

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Football Policing, HC 1553

Tuesday 6 January 2026

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Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Mr Paul Kohler; Robbie Moore; Peter Prinsley; Joani Reid; Jo White.

Questions 148 - 371

Witnesses

[I:](#) Chief Constable Craig Guildford, West Midlands Police; Assistant Chief Constable Mike O'Hara, Gold Commander for Aston Villa v Maccabi Tel Aviv, West Midlands Police; Chief Inspector Mick Wilkinson, Football Policing Lead, West Midlands Police; Chief Constable Mark Roberts, National Football Policing Lead, UK Football Policing Unit.

[II:](#) Councillor John Cotton, Leader, Birmingham City Council; Richard Brooks, Executive Director of City Operations, Birmingham City Council; Anthony Cox, Director of Law and Governance, Birmingham City Council.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Chief Constable Craig Guildford, Assistant Chief Constable Mike O'Hara, Chief Inspector Mick Wilkinson and Chief Constable Mark Roberts.

Chair: Can I welcome our first panel today to our follow-up session following the session that we held at the beginning of December on the policing of the Aston Villa-Maccabi Tel Aviv football game?

Before we start, could members of the Committee declare any relevant interests? I will declare that I am a member and officer of Conservative Friends of Israel.

Jo White: I am a member of Labour Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Palestine, but I have also been for 40 years the spouse of Lord Mann, who is the Government's independent unpaid adviser on antisemitism.

Joani Reid: I am the chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism.

Peter Prinsley: I am a member of Labour Friends of Israel. I travelled with Labour Friends of Israel to Israel in May of last year. I also attempted to travel to Israel with the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding and was banned from entering Israel later in the year, so I have been twice but only got in once. I am also a member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

Mr Kohler: I received a donation from the Lib Dem Friends of Israel before the last election.

Q148 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I will ask our witnesses to introduce themselves and then we will go into questions. Perhaps we will start with you, Mr Roberts.

Chief Constable Roberts: Good afternoon. I am Chief Constable Mark Roberts from Cheshire Constabulary, but I am here in my role as NPCC lead for football policing.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Good afternoon. I am Mike O'Hara, Assistant Chief Constable from West Midlands police. I was the gold commander.

Chief Constable Guildford: Good afternoon. I am Craig Guilford, Chief Constable of West Midlands police.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Mick Wilkinson. I am a chief inspector with West Midlands police and I am the head of the force football unit.

Chair: Thank you very much. To start our questioning I will call on Paul Kohler.

Q149 **Mr Kohler:** I would like to return to the meeting with the Dutch police on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

1 October. I think it was 1 October. It is referred to as 2 October in the peer review, but I think that meeting was 1 October. There were no contemporaneous minutes of that. Is it normal practice not to have minutes taken when interviewing witnesses?

Chief Constable Guildford: Sorry, did you say "when interviewing witnesses"?

Mr Kohler: Yes, or listening to evidence. Is it normal practice not to take minutes?

Chief Constable Guildford: Do you want to just come in there? You were in the meeting.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: I will just take a couple of moments, if that is okay, to explain my role within West Midlands police and some of the operational experience that I drew upon in the planning and delivery of this policing operation.

I am one of West Midlands police's silver and bronze public order commanders. I have been involved in football policing for the majority of my policing career and I am part of the European silver cadre of police commanders, policing both in the UK and, indeed, in Europe. I have planned and delivered numerous high-profile and high-risk football fixtures, but, additional to that, in terms of my operational command, I am the force's national CT SecCo lead and have regularly taken on the role of delivering party conference, and most recently was the security co-ordinator for the Commonwealth Games. I just felt that it was important to share that with you in terms of my operational exposure and the roles and processes that I go through in delivering those operations.

With regard to the comments around the meeting with the Dutch police, I would just say that, as a commander and in terms of informing my decision making and making the best and most informed decision, it is really important to try to obtain information from diverse sources of information to make sure that our decision making is the most well informed that it can possibly be.

Q150 **Mr Kohler:** That is not my question. No minutes were taken.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: Forgive me. In terms of the question, no minutes were taken.

Q151 **Mr Kohler:** Why not?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: The conversation was between policing peers. My conversation was with the Dutch police command, who were, as I say, trusted professional policing peers. We were speaking peer-to-peer to obtain their information and experiences of delivering an operation on the scale of the fixture that we were going to deliver. I have done that commonly when planning big operations. I have spoken to police commanders from other forces both within the UK and across the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

world. I have spoken to other professional policing peers to get that honesty and candour from their experiences of delivering an operation.

Q152 **Mr Kohler:** That makes sense, but did you record what was said soon afterwards?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: I made notes during my meeting with them, which were then transcribed and put into an email that was submitted into the chain of command.

Q153 **Mr Kohler:** We have the email before us now.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: You have the email.

Q154 **Mr Kohler:** It is not dated. When was the email sent?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: The email was sent on 9 October.

Q155 **Mr Kohler:** That is a week later. You made notes soon afterwards and this email is a version of those notes.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: That is correct.

Q156 **Mr Kohler:** Thank you. It is referred to as the “tipping point” in the peer review. Do you agree that that evidence was the tipping point in your decision to ban away fans?

Chief Constable Guildford: From the perspective of the operation and the evidence that I gave last time, yes, absolutely. With the way that the intelligence had built up, my assessment was, certainly looking at it objectively, that it was really important information that influenced the bronze, silver and gold commander.

Q157 **Mr Kohler:** Why does it not appear in the community impact assessment? Why is no reference made to this incredibly important information in the community impact assessment?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: It is not normal practice to reference engagement with professionals particularly.

Q158 **Mr Kohler:** I do not mean the engagement but the actual information. All that is in the community impact assessment is more accurate information about what happened in the Amsterdam fixture. None of this contentious information, which there is great doubt over, appears in the community impact assessment. Why not? It was so important. Why was it not there?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: The community impact assessment is exactly that. It is about engagement and information exchange with the community. The CIA has a different role.

Q159 **Mr Kohler:** I am sorry to correct you, but the community impact assessment does cover the Amsterdam match and what was said previously. It does not say this new information, which contradicts what you have recorded in the community impact assessment. You cannot argue, “We don't include that stuff” because you did include it. You



HOUSE OF COMMONS

included the initial, but not later.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: If I can explain, the reference to the Amsterdam information within the CIA was a feed directly from the Community Security Trust. That is why it was inserted: because it was from our community liaison. We have a range of documents or products within any operation. There is an intelligence sitrep that is regularly produced, which effectively contains information intelligence that is relevant to an operation. The CIA relates to community impact and engagement. It does not relate to information or intelligence that we may have gleaned from partners.

Q160 **Mr Kohler:** Information that you receive that contradicts what is there does not appear in the community impact assessment. It never does.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: It does not appear in the community impact assessment.

Q161 **Mr Kohler:** Why was this information not referred to in the first meeting of the SAG? The first meeting of the SAG was a week after your meeting. Why does this information not appear in the SAG?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I did not go to the SAG. Mick, I do not know your recollection in relation to what was discussed in the first SAG meeting.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: Post receiving that information from the Dutch police, I briefed that verbally into the silver commander that night. The following day, I met with the gold commander, ACC Parnell, and verbally briefed him around the findings of the meeting with the Dutch police. Subsequently, the information from that meeting was briefed into the SAG meeting on 7 October.

Q162 **Mr Kohler:** Why in the SAG minutes does it say, "In the absence of intelligence and based on conversations with peers and my professional judgment, we prefer to ban away fans"? It says, "In the absence of intelligence". You are telling me you had all this information, all this intelligence, and yet the SAG minutes a week later, after you have briefed various commanders, say that, in the absence of intelligence and based on intuition, it seems, you want to ban away fans. Why was reference not made there?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: In honesty, there is a reality about what is information and what is intelligence. Sometimes the two can be misconstrued. Information is anything that is available to us that can inform some of our decisions. That can be open source; it can be CCTV; it can be conversations and those experiences of people. Intelligence is anything that has been subject to some sort of assessment and sanitisation that means it is actionable. The terminology of information and intelligence can be a little confusing at times.

Q163 **Mr Kohler:** You are saying it is utterly understandable that no reference



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to your meeting a week earlier and the information that you found out is in the SAG. You think that is utterly plausible, do you?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: The information that was shared from the Dutch meeting was referenced within that first SAG.

Q164 **Mr Kohler:** It was, but why is there no reference to it in the minutes?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: The meeting was recorded. I am not sure as to the comprehensive nature of the minutes. The recording would probably be helpful.

Q165 **Mr Kohler:** We can see that recording, can we?

Chief Constable Guildford: All the SAG minutes and any recordings are within the purview of Birmingham city council. Certainly, I would suggest that it would be a really good idea to have those so you can either listen to them or look at them. I would be absolutely certain that there will be more in listening to it than there will be in looking at a couple of the minutes.

Chair: Birmingham city council is giving us evidence in the next session.

Q166 **Mr Kohler:** Would you agree with me that it is surprising there is no reference in the SAG minutes to them?

Chief Constable Guildford: Personally, I think the comment that you make is a fair comment. With regard to what was recorded in those minutes, Mike was not there; I was not there. I do not know the custom and practices of what is recorded, what is not or whether they rely on an audio recording. I am really not sure of that particular element of the process, but the point that you make is a fair one. As the chief inspector has just said, it was discussed. I do not know the rationale behind how those words have got into those minutes. I cannot help you with that bit.

Mr Kohler: Okay, we will return to that with Birmingham city council.

Q167 **Joani Reid:** Have you read the minutes?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: We have read a lot.

Q168 **Joani Reid:** Have you read the minutes in which the decision was made?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Yes.

