Home Office, should create a plan and begin work to better understand and respond to the risk associated with online content. They should plan to:

- make sure that at force, regional and national levels there is enough police capacity and capability to monitor, analyse and respond to online content;
- make sure that forces have capacity and capability to manage risk from online content through effective communication arrangements;
- identify the full range of technical solutions that the police service uses or could use to improve monitoring and analysis of online information and intelligence on disorder, and responses to it;
- review whether provisions within the Online Safety Act 2023 are fit for purpose to support policing in its response to disorder; and
- improve structures and arrangements for liaison and support between the police service, government departments and online service providers.

Crime investigations associated with the incidents of disorder

Recommendation 3

With immediate effect, the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables, working with the College of Policing, should create a plan and begin work to improve how the police service investigates offences associated with large-scale disorder. They should plan to:

- revise the revise the public order public safety Strategic Policing Requirement to include and specify the range of investigative resources that can be deployed when the national mobilisation plan is activated;
- make sure that senior investigating officers receive training and guidance to better manage investigations into widespread disorder;
- make sure that there is an investigation plan or strategy that can be used by all forces at times of a national police mobilisation to disorder; and
- make sure that all forces routinely carry out structured debriefs of suspects and offenders, to obtain potential evidence or intelligence about disorder.

Annex B – List of forces, other organisations and individuals involved in this review

Main forces

Tranche 1

- Cleveland Police
- Devon and Cornwall Police
- Humberside Police
- Merseyside Police
- Metropolitan Police Service
- Northumbria Police
- South Yorkshire Police
- Staffordshire Police

Tranche 2

- Greater Manchester Police
- Leicestershire Police
- Nottinghamshire Police
- South Wales Police
- West Yorkshire Police

Additional forces

- British Transport Police
- Essex Police
- Police Scotland
- Police Service of Northern Ireland

Other organisations and individuals

- BAE Systems
- Cabinet Office

- Security, Crime, and Intelligence Innovation Institute, Cardiff University
- Chief Police Officers' Staff Association
- College of Policing
- Cosain
- Counter Terrorism Command SO15
- Counter Terrorism Network – Protect & Prepare
- Counter Terrorism Policing HQ
- Counter Terrorism Policing National Community Tension Team
- Counter Terrorism Policing North East
- Counter Terrorism Policing North West
- Counter Terrorism Policing Prevent
- Counter Terrorism Policing Wales
- Crown Prosecution Service
- Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
- Eastern regional information and co-ordination centre
- Eastern Regional Organised Crime Unit
- Fire and Rescue Service
- Fivecast
- Flint House Police Rehabilitation
- Home Office
- Hope Not Hate
- Meta
- National Crime Agency
- National Crime Agency Intelligence Lead
- National Crime Agency Investigation Lead
- National Crime Agency National Lead for tackling online exploitation
- National Crime Agency North West Serious and Organised Crime Lead
- National Major Incident (Communications) Working Group
- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)
- NPCC Chair
- NPCC Community Tension Lead
- NPCC Dogs Lead
- NPCC Investigations Lead
- NPCC Mounted Lead

- NPCC National Undercover Lead/Working Group
- NPCC Protest Lead/Working Group
- NPCC Public Order Public Safety Working Group Lead
- NPCC Recovery Lead
- NPCC Sensitive Intelligence Network Lead
- NPCC Serious and Organised Crime Lead
- NPCC Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme Lead
- NPCC Tactics, Training and Equipment Working Group Chair
- NPCC and Operation Navette Intelligence Lead
- National Police Coordination Centre
- National Police Coordination Centre Strategic Intelligence and Briefing
- National Police Wellbeing Service (Oscar Kilo)
- North East regional information and co-ordination centre
- North East Regional Organised Crime Unit
- North West regional information and co-ordination centre
- North West Regional Organised Crime Unit
- Ofcom
- Orlo
- Police Digital Service
- Police Federation of England and Wales
- Police Superintendents' Association
- Police Treatment Centres
- PROSE UK LTD
- Refute
- Scottish Police Information and Coordination Centre
- Sensitive Intelligence Network
- South East Regional Organised Crime Unit
- Tech Against Terrorism
- TikTok
- UK Football Policing Unit
- UNISON
- Wales regional information and co-ordination centre
- Wales Regional Organised Crime Unit

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