Q169 **Joani Reid:** You were not aware that the intelligence or information was not included in those minutes upon which the decision to ban fans was decided.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: There was an awful lot discussed in the SAG. I was not present.

Q170 **Joani Reid:** This information was later claimed as the significant intelligence that emerged. You have not noted that that was not included in the minutes of the meeting where the decision was made.



Chief Constable Guildford: Can I just step in and answer that? This is a situation whereby the officers who go to the SAG give the information and things are discussed in the SAG. Have we then gone back and retrospectively checked everything that was said in the SAG? The straight answer would be that, no, we have not done that.

Q171 **Joani Reid:** After the Prime Minister raises the issue publicly and you have to come to the Home Affairs Select Committee twice, you have not read the minutes where the decision was made.

Chief Constable Guildford: Sorry, I am not saying that. To be clear, what I am trying to explain is that I would assume it is not custom and practice to go through the minutes immediately after the SAG, if the officers have attended the SAG and they have given all the information to the SAG.

With regard to this process itself, with all the things that we have prepared, we have looked at the minutes. As part of the process that we have been undertaking, there is a judicial review process. In the stage at which we are at, we have gone and we have listened to the actual recordings as well. It would be very advantageous for you, as members of the Committee, to secure a copy of that recording.

Q172 **Joani Reid:** We will ask the council at the next session, but, just for clarity, this is my understanding. That SAG meeting on 7 October, which Paul is referring to, was where the decision was made to ban Israeli fans. It refers to an absence of intelligence. On 8 October, our understanding is that the chair of the SAG notified you that a clearer rationale for the decision to ban Israeli fans was required. On 16 October, significant intelligence emerged in the form of the information/intelligence as a result of this phone call, all of which happened before the meeting on 7 October, but it was never discussed. Is that your position?

Chief Constable Guildford: You have asked three or four things at the same time. Could we just break those down? Do you want to talk about the SAG?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: It is a very fair observation. The one thing that I would say, however, is that Chief Inspector Wilkinson and the silver commander were present in the first SAG. My understanding is that the information was briefed into the SAG. The fact that it is not reflected in the minutes is unhelpful, but that is something that, again, we need to discuss with Birmingham city council.

You then referenced that "intelligence emerged". My assessment would be that information and intelligence came into this operation from when the fixture was announced at the end of August all the way through September, October and into November. I took command of this on 17 October. From the beginning of this operation—we have briefed a lot into HMICFRS, et cetera—you can clearly see a constant flow of information



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and intelligence coming into the operational environment, being assessed by intelligence operatives and creating intelligence sitreps.

I do not know what you are implying around the intelligence emerging, but there is a reality that information and intelligence—

Q173 **Joani Reid:** I will tell you exactly what I mean. On 7 October it was minuted that there was “an absence of intelligence”. The SAG chair notifies you that you need a clearer rationale for the decision to ban Israeli fans. That was required for legal reasons. On the 16th, the information/intelligence is provided in the form of the minutes or the recollection of the phone call and what happened with the Dutch police on 1 October. Why was it not referred to on 7 October?

Assistant Chief Constable O’Hara: I think it was.

Joani Reid: That is not credible. It is not credible. The basis upon which the decision was made was not minuted at all.

Q174 **Mr Kohler:** Assistant Chief Constable, if you think it was referred to, you get this email on 9 October saying, “We need a clearer rationale”. What did you do when you received that email?

Assistant Chief Constable O’Hara: I was not in command at that point. I took command from the 17th. Fundamentally, organisationally, the SAG chair understood the contentious nature of this decision. From reviewing the operational progress of the information and intelligence, my view is that he wanted to ensure that we were all very clear what the information and intelligence was suggesting and therefore what the preference or the recommendation from the police was.

Q175 **Mr Kohler:** Are you aware of this email of 9 October?

Assistant Chief Constable O’Hara: I am.

Q176 **Mr Kohler:** When did you see it?

Assistant Chief Constable O’Hara: Me personally?

Mr Kohler: Yes.

Assistant Chief Constable O’Hara: Probably in November/December.

Q177 **Mr Kohler:** What about Chief Constable Guildford?

Chief Constable Guildford: I only saw it when we have been in the review process.

Q178 **Mr Kohler:** An email comes into senior officers in West Midlands police saying, “We need a clearer rationale” after supposedly it has been discussed. Clearly, you have talked about this pivotal moment. No one says, “Hold on. We had a SAG two days ago where we discussed it”. Did no one say that? Did no one return to that point?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chief Constable Guildford: What I need to be clear on is that, whenever anything came in from the SAG, the gold commander who was in charge at the time responded to the request that came in. My sense of it—I was not at the SAG—is very much along the lines that discussions took place and information was shared, but the SAG chair then requested a written document.

Mr Kohler: They asked for a clearer rationale.

Chief Constable Guildford: Just bear with me a second. A written document was required to set everything out. I think that is what was required.

Q179 **Mr Kohler:** The email does not ask for a document. It asks for a clearer rationale; i.e. there was no rationale at that point.

Chief Constable Guildford: I do not think that was the case. The officers who went there participated in that process and the SAG chair listened to what was said. It was discussed at the SAG and following that, a couple of days later, that request came out. You can see in the chronology that we then send more of a written document that set out some further detail.

Please, for the purposes of what you are trying to get to the bottom of, it would probably be important to ask the SAG around that because I was not there and ACC O'Hara was not there.

Q180 **Mr Kohler:** Turning to Lord Mann's report, in the last session you told us that you did not have sight of it. Was that entirely accurate?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, it never was sent to us.

Q181 **Mr Kohler:** Then why is it referenced in the community impact assessment? Bizarrely, this is something that is not about the community, despite what you told me a few minutes ago. It is referenced in the community impact assessment. Why have you not had sight of it?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: At the community meeting on 20 October, which took place in the evening, Lord Mann's report was referenced by a Jewish community member. The community bronze, Chief Inspector Tim Robinson, made a note of the feedback from the community and put it into the CIA.

Q182 **Mr Kohler:** It was circulated. It says here "circulated".

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That is what was said by the member of the community in the community meeting.

Q183 **Mr Kohler:** The community impact assessment says it was circulated and you are saying that does not mean it was circulated. What does it mean?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I was present in the community meeting on the evening of 20 October. A member of the community in the community meeting that took place at police headquarters referenced



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that Lord Mann's report had been circulated. That was noted by our chief inspector.

Q184 **Mr Kohler:** Why did he note doubts to the report's accuracy and that it is a bit late? What is all that about? Why were there doubts about its accuracy at that point?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I do not know.

Q185 **Mr Kohler:** That is in there. It is recorded in this document, but you do not know why.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I imagine that would be the assessment of the community bronze commander.

Q186 **Mr Kohler:** Turning to what happened in Amsterdam, do you stand by what you said to us last time about what happened in Amsterdam?

Chief Constable Guildford: Do you mean the evidence that we gave last time?

Q187 **Mr Kohler:** You stand by all those things that you said happened, even though it is contradicted by the Dutch police, contemporaneous evidence and media evidence. You still stand by all those things. I have a list of 11 things you told us that are disputed. Are you telling us you still stand by what was said?

Chief Constable Guildford: I was really clear last time in what I said. The chief inspector who had the conversation is sitting next to me. I told you very clearly that I did not doubt his integrity. In your letter since our first appearance, Chair, you asked me to respond to eight points. I have provided all that information to you. I do stand by what was said. It was said on the basis of the information that was given to us.

Q188 **Mr Kohler:** Maccabi fans attacked taxi drivers. Do you still hold that?

Chief Constable Guildford: In specific reference to the taxi driver, yes, I do still hold that. In preparation for today, I have seen that in one of the first community impact assessments Lord Mann mentioned something about taxi drivers. He said that it was the other way around. In his articulation, it was a taxi driver who was being allegedly attacked or dragged out of a taxi who was a Jewish member of the public.

In the CST information that we have that I have read as part of today, a taxi is mentioned twice. That incident is mentioned, but there was also an incident on the evening before, which would imply that the taxi was attacked because it was possibly a member of a different community. This was information that we got from the CST. That was one of the very first bits of information that they provided us with. It mentioned two taxi incidents, one on the evening the day before and one on the day of the actual fixture.

Q189 **Mr Kohler:** Can you send that to us?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chief Constable Guildford: I think we have, but, yes, we have that.

Q190 **Mr Kohler:** You still hold that there were 5,000 Dutch police deployed. You still hold to that, do you?

Chief Constable Guildford: No, I remember when that was discussed at the beginning with the Chair, Lord Mann and us. The 5,000 was our assumption as to what were the inputs over those three or four days of the policing operation. The Dutch said that more than 2,000 were deployed just on the day of the operation itself.

Q191 **Mr Kohler:** They said 1,200 were deployed.

Chief Constable Guildford: I thought it was nearer to 2,000. The 5,000 was a planning assumption from the silver, which we discussed right at the beginning—

Q192 **Mr Kohler:** It was made up, in reality.

Chief Constable Guildford: It is not right to say it was made up, no. That is not right. That is really not fair. It was a professional assumption of what would be required over the period of days. Chair, I remember you and Mr Mann having that conversation at the beginning of the evidence.

Q193 **Chair:** We were saying that that may be the way that you came up with the 5,000 number, but it is a finger in the air hoping to get to a calculation that might possibly work rather than having any concrete basis.

Chief Constable Guildford: No, definitely not. It is a professional estimate as to how many officers they—

Q194 **Chair:** You did not check it with the Amsterdam police. You did not go back and say, "If we say 5,000, is that correct?"

Chief Constable Guildford: No, we did not. That was just the assumption that we have made based on four days of—

Q195 **Chair:** You do not know whether the 1,200 was 1,200 on one day or 1,200 over the full period.

Chief Constable Guildford: No. I assumed, from having spoken to the silver commander, that the number itself was on the day of the actual event. I think it was more towards 2,000 than 1,200. I know some of those figures have been disputed, as you quite rightly say, but, no, that was our assumption.

Q196 **Mr Kohler:** You still hold the line that no AI tools were used in the preparation.

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes. I have got a note about that as well. In your letter you asked around some of the background of the information and the intelligence that we have provided. There was a definite note that we have got to the bottom of in terms of the West Ham game. The



HOUSE OF COMMONS

summation in the House—it was a question that was asked in the House—was that West Midlands police may have used AI on this particular occasion. We do not use AI.

On the West Ham side of things and how we gained that information, in producing the report, one of the officers would usually go to—correct me if I am wrong on this, Mark—a system, which football officers use all over the country, that has intelligence reports of previous games. They did not find any relevant information within the searches that they made for that. They basically googled when the last time was. That is how the information came to be.

Q197 **Chair:** Was it the AI function on Google?

Chief Constable Guildford: I am being really candid here. I am told that they just did a Google search on that because they could not find it in the normal system. As it transpires, as I have said and made really clear, that information was wrong. I have apologised for that.

Q198 **Mr Kohler:** We know that. We have gone through that.

Chief Constable Guildford: We have not routinely used AI on any—

Q199 **Mr Kohler:** Why was your officer googling to find information? If he looked in the usual place and there was not any, why did he not stop at that point? Why did he start googling to try to find something?

Chief Constable Guildford: When you do one of these assessments, I am fairly convinced that when you produce it you look at when an event has last taken place. You try to find the information as to when it last happened. You go to the football system and usually it tells you. Because these teams had not played for so very long, I do not think the information was in the system. Is that right?

Chief Constable Roberts: We have double-checked and there is no information held in relation to Maccabi playing in this country on the national football system. Clearly, they have played, but no incidents have been recorded.

Mr Kohler: Is that not your answer? There were no incidents.

Chair: There were none.

Mr Kohler: Rather than accepting that, you went, “We will find it somewhere else”.

Chair: They had played Chelsea. We are getting bogged down in detail. There are a few other points that we need to make.

Q200 **Jo White:** I want to come in on the accuracy of your reporting. In the SAG minutes of 16 October there was a discussion about the risk in reference to the different football fans. When talking about the Maccabi fan base, incidents in Italy, Norway and Holland were referenced, but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

none of these incidents involved Maccabi fans. For example, in Italy it involved Beitar Jerusalem. In Norway, it involved the Israeli national football team. In Holland, it was the Israeli baseball team. In fact, both of them were pro-Palestine protests rather than Israeli fans' bad behaviour. You are using evidence that did not actually relate to Maccabi Tel Aviv to highlight a risk to the community, which I do not think existed.

Q201 **Chair:** You stated that Lord Mann had said that a Jewish person was dragged out of a taxi as part of his report. Can you point to exactly where that is said? We have been through the reports and we cannot find that.

Chief Constable Roberts: Can I assist on that, Chair? I have seen Lord Mann's report. He references on the first page of the report, at point 3, "There was an altercation with a taxi driver that resulted in Israeli fans attacking a small number of taxis at the same location. The event dissipated quickly as the taxi drove off". That is referencing Lord Mann.

Q202 **Chair:** It does not say a Jewish person was dragged out of a taxi. I have it in front of me.

Chief Constable Roberts: No, I have just read exactly what he says. In terms of the national system, as I say, bearing in mind that those two fixtures were played some time ago, if there are any instances of note, match reports are filed on the intelligence system. They would have been available.

In terms of any current intelligence, we would also check with other countries, as you would imagine, to find out whether they have relevant intelligence. We brokered the contact between West Midlands police and the Dutch national police. Subsequent to that, we would do the checks. There was the incident with the Tel Aviv derby, which came out partway through this process.

Q203 **Chair:** I was going to say that was after the decision was taken.

Chief Constable Roberts: Yes, that was after the decision. There was then a further incident—

Q204 **Chair:** It was not Maccabi fans, was it?

Chief Constable Roberts: I am sorry. The reports were that it was the derby between Maccabi and the other Tel Aviv club. The report was that there was disorder there. It was reported by the Israeli police as being a serious disorder. It was after—

Q205 **Chair:** The game was called off, was it not? It was afterwards, yes.

Chief Constable Roberts: That was after the decision but before the game.

Chief Constable Guildford: I have found the reference, if you want it. Do you want to go first? This is the taxi thing.

Jo White: Yes, I asked a question about why you were using a different



HOUSE OF COMMONS

instance of football violence where Israelis were involved as a way to highlight the threat that Maccabi Tel Aviv fans posed to the community.

Q206 **Chair:** It feels to us, from everything we have seen, that you felt you had to justify banning these fans and that scraping was done to find a reason.

Chief Constable Guildford: That is absolutely not the case. I am really sorry if it comes across in that way. That was absolutely not the case. The information and intelligence that we received and documented—we have shared absolutely all of that with HMICFRS very recently—was all gone through. The mistake that was made in terms of the West Ham was one individual doing one Google search because he could not find the reference because it was not there within the system. Mike, do you want to just answer that question?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I have a couple of points, just to try to help a little bit, if possible. Open-source research is not unusual in police information and intelligence gathering.

Chair: I am sure it is not.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: It is specifically called out in the public order public safety authorised professional practice as being good practice to do online open source research. That is not unusual. This was briefed into the first gold meeting very early on. At that point, from everything that I have read, West Midlands police were planning on receiving Maccabi Tel Aviv fans.

The implication that that was erroneously searched for to try to build evidence to justify the decision is not a fair reflection of the reality. Open-source research is good practice. It incorporates the broader understanding for your threat assessment. The open-source research was a mistake. That has been called out. AI was not used.

Just in relation to the point that you raised, again, my understanding—I was not at the SAG—from the SAG was that they discussed the full range of risks. That included the risk from pro-Palestinian protests. My understanding is that, if you look at the intelligence picture and the information that developed over time, it was clear that there were people locally who were very unhappy about Maccabi Tel Aviv coming to Birmingham. There were threats and there was information and intelligence of those threats.

We had a rising tide of concern locally and then we had the additional information about Maccabi Tel Aviv and the potential threat of them attacking community members as opposed to rival fans. Those two things together presented a reasonable position for the police to say, "We want to protect the public". This was about a reasonable decision to try to protect the public.

Q207 **Joani Reid:** This is a question specifically for Mr Roberts. We have heard a lot about Lord Mann's report. It is one quite concrete piece of research



on the actual football team that we are discussing. When you received the report from Lord Mann, what did you do with it?

Chief Constable Roberts: First of all, I will say I have had a dialogue with Lord Mann over a number of years. It has always been a very positive dialogue. He always comes from a motivated point of view from the fans' perspective. That is not just over the issues involving Israeli fans. Particularly around disabled fans he is a real champion, so I listen to Lord Mann and we have a good dialogue.

With that said, the report was marked private and confidential. I made a number of attempts to try to arrange a meeting with him. There were two meetings arranged—I offer no criticism; he is a busy man and things happen—and I understand that there was a technology failure on at least one occasion, but we never managed to speak despite a number of attempts to try to speak to him. As I say, I offer no criticism because I speak to Lord Mann a lot and I think he quite enjoys speaking to me on occasions.

When I look at his report and the relevance of it to the risk assessment process in this particular case, the salient point—it has been brought out already—is the distinction between intelligence and information. The relevant intelligence in this was the narrative around what happened on that night in Amsterdam. That was superseded with first-hand evidence by West Midlands police speaking directly to the Dutch police. The rest of it is a narrative and an opinion by Lord Mann, some of which I agree with and some of which I disagree with. As such, it would fall into the category of information. It will not be something that I fed into the risk assessment process because the relevant element was superseded, as I say, by the conversation with the Dutch national police.

Q208 **Joani Reid:** On the intelligence-gathering operation, could you just give us a quick overview of, other than the conversation that you had with the Dutch police and the googling, what official documents you analysed that fed into your risk matrix?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Because of the nature of the football fixture—this is not normally the case for a normal football fixture—we identified an intelligence bronze commander. In effect, you have somebody who is an intelligence professional, whose role is to collate and gather all sources of information and intelligence to help inform a threat assessment on behalf of the commander. That comes by way of a weekly sitrep. I do not know whether that increased nearer to the fixture, but in effect the intelligence operatives create a document that is considered by the gold and silver commanders within their meetings and the use of the national decision-making model. That contains sensitive intelligence flows from a range of sources.

Q209 **Joani Reid:** Specifically, what was the clincher, other than the conversation that you had with the Dutch police and the googling of information?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I would not say there was a clincher. It was very clear from looking at the information and intelligence flow and the feedback from community.

Q210 **Joani Reid:** You talk about this intelligence flow. I am just trying to get a sense of what that intelligence flow and information looks like. From everything that we have read and seen, it boils down to one conversation that was not minuted and some inaccurate information about the football team in question. Can you put us right? I am giving you the opportunity. Tell us what the information and intelligence was.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Intelligence comes in a range of forms. People give information and intelligence, which is then assessed and sanitised. It is then looked to be triangulated and corroborated. It is given a handling code and then it is listed with—

Q211 **Joani Reid:** I am not asking about the process. I do not want to know about the process. I am asking for specific bits of information and intelligence. If you are saying to me that we are not entitled to that or it is private and confidential, please do say that.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I am not saying that at all. I am just trying to be cautious about how I speak.

Joani Reid: You are being very cautious.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Thank you. In policing, you have informants, for example. In policing, you have technical feed. You have a range of sources of information and intelligence online. You have chatter from people and human intelligence sources. You have a range of intelligence that comes together, which is then overlaid with a range of professional judgment.

Chief Constable Guildford: Can I help you just a little bit with that? I think I see where you are coming from. On the types of intelligence, you get intelligence from the community and from individuals. That intelligence is fed into the system, but it is made in the form of intelligence reports. We received a number of those intelligence reports from different people, which fed into what Mike has just been receiving. What are they? I think that is what you are getting at.

Q212 **Joani Reid:** I will tell you what I am struggling with. The main source of intelligence is from a private conversation with the Dutch police, which they are denying the contents of. They have publicly doubled down on that since this news was published. That is your main source of intelligence. You are willing to share publicly that the Dutch police have effectively lied to their public and their press, but you are not willing to tell us the other sources of information. It appears that that is really the only intelligence and information you received, that the decision was based solely on that, and that we cannot corroborate because the Dutch police have said that it is categorically not true. I am trying to get a sense of what this decision was based on.



Chief Constable Roberts: Can I just offer a relatively objective view, as far as I can, given that I am sat on this side of the table? I made the reference to the tipping point in the review. Up until the intelligence from the Dutch police and briefing that we have discussed, it was fairly clear to me that West Midlands police were fully working on the basis that they were going to host the Maccabi fans. There were contingencies in place and they were exploring them. It had some similarities to operations that I have looked at in the past that were considered high risk.

I have been national lead for 11 years and before that I spent five years in GMP handling most of the big events there. This is a unique situation.

Q213 **Chair:** How many times have away fans been denied access?

Chief Constable Roberts: There have been rare occasions. We came close to a decision around Ajax fans, ironically, a number of years ago as a result of their behaviour. Personally my closest experience was the first time Glasgow Rangers played in Manchester after—you may remember it—the Europa League final where there was a riot in Manchester.

Chair: I remember it well.

Chief Constable Roberts: The next time Glasgow Rangers got drawn to play in Manchester was against Manchester United. There were real concerns there. One of the options that we considered was banning Glasgow Rangers fans. The accommodation that we reached there was that they all went to Wigan. In effect, they had a fan zone at Wigan and were only given their tickets once they got on the coaches to Manchester.

Q214 **Chair:** There was a proposal here to have a fan zone in Walsall, was there not?

Chief Constable Roberts: Yes, absolutely. That is the parallel that I see. We had all the Glasgow Rangers fans go by consent. We do not really have a power to do it by coercion. Glasgow Rangers worked with the authorities and in effect they all met. They were fans groups. We roughly knew who they were. They got the ticket on the way to Old Trafford and they were escorted straight to the ground and straight out. That is the closest parallel to this that I can think of. In the preparations for this event, West Midlands police looked at an option to use a local football ground to try to do something.

It is clear that, from the initial point up until the point of the Dutch intelligence, the plan was to host the fans. The tipping point is referred to there. It is the Dutch intelligence where there is clearly a shift.

In terms of corroboration, I take the point about casting doubt on what the Dutch have said and whether the Dutch have recanted on that. There is clearly corroboration because it is agreed by everyone that there was an incident where a Palestinian flag was ripped down; there was an incident where there was a disturbance around a taxi; and there was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

some pretty appalling chanting. Equally, we know that there were attacks on Jewish fans.

Q215 **Chair:** There were 400 stuck in a casino, were there not?

Chief Constable Roberts: Yes. There were attacks. It appeared to be based on race. It was not typical football violence. For me, the distinction here was that we normally plan for away fans and their risk fans or ultras—people call things different names—seeking disorder with rival fans from the home team. The difference from the intelligence reading was that here there was a threat that some of the Maccabi fans might seek confrontation with the local community.

In terms of additional intelligence—I will not go into the sensitivities; I will leave it to West Midlands police to discuss it, if they wish to—clearly there was chatter on social media. There was evidence that some Maccabi fans or people purporting to be Maccabi fans were gloating in effect about what had gone on, and that was being responded to by others who were saying about the reaction. That was the distinguishing dynamic that made this different. Genuinely, this is a unique set of circumstances.

Q216 **Peter Prinsley:** I am Peter Prinsley. I am the MP for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket. Thank you for coming again today. At lunchtime today the *Times* published a report from David Brown, the chief news correspondent, who has said there has been an internal police report that said the police received high-confidence intelligence on 5 September that elements of the west midlands community were planning to arm themselves. Did the police receive intelligence that there were locals who were actually hostile to this and would in fact be causing the trouble? Is this something that you were aware of? Where does this information come from? It has just been published at lunchtime today.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That was the point that I was going to raise just around the broader intelligence flow. I understand your concern that the only thing the police focused on was the information from the Dutch. It absolutely was not. We were very clear that there was a huge degree of consternation from the community around the arrival of Maccabi Tel Aviv. As a direct result of that concern, we got a lot of information and intelligence to suggest that people were going to actively seek out Maccabi Tel Aviv fans and would seek violence towards them. We had sort of a bubbling position locally and then we had the information about Maccabi Tel Aviv and the assessment from the Dutch commanders.

Q217 **Chair:** You could have managed that in the way that we have been discussing with the Glasgow Rangers fans. They could have been kept in very restricted places, bussed in on coaches and not been allowed to go out into local communities. That could have been managed.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That could be managed. That is absolutely right. There are a range of options available to all commanders



HOUSE OF COMMONS

when they are trying to police a range of risks. However, as the chief has just referenced, particularly when we got the information about Maccabi, the worry was that the Maccabi fans would target the community. We saw that in the information and intelligence. We had people purporting to be Maccabi fans online who were goading local community members and saying, "This is what you're going to get". This was all forming part of the heat of the situation.

Based on that, the commanders tried to make the right decision that was reasonable in the circumstances. You have a very hot community reception. You have the Dutch police saying, "We feel they actively targeted community members". Those two things together posed a sufficient risk. The challenge around risk decision making is that public safety has to be at the heart of it. Again, I understand the frustration, but there is no conspiracy here. This was a decision based on safety.

Q218 Peter Prinsley: Why are we only hearing about this now? Why is it that a report has come at lunchtime today from the *Times* newspaper that you had information on 5 September that there were likely to be vigilante groups within the west midlands community itself who were planning to take action against the Maccabi fans? How is it that this Committee is just hearing this for the first time?

Chief Constable Guildford: This is the first time specifically that you have asked for that detail. That is what we tried to get across.

Joani Reid: That is absolutely outrageous.

Chief Constable Guildford: This is the first time that you—

Q219 Chair: To be clear, we have wanted to get to the bottom of this and understand why you took the decision that you did. We would like very much for you to be able to demonstrate to us that this was done entirely as a risk-based matter for public safety etc. It is very frustrating if there is information that could help you in that that does not come to light up front.

Chief Constable Guildford: That is understood.

Q220 Chair: I do not think we should have to ask specifically for every single piece of information, if you have things that you could give us that would assist us in this process.

Chief Constable Guildford: We do have things that we have documented in the form of the reports that you have asked for, which you have set out quite clearly. We have set out the process and what I am sure my colleague has been trying to say and what I say to you very clearly is that we have individual intelligence reports from people who live locally and some open-source intelligence reports.

As Chief Roberts has just explained as well, we have assessed those and we have used those. We have details of all those that were in the minds



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of the commanders that were briefed in. That type of detail includes detail about the hostility of certain aspects of the local community towards the group of risk fans who were due to attend. It absolutely covers the things that were said online about agitation, and it covers elements of information that we got about people wanting to protest, both on a local basis and people outside of the west midlands coming to the west midlands to protest. We have all those pieces of information and that is what we have based our decision on.

Q221 Chair: We need to move on because we have more questions, but the important thing here is not whether this Committee is satisfied. It is whether the Jewish community living in Birmingham feels safe and whether the police of West Midlands police are policing without fear or favour and protecting the Jewish community. That is what is absolutely of essence in these questions.

Chief Constable Guildford: That is absolutely what we have done from day one, we continue to do and we are absolutely 100% committed to do.

Chair: It is a good job you cannot see the shaking of heads behind you, Chief Constable.

Chief Constable Guildford: In terms of this fixture itself, all the ongoing liaison that we have had and the service that we have provided to members of the Jewish community, particularly in light of things that have happened nationally and internationally over the last couple of months after this football match, we can absolutely assure you of that.

Q222 Mr Kohler: I have two quick questions. Was this information about potential vigilantes attacking Maccabi fans raised in any of the SAGs? I cannot see it in the minutes.

Chief Constable Guildford: I do not know the answer to that question because I was not at the SAGs.

Chair: We can ask the city council.

Mr Kohler: It does feel a bit like we are going to blame Maccabi fans but not anyone else.

Q223 Jo White: It is not covered in the peer review, which analyses and highlights presumed behaviour on behalf of Maccabi Tel Aviv. It never talks about the threat to the Jewish community or to Israeli players or Israeli fans if they came to Birmingham. It is never analysed.

Chief Constable Roberts: It is an appendix to the review. It is in the review.

Q224 Mr Kohler: There is another quick question that I wanted to ask, Chief Constable Roberts. When did you become aware of the conversation that the chief inspector had with the Dutch police?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chief Constable Roberts: We conducted the peer review. It was requested by Chief Constable Guildford and Gavin Stephens as NPCC lead. Clearly, there was a lot of consternation.

Q225 **Mr Kohler:** When did you become aware of that conversation?

Chief Constable Roberts: The review was on 20 October.

Q226 **Mr Kohler:** You did not become aware before then.

Chief Constable Roberts: We may have had a conversation about it, but not in any great detail.

Q227 **Mr Kohler:** You told us earlier that you did not forward Lord Mann's report because it was contradicted by information that you only heard on 20 October. Why did you not forward Lord Mann's report? It cannot be because of information that you had not yet heard.

Chief Constable Roberts: I was aware that West Midlands police had been in contact with the Dutch police because we brokered the contact via the UKFPU. We put them in contact. I had an overview that they had had a conversation, that there had been concerns raised and that the brief had gone to West Midlands police. I was aware that they had had direct contact.

Q228 **Mr Kohler:** You told us that you did not forward Lord Mann's report because it had been contradicted—

Chief Constable Roberts: I said it had been superseded.

Q229 **Mr Kohler:** You did not even know its contents until 20 October.

Chief Constable Roberts: I was aware that there had been a conversation.

Q230 **Mr Kohler:** Yes, but you did not know what had happened in the conversation.

Chief Constable Roberts: It had been well publicised anyway. Anyone with a passing interest knew that there had been issues in Amsterdam and that that had been flagged up as an issue. I read the detail of the conversation between West Midlands police and the Dutch police when we went and did the peer review. The relevant bit of Lord Mann's review was the criminal activity as summarised by Lord Mann. The Dutch police were in contact with West Midlands police. That is the direct intelligence to base the risk assessment on.

Q231 **Mr Kohler:** You simply did not forward Lord Mann's report because you knew there had been a conversation between the chief inspector and the Dutch police.

Chief Constable Roberts: I clearly knew the content of Lord Mann's report and I knew that the West Midlands police had been in direct contact with the Dutch police.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q232 **Mr Kohler:** That was enough to supersede sending that information to—
Chief Constable Roberts: Yes.

Q233 **Mr Kohler:** You stand by that.
Chief Constable Roberts: Yes.

Q234 **Robbie Moore:** What we are all struggling to understand is the lack of continuity between what has been reported by the Dutch authorities and what has then been reiterated to us through the correspondence that you sent us since the last Committee.

The Dutch police are clearly saying in their evidence that had been provided on the Wednesday night before that effectively the instigators were threats of aggression and threats towards Israelis through social media postings. That is quite clearly in the evidence that has been provided by the Dutch authorities. It says, "Various social media posts, messages with aggression and threats were aimed at Maccabi supporters". It goes on to say that pro-Palestinian texts were sprayed or painted with graffiti on to the arena. It then goes on to say that there were slide projections aimed at the arena that were showing anti-Israeli messaging. It then goes on to say that about 50 Maccabi supporters were specifically targeted.

None of that is referenced within any of the correspondence that has come back to this Committee. In fact, it says the contrary, in that it was Israeli fans who were targeting the Muslim community. Why has such contradictory evidence been provided? That is what I simply cannot get my head around. That is what, in essence, is incredibly worrying to the Committee. Everything is contradicting itself. It seems very much to me that it is almost a retrofitting of the evidence to try to back up the decision that was ultimately concluded.

Chief Constable Roberts: I can speak to the peer review. The peer review clearly says that there are conflicting reports surrounding this disorder. There were strong accusations of antisemitism with attackers targeting the Maccabi supporters because they are Israeli/Jewish. Other reports state that the Maccabi supporters were ripping down Palestinian flags, et cetera. Certainly in the peer review that was information from West Midlands police. We acknowledge that there were hostile acts on both sides. If I could go on to clarify, it is very difficult to give a definitive of who did what first.

Q235 **Chair:** Was that presented to the SAG?

Chief Constable Roberts: That was in the peer review.

Chair: Was what the Dutch police said about the attacks on and the threats to Maccabi fans presented to the SAG?

Q236 **Robbie Moore:** That is a no answer. The point is that it is very unclear to us. The evidence that has been presented by the Dutch authorities is very different from the analogy of events that took place and, dare I say,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

which side was against one another in the evidence that has been provided by West Midlands police.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Can I just clarify? What evidence you are referring to? Have the Dutch police provided that to HASC?

Robbie Moore: The mayoralty for the Dutch—

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: There are a number of reports that relate to Amsterdam. You have an inspectorate report. You have the mayoral report. There are a range of reports.

Q237 **Robbie Moore:** It is the report that came out that was dated 11 November 2024. It recounts the troubles at the Amsterdam match. It goes through the course of the Wednesday evening and night and the police action that was taken.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: This is a report that was commissioned by the mayor of Amsterdam.

Robbie Moore: Correct.

Jo White: Can I correct the record? That was issued by the mayor, but it is written on behalf of the chief constable and the chief prosecutor. It was not written by the mayor. She issued it on their behalf.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Why are there different perspectives? I would imagine because it was a very complicated three-day policing operation. All we can do is report on what the Dutch commanders briefed us personally on.

Q238 **Chair:** That is not all you can do. You can look at the other bits of evidence. I am sorry, but you are capable of doing more than that.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: No, you are right. You are absolutely right. It is just that we have had a personal one-to-one conversation with Dutch commanders, who briefed us around the challenges they faced in policing three days of extreme violence across the city of Amsterdam.

I acknowledge there are a range of perceptions and views, and different reports that contribute to that, but our assessment was that we have growing community tension and we have the arrival of Maccabi Tel Aviv, whose hooligan element within the ultras we were concerned about. Those two things meant—

Q239 **Chair:** We were told that the ultras were not coming. We were told last time—

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: We were never told that. Lord Mann said he believed—he was briefed by Maccabi Tel Aviv—that the ultras were never coming. We were never briefed that the ultras were not coming.



Q240 **Chair:** Was the question asked?

Chief Constable Roberts: Chair, one of the difficulties in this is that normally, when we have any fixture with European teams, the UKFPU, which is the national football intelligence point—forgive me if I am telling you something you know—would liaise directly with its opposite numbers in the foreign country. Israel does not have an NFIP. We attempted to broker that contact via the Foreign Office on two occasions and were not able to do so.

Q241 **Chair:** We have seen in the peer review how disappointing it is that there was not that contact.

Chief Constable Roberts: Yes, it is a missed opportunity. Equally, UEFA has a conference at the start of the football season where it invites participants, clubs and police. Again, Maccabi turned up to that conference. There was able to be a conversation between Maccabi, Aston Villa and West Midlands police. The Israeli police, again, did not turn up.

Normally, you would have a pre-visit to an away game where the police would visit with the club and assess the security positions. The fact that there was no direct contact with the Israeli police made that more challenging. This is not specific to Israeli teams. We have had problems with people from different countries. We cannot always rely on what the club tells us. There are plenty of examples.

West Midlands police can probably speak to one challenging European feature that they had with Legia Warsaw, where what was told to them by the club actually did not materialise. Of course, you should try to triangulate with every possible source, but our normal avenue of going police to police was not available in this circumstance, which made it harder to make firm decisions based on the information supplied.

Q242 **Chair:** Where we are confused is that that is the case when the away fans come. You have not been able to get the full picture, but the away fans are still coming. Afterwards, you regret that there could have been different things done and, with hindsight, things could have been different. In this case, the away fans were banned. That is a different situation. The thing that is puzzling us is why extra steps were not taken to confirm why, in this case, the extraordinary and very out of the ordinary decision to ban the away fans was taken without picking up the phone to Israeli police—maybe you tried; we have not had the information, but perhaps you did try—and without having those conversations with Maccabi Tel Aviv. If you did it with others and allowed the fans to come, and you did not take that risk-based approach, which you tell us is what you are doing—it is always risk-based and all about public safety—why on earth, when you get information that you do not trust, do you just not ban every away fan?

Chief Constable Guildford: We would never do that. I am just trying to pick up on some of the questions that you asked as well. What troubles me as chief is similar to what you said, which is that we have a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

conversation with three commanders—the three people who were involved from the Dutch side—and that information was clearly very concerning to us. That information was firsthand, from the horse's mouth, from a fellow professional.

At the time that that information was given, there was no commentary to the contrary by those people. I do not know why they have made the comments that they have made. I am not sitting here and saying, "Some of my colleagues in Holland are lying" or anything like that. All I am saying is that we were provided with that information. We have assessed that information. We have documented it. I have seen the notes that were made in the email, and it was really quite important information, which clearly had an impact on the commanders and their assessment of the overall risk.

Q243 Robbie Moore: Why is that so different from the commentary that has been provided in the report from the Dutch?

Chief Constable Guildford: I honestly do not know why. I can only tell you what we have been told by our fellow professionals. That is the straightforward answer to a straightforward question.

Q244 Robbie Moore: When we have that level of uncertainty, then compounded with the information that has been reported in *Times* newspaper today, where there was an acknowledgment that a report stated that, in essence, there was no preferable option, but that there was a local community planning to arm itself, and then the decision was taken, effectively, to stop the fans from coming, it all seems, from my perspective, to create a narrative that the intention was for no fans to be permitted and that West Midlands police were not going to do their best to enable that fanbase to come and watch the match, regardless. It all seems very one-sided from my point of view. We are giving you the opportunity to counteract that narrative. It is for you to justify to us, not for us to be pulling teeth and getting the information out of you.

Chief Constable Guildford: We need to try a little bit harder in terms of setting that out for you. We have an abundance of that information and that intelligence that was building up, which we have, and which we have spoken about. Some of the sources of that intelligence, as has just been referenced, were community intelligence, intelligence from other agencies, and intelligence that we received as we were planning the event.

To really answer your question about making things fit, our starting point was that they were all coming. That was the starting point. They were all coming while all this intelligence was building up at the same time. The game was assessed as a high-risk game. When it comes to public safety, we were still planning on them attending. I have seen in the notes that the commanders were actively thinking about what mitigation measures could be selected to try to get the game going as safely as possible with away fans. After the Dutch information was received, though, that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

certainly was something that was so serious to the commanders that the decision was then taken to offer that advice to the safety advisory group.

In terms of the specifics of what you said and what one of your colleagues said beforehand, there were lots of pieces of that intelligence from a variety of sources around the risk profile of the fixture. To answer your question, we absolutely were planning up until that point on both sets of fans attending. We absolutely were.

Q245 **Chair:** We are going to move on from the intelligence in a moment, but let us be absolutely clear. What you are saying is that you wanted the fans to come. You were trying to find a way for the fans to come. This one phone call and the Google search were the things that confirmed to you that this was now no longer viable.

Chief Constable Guildford: It was nothing to do with the Google search. That is completely irrelevant.

Chief Constable Roberts: I have to say that it is really unusual in all the big matches that I have seen—I am talking Champions League finals and things like that—for a gold, silver and bronze commander from a foreign force to come to a meeting. I have seen, first-hand, Amsterdam police deal with an awful lot of football violence. The Ajax risk group is one of the worst that I have ever seen come to the UK. For them to be bothered, there is an issue, because they can deal with serious football violence.

Q246 **Chair:** Did they proactively reach out to West Midlands police and say, “We want to talk to you about this”?

Chief Constable Roberts: We were aware via the UKFPU that there had been issues with Maccabi. We brokered the contact because they had the most recent experience.

Q247 **Chair:** So the contact started from the UK side.

Chief Constable Roberts: I cannot remember whether West Midlands police asked UKFPU, or UKFPU proactively did it, but the way it works is that we will broker the contact with our opposite numbers in the Netherlands, who are very good to work with. They, via their NFIP, will get in touch with the match commanders. The meeting was then arranged for West Midlands police to speak firsthand. As I say, for the gold, silver and bronze commander from a city and a country that are very used to dealing with big events to turn up to speak to their English counterparts, there was clearly a pretty significant level of concern.

Chair: And not via Zoom.

Q248 **Joani Reid:** What I am getting from this so far is that there is a range of intelligence and information sources. Correct me if I am wrong, but it feels like what you have done in that process is suppressed information and intelligence that is not consistent with the decision you made, and released and published information that supports the decision to ban the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

away fans. That is based primarily on the fact that you reiterate the importance of this telephone conversation with the Dutch police, and that you did not circulate John Mann's report, or take it seriously, including the evidence from the Ministry of Justice and the national security services in the Netherlands. When our colleagues contacted the Dutch police, they refuted the claims that are included in the phone call that you made. They are publicly written and published, and I can read it to you now, if you want, saying that it is an inaccurate account. It is not great, is it?

Chief Constable Roberts: Can I just deal with the Lord Mann report? There is nothing in the Lord Mann report that would have affected the decision.

Joani Reid: I am saying that circulating that information did not happen. You did decide to publicly release the decision and the private conversation that you had with the Dutch police, which was not minuted, but you have suppressed the report that is in the *Times* today. You did not send that to us, nor did you release it to the press or the media, or anything that contradicts the decision that you made. That is what it looks like.

Peter Prinsley: Central to this discussion that we are having is the question of whether there was political pressure put on the safety advisory group of Birmingham city council, which then made a decision and asked the police to justify this. What people are wondering is whether information was then created by the police to support a decision that the safety advisory group made as a result of political pressure that was coming from citizens of Birmingham and from a particular Birmingham MP. That is the thing that we are all wondering, and I am not sure that the last hour or so has thrown any light on that absolutely central question. Was there political interference in this decision to ban the Maccabi fans?

Q249 **Chair:** You suggested at the last meeting, Chief Constable, that there might be political pressure being put on the Dutch police. If there can be political pressure put on the Dutch police, it does feel slightly contradictory if it is not put on to our police.

Chief Constable Guildford: I will briefly say two things. After today, because we have done the same for HMIC, we will go through all the intelligence that we have. We will try to do a sanitised précis of every piece of intelligence to give to you, so that you can see what we had and what we were working on. That is number one.

Number two, that is a really important question. It is a really important democratic question. I answered that last time, and I gave a very similar answer. From everything that I have read and the commanders who I spoke to, I do not believe that there was political influence on that decision. I do not believe that to be the case. I believe the information that we provided, the advice provided to the SAG, and the decision



HOUSE OF COMMONS

making by the SAG and all those around the table in the SAG—please ask this of people who come in after us.

Peter Prinsley: We will.

Chief Constable Guildford: Please get the audio of the SAG. I am sure that the SAG chair took into account what people thought. My personal opinion is that there was not any political interference.

Q250 **Chair:** West Midlands police did meet the local MP at their request.

Chief Constable Guildford: They did, and that was the local MP for the area. We discussed that last time.

Q251 **Chair:** That, by its very nature, is political pressure.

Chief Constable Guildford: I am sure that opinion formers of all sides wanted to do their influencing. From my perspective as chief, your question is absolutely spot-on. My honest personal opinion is that the decision was not influenced by politics. I am sure that lots of local politicians and members of the community wanted to try to influence it, but I honestly do not think that it was influenced.

Chair: Can we move on to some specific questions about the peer review?

Q252 **Jo White:** Mr Roberts, you confirm that the meeting with the Dutch police was a tipping point for West Midlands police's approach to the fixture. Was a single verbal intelligence briefing sufficient to support this fundamental change in approach? We have already covered this, but should there have been a more in-depth investigation, particularly as, as we all know, a number of reports have come out since the match in 2024? I have seen the reports from the chief constable of the Dutch police speaking on the TV regarding her personal perspective of what happened, which is very different from the report that was given to West Midlands police.

Chief Constable Roberts: You always want more intelligence, but the peer review was based on the time when the decision had been made by the SAG. The ask from Craig was, "Was that initial decision a reasonable one?" and, secondly, "What were the options then?" The report was in two halves. Based on the intelligence and the threat posed by the Dutch report, as provided to the peer review, I formed the view that it was a reasonable decision to seek the banning of away fans in the circumstances, the distinction being the potential threat by the visiting fans to the local community and the reaction that that could provoke.

Was it a reasonable response on the span of reasonableness? Yes, I think it was. Information from police colleagues, even if it is only one incident report, is something that we would always place high value on.

Q253 **Jo White:** You will be aware that we are visiting Manchester City in a few weeks' time, and I understand that you are a season ticket holder.



Chief Constable Roberts: That is good intelligence.

Jo White: Manchester City is playing Galatasaray. There were two murders in Leeds. It is a team that has not been allowed to come to the UK on countless times since that occasion. What security assessments would you give to that team coming to the UK?

Chief Constable Roberts: That security assessment is going to be done. We will provide intelligence as best we can, working with the Turkish authorities, and it will be up to GMP to do the threat assessment. Times change. The behaviour of fans changes. With the background, going to Istanbul is a different risk from Galatasaray coming to this country. We still have issues with the way in which English fans are treated in Istanbul. There are very draconian measures put in place for English fans, and we work hard to try to make sure that the fans are treated appropriately. There is not a direct read-across. Certainly, anyone going to Galatasaray would always be a concern to us. Coming to the UK, I am really confident that GMP will manage it well.

Q254 **Jo White:** At the end of your peer review assessment, you said that you believe that the preferred option would have been to bus fans into Aston Villa.

Chief Constable Roberts: The peer review, as I say, was in two halves. The ask from Craig was, "Was the original decision a reasonable one?" You can take a view as to whether it is right, wrong or indifferent. It was a reasonable option. In terms of the prospective view, the ask was, "What are the reasonable options going forward?" I gave four options.

One was to ban all fans. It was deemed that that would be unfair on the Aston Villa fans who had not caused issues, and you could then provoke a response from them, so it might increase the threat. The second one was to allow everyone to come as per full allocations. That seemed to exacerbate the threat.

Of the two possible options, one, subject to discussions with the Government, which Craig can speak to, was to maintain the ban on away fans. The other option, which then became the preferred option, was to have a limited number of Maccabi fans. The rationale for why that was then a better option—and it was looking forward, not back—was that, if it was a limited number of Maccabi fans, they would be easier to protect. The onus could be put on Maccabi as a club to make sure that the fans who came were genuine fans, and to vet out any of the fanatics or people who might cause trouble. That then leads into a communications strategy to, hopefully, calm any potential against those fans by saying, "These are just normal fans coming to enjoy the game", and you can try to mitigate the risk that way. It is easier to manage 100 or 200 people into the ground than a number.

The risk went up after the initial decision by the SAG. Because of the publicity, it became more heated. People expressed different views. In



HOUSE OF COMMONS

some ways, the threat became greater. It may have mitigated the threat to allow a limited number of Maccabi fans to come in order to remove some of the noise around it.

Q255 **Jo White:** The match that went ahead a few weeks later was scheduled at an earlier time in order to manage the bussing in and bussing out. That was not considered as part of your peer review as an alternative.

Chief Constable Roberts: Once we had established what the overall structure was about fans versus no fans, you would kick into, "What are the other mitigation measures?" For example, a reduced allocation of Maccabi fans could have been taken to a remote location and bussed in. It could have been that they came in smaller groups, in less obvious transport, to avoid a big escort and a big drama. It could have been that there were restrictions on drinking. After that, it would then have fallen into the detail of a tactical plan to try to make it happen as safely as possible.

Q256 **Jo White:** We have already covered the fact that there was no communication with Israeli police. Should more action have been taken in order to try to make that happen effectively, perhaps through Europol?

Chief Constable Roberts: Europol would not really become involved in this. There is a danger in going outside existing networks. The football policing network of NFIPs where we exchange the information is very well established. If we cannot make direct contact, because Israel has no NFIP, our route is then via the Foreign Office, which we tried. There were two distinct attempts to do it. There was the missed opportunity at the conference in Budapest. With hindsight, could we have tried even more? Yes, we could, but we made reasonable attempts to try to engage with the Israeli police and authorities. Unfortunately, we could not broker that contact.

Chair: We need to move on to community engagement, so I am going to bring in Joani Reid.

Q257 **Joani Reid:** You will know what a difficult time this is for the Jewish community in light of the huge surge in antisemitic hate incidents. There were the murders in Manchester. Since this decision was taken, we have had the horrific event on Bondi Beach. Was that not at the forefront of your mind at any point when you were making these decisions? Did you, at any point, not think that it was a good idea to seek more advice, support and recommendations from the Jewish community? Did they feature in your thinking?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I can come in there if that is okay. We have learned a lot as a force in relation to our engagement with the Jewish community. If there is a silver lining in this whole situation, it is the fact that we are working more closely and more strategically with the local Jewish community in the west midlands.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If I talk specifically around the engagement for this particular fixture subsequent to the announcement at the end of August, from 3 September onwards, West Midlands police engaged very closely with the representative from our local community security trust, or CST. That is a tried and tested approach, but our learning is that we missed a real opportunity to get closer to our Jewish community sooner in relation to this fixture.

Our liaison with our CST rep has been very strong. We were meeting with him weekly, or probably more. There was a lot of information exchange. I know that the CST has an advisory role. At the point where we liaised with our main contact from the Jewish community, we were moving into high holy days, and there were some limitations in relation to contact. Fundamentally, we had arranged to meet face to face with the chair of the Jewish Representative Council of Birmingham and West Midlands, along with the CST etc. on 17 October.

Q258 **Joani Reid:** That was after the decision.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Yes, it was after the decision. However, the second SAG was scheduled for 20 October, and it was brought forward to the 15th. There are a number of things there. Our face-to-face meetings with Jewish community reps in Birmingham were not soon enough. I agree with you 100%.

Within the letter from the chief constable to the chair of HASC, we have highlighted an improved engagement position with the Jewish community in the west midlands. We have developed and continue to develop stronger and more collaborative working arrangements. Learning-wise, CST liaison is our go-to, and police forces do that nationally. It is insufficient for events of this magnitude, and our learning is that we should have liaised earlier with our key representatives.

However, it was rather unhelpful that the SAG was brought forward. The SAG was due for the 20th. Interestingly, the two key community meetings—one with the Jewish community and one with the Muslim community—took place on the 16th and 17th, both after the decision.

Q259 **Joani Reid:** West Midlands police is by no means the only perpetrator of such an approach or crime, as I would not very appropriately say, but I find it hard to believe that this approach would have been taken had it been any other minority group, and it is really important that all public bodies and institutions reflect on that.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I agree.

Q260 **Joani Reid:** It is unlikely to have happened with anyone else. Why did you decide to consult with four or five mosques or organisations in the area that have well-documented, in the press or the media, crime incidents of antisemitism and extremism prior to the decision to ban the Maccabi fans?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: My understanding, from liaison with the community bronze commander, is that we did not. The large meeting with the Muslim community took place on the 16th, subsequent to the second SAG, which was brought forward from the 20th.

Q261 **Joani Reid:** So it is incorrect to say that you consulted and met with various mosques, including ones with a history of antisemitism and extremism. That is not the case.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: There is a difference between consultation and engagement, firstly.

Q262 **Joani Reid:** Did you consult with them? You did not meet with them, but you did consult with them.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: We engaged with all of our communities.

Joani Reid: Sorry, I want to be really clear about this.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Yes, me too.

Q263 **Joani Reid:** You did not meet them.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Yes, we did.

Q264 **Joani Reid:** You did, but after the decision was made, on the 16th. Prior to the decision that was made, who did you meet with, in terms of those you now understand to be extremists or antisemites?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: The engagement plan around this related to reassurance and communication. There is a difference between consultation and engagement. We were not consulting with the community. We were engaging with the community to get community sentiment and viewpoints, to understand tone and tension, and to reassure that we were going to do everything that we could to protect all communities around this fixture.

The engagement starts at local neighbourhood level. From 3 September, when we identified our community bronze commander, through to beyond the fixture, our neighbourhood teams have been liaising with people within the vicinity. For example, through our interfaith forum, we had the Church of England church in Aston make contact with us because they were worried about protests. The neighbourhood teams liaised with them in relation to reassurance and to understand their fears. That work took place from the outset, from 3 September, all the way through to prior to the fixture.

The formal community bronze meeting, for want of a better phrase, with the Muslim community took place on the 16th. It was also for those in the broader community, and not just a Muslim and Islamic meeting per se. The meeting with our chair and the CST rep from the Jewish community took place on the 17th, which was then followed up on the 20th.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q265 **Joani Reid:** In terms of community relations and political influence, you did not have any bilateral communication with anyone in the community with a history of antisemitism and extremist beliefs, as far as you are aware.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That is correct.

Q266 **Joani Reid:** Looking at the SAG as a body that takes decisions, did you at any point notice or raise the fact that there were two councillors on that decision-making body who had a history of extremist and antisemitic views? Did that cross your path or your radar at any point?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I was not aware, but I was not commander at the time. That is probably a conversation for the SAG chair in relation to how they manage their attendees.

Q267 **Joani Reid:** It is definitely a conversation to have with them. In terms of making decisions about safety, which is very much in your line of business, and having at least an understanding of who is making these big decisions about the safety of our community and what their ideology or, indeed, their pre-decision approach is, you did not think about or discuss that. You were not concerned about who was on the SAG and the information that they were bringing, which was influencing the decision about safety.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: We were not concerned, no.

Chief Constable Guildford: It was an independent SAG chair, with professional experience, and lots of local partners represented at the SAG table, so no is the answer to your question. I am told that, not so many years ago, the local MP chaired the SAG as well. How it all comes about in terms of who sits on the SAG is definitely an issue for the local authority.

Q268 **Joani Reid:** You are not concerned about it from a safety perspective.

Chief Constable Guildford: Honestly, we did not have any concerns about that. It was never mentioned to us.

Chief Constable Roberts: Can I just make a broader point in terms of safety advisory groups? The first thing I would say is that, notwithstanding any issues in this, they were brought in post a number of disasters. The genesis of it was around the Ibrox disaster, and then Heysel, Hillsborough, and the Bradford fire. There is a bit of an overlapping of different attempts that have improved it, but the bottom line on the current process is that this is the longest ever period in British football without a disaster in which people have gone to a football match and died. If there are tweaks required to the system, we need to be careful, because it has been very successful at keeping people safe.

Clearly, it is locally focused. At the base level, the aim of the SAG is to let people go to a game and do it in safety. Whatever thoughts come out of this, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater, because we have been very successful at keeping people safe.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is probably a broader thing about the consistency of SAGs, which you allude to. There is no consistent mandate for who goes, apart from emergency services. SAG chairs have varying degrees of training, background and relevance to this, so there is a very diverse picture across the country about the efficacy of SAGs. That said, the process has worked very well at keeping people safe.

The final point I would make is that there has been national government commentary on this. Some thought needs to be given to how we give those broader concerns a voice at a SAG in an audited way, because, ultimately, if this had gone badly wrong in terms of public safety and people had been injured or hurt, or had died, the SAG and the chief constable are the people who are going to be held to account.

We need to look at a way of updating the system for consistency, but also give appropriate people a voice, bearing in mind we have Euro 2028 coming up, where there will be a lot of commentary. It needs to be fed in, in a proper, documented and audited way. From the conversation that we are having, you would probably agree.

Chair: Baroness Casey did her report following the incidents at Wembley, and our sister Committee, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is also now looking at safety advisory groups. As a Committee, this is part of what we are looking at.

Q269 **Jo White:** We are diverting, but this is about the overarching way in which football is managed. It is a responsibility of DCMS and the Home Office, and now you are talking about the FCDO.

Chief Constable Roberts: The FCDO is purely a conduit for us to get information.

Q270 **Jo White:** It may well be that a recommendation that comes out of this report is around how these issues are managed. We are getting the security and safety of football grounds muddled up with fans and who attends, et cetera. They should be entirely different decision-making processes.

Chief Constable Roberts: It is probably a more in-depth conversation. The remit is safety. A subset of that is security. It is only relatively recently that the green guide has been updated to specifically reference the need to consider crime and disorder, and counter-terrorism, as a subset of safety. It is not perfect, but it is a really good system that has kept people safe. We just need a considered approach to make sure that it is even better.

Chair: I am conscious of time. Are you okay for another five or 10 minutes?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes. I was just going to say that, because the HMIC is doing a thematic review around SAGs as well, we have made recommendations to that based on our learning from this experience. I



HOUSE OF COMMONS

am sure that that will help contribute, but I absolutely echo those comments.

Joani Reid: I am glad that you agree that you need to improve your processes in terms of engaging with the Jewish community and how that affects the decisions that are made. I would just point out that, at the previous Home Affairs Select Committee, we were told that the Jewish community supported the ban. That, along with many other things that I was going to go through but will not because of time, contradicts what you subsequently said. The Jewish community did not support the ban, because you had not sufficiently engaged with them. I will leave it there.

Chair: Do you want to comment?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: It was never my intention to misrepresent the views of the Jewish community. I was personally quite gutted to leave the first session, to be contacted by the Chair and to understand that I had caused confusion or consternation. That was never my intention. I immediately apologised, which was then shared with the community. I will do whatever I can with our local commanders to continue to improve our working relationship with the Jewish community.

Chief Constable Guildford: Mrs Jacobs is someone we regularly liaise with, and we are very grateful for the support that she has given us. I know that she is grateful for the support that we have given her post some of those international events and, as I was saying before, we absolutely continue to do so.

Joani Reid: I do not know who Mrs Jacobs is.

Q271 **Robbie Moore:** Just following on with community engagement, did you engage with mosques or Muslim representatives in advance of making a decision?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: In advance of making the decision, we liaised with a range of faith and community groups and mosques.

Q272 **Robbie Moore:** On what dates did you meet with mosques or Muslim representatives?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I have a full list of community contacts, which I can send you, if you wish, in relation to the date and time of every communication that took place.

Q273 **Robbie Moore:** That would be great. It is my understanding that West Midlands police decided to consult with various mosques, as you have indicated—

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Engage with, not consult.

Robbie Moore: —including ones that had a previous documented history of antisemitism prior to the decision being made with Maccabi fans. Are you aware that those mosques had that history?



Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: No, not as far as I am aware.

Q274 **Robbie Moore:** Is it reasonable to check those mosques that had had that level of accusation made against them before engaging with them?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: What we have is a vicinity or a community that has places of worship, charities, third-sector organisations and key contacts. We liaised with a lot of different people who I am sure have a range of views, but it was not consultation. It was engagement. There was no pressure in relation to our decision. It was made in relation to public safety.

Q275 **Robbie Moore:** Just finally, why was the threat level to local Jewish communities initially downgraded to medium and then not featured in the West Midlands police final report?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That was in relation to the third SAG and the information provided by the silver commander. I am not aware of why it was removed. My understanding is that we were focusing in relation to the attendees and the protest groups, et cetera.

Q276 **Robbie Moore:** It was downgraded, but then not necessarily included within the final report.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: That was more of an oversight than anything else.

Q277 **Mr Kohler:** Can I jump in there? The threat to Maccabi fans was high on 7 October. We have all this evidence of the threat of armed vigilantes. Why was the threat to them downgraded to medium by 24 October? What happened to downgrade the threat to them?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: You are absolutely right. The reason that it was high was because of the information and intelligence that we had within the operation to suggest that there was a threat that could be posed towards the Maccabi fans when they arrived. By the time of the final SAG, Maccabi Tel Aviv had said that it had refused all away tickets, so we were expecting no away fans. Therefore, the risk level had reduced.

Q278 **Mr Kohler:** They were not coming, but there was still a medium threat to them. Why was there not no threat or a low threat?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: Because there was potentially an opportunity for people to still attend.

Q279 **Mr Kohler:** Why was the threat to the Muslim community raised from low to high?

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: From low to high?

Mr Kohler: Yes, between 7 October and 24 October.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I would imagine that that was in relation to the information and intelligence that was presented to the silver commander at the time.

Q280 **Mr Kohler:** But the Maccabi fans were not coming, so it was not from the Maccabi fans, presumably.

Assistant Chief Constable O'Hara: I would assume not.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: Post the decision being communicated, we had an uptick in right-wing protest.

Q281 **Chair:** So it became a higher risk because of the decision to ban the fans.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: Yes. We started to get more intelligence coming in of counter-protests, which would have been directed towards pro-Palestinian protests. It was not a threat from Maccabi fans, but from additional protesters coming into Birmingham to counter-protest around the pro-Palestinian protests.

Q282 **Robbie Moore:** Just moving on to engagement with the Home Secretary—this is addressed to the chief constable, if I may—what was the response of the Home Secretary after you indicated to her on 8 October that no away fans was the working assumption of the SAG?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, subject to the SAG's decision. The Home Secretary's response was that she noted that. She did not give a specific response once I had given the information.

Q283 **Robbie Moore:** No levels of concern were raised by the Home Secretary. It was just that it was noted.

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes. It was at the end of a meeting that was all to do with protests, which the Metropolitan chiefs were on. I and the chief HMI sat on it as well. It was not a long conversation back from the Home Secretary. It was a meeting around protest, and she noted what I said to her.

Q284 **Robbie Moore:** So that was noted in the engagement that you had with her on 8 October. The decision was made on 16 October, so there was a period of time between those two dates. Was there any further communication from the Home Secretary or No. 10 and the Prime Minister's Office in relation to any concerns being raised around the fact that there may not be any fans permitted to attend on the basis of the SAG?

Chief Constable Guildford: There was no further correspondence. I have hopefully supplied you with details of the correspondence that was relevant. In Chief Constable Roberts' submission, there were a couple of emails, and we have done the same as well.

Q285 **Robbie Moore:** So despite the narrative that has come out from the Government, no concerns were raised to West Midlands police in that period of time, even though we have heard in the evidence session now



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that there were counter-protests from the far right as a result of a ban being put in place.

Chief Constable Guildford: There was nothing directly to us.

Q286 **Robbie Moore:** What representations were made to you by Birmingham city council leaders about the implications of a decision to ban fans from attending?

Chief Constable Guildford: There was only one leader, who is going to give evidence after us. That is Mr Cotton. Out of courtesy, I updated him on the position from our side in terms of advice to the SAG that there would be no away fans. He disagreed with the outcome of that, but did not stray into the operational police decision making. I am sure that you can ask him those questions. The reason that I communicated with him is that we communicate on various issues. He is a key local partner. I very much respect his view, but I also very much respect the decision making of my colleagues in terms of weighing up that risk to public safety. I am sure that he, as a professional, respected the decision making of the SAG, the independent chair of the SAG, who is a council employee, and the way that the SAG is managed. That was the communication that I had.

Q287 **Robbie Moore:** Given the level of public interest in this, and the fact that this is your second time in front of the Committee, did you anticipate any of the fallout that would then come from the decision that had been made by the SAG? As part of that process, in discussions with the Home Office, did you seek any additional resource or strategy that could deal with an inevitable outcome of allowing fans, or a limited number of fans, to still attend while being able to mitigate any community—

Chair: The peer review conclusion was that the preferred option was to accept a small number of away fans.

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, absolutely, but, as Chief Constable Roberts set out, the first part of what I asked him to do was to give me an independent assessment as to the reasonableness of the decisions made that led to the ban on the away fans as to that point in time now.

The second part of what I asked was, "What are the options, from your independent perspective, going forward at this moment in time?" After the ban was announced on that particular weekend, the Prime Minister made a comment on the Thursday evening. Then there was commentary on Friday. There was then an increase in the intelligence that we got about protest and counter-protest, and the Tommy Robinson picture of the shirt, et cetera, and his potential attendance.

On that weekend, I had conversations with Home Office officials, in which they asked us to look at the options going forward. As I had asked Mark, the level of risk had increased, because of all that additional protest and the intelligence about who was likely to come, et cetera. At that point over the weekend, I had a conversation with Home Office officials, as



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they have previously said in their evidence, with regard to what additional resource would be required to try to facilitate a number of Maccabi fans attending the fixture with the intention of a new look at the risks as they posed themselves on the Monday morning when Mark undertook the peer review.

It was based upon what had happened on the weekend, what had changed since the announcement, what had happened with the intelligence that we had received over the weekend, and a new look at the risk level of what we could reasonably do. Those are the options that Mark set out.

Q288 **Robbie Moore:** Did you, as the chief constable, at any point request additional resource to deal with the initial recommendation of allowing a limited number of fans to attend?

Chief Constable Guildford: To be clear, up until the point of the fans being banned from attending, I did not request any additional resource from the Home Office, because it was within our gift to go to mutual aid and just sort it out. After that weekend when I spoke to the Home Office, the risk had changed, as Mark says in his peer review.

Q289 **Robbie Moore:** Before the risk level changed, even though you had going to mutual aid at your disposal, was that something that you had considered?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, absolutely. We were going to mutual aid.

Q290 **Robbie Moore:** Is that documented anywhere for us to be able to see that that was a consideration?

Chief Constable Roberts: The review referenced an assessment of the number of PSUs that were required, which was above West Midlands police's capabilities. It is one of the biggest forces in the country, but they would seek mutual aid.

Q291 **Chair:** That was the 5,000 number.

Chief Constable Roberts: No, that was the Dutch figure that was referenced. The reference here is that West Midlands police had said that, in any of the circumstances, they would have to go to mutual aid to get sufficient officers for the operation.

Chief Constable Guildford: So, "Yes, early doors" is the answer to the question, but we would need more after a reassessment if we were to then reconsider a limited number of fans attending.

Q292 **Joani Reid:** Overall, then, we have minutes that highlight that the decision was made in the absence of intelligence. There are varying views and stats about what happened in Amsterdam, but the Dutch police have written to say that they do not recognise your version of the conversation. You told the Home Affairs Select Committee last time that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Jewish community supported your decision, which was not true, that 5,000 police had been deployed in Amsterdam, despite your own figures and the Dutch saying that it was 1,200, that Israeli fans had thrown locals into a river, and that you had not been subject to any political pressure, although it has now emerged that you met the MP and other local activists. As a very quick question, would you make the same decision again?

Chief Constable Guildford: We are certainly not an organisation that does not learn from things. We treat each event on its own merits. With some of those things that you said, in the cold light of day, looking in, do I regret the fact that that minute seems to have been recorded about a lack of intelligence? There was not a lack of intelligence. There was an abundance of intelligence. That is unhelpful. That is misleading. On behalf of the organisation, I apologise unreservedly to the public about those types of matters.

The 5,000 was our professional opinion. With regard to the intelligence that came from the Dutch, we absolutely took it on face value. The communication and the detail that was written was compelling. I cannot speak for the Dutch. That would be wrong of me to do so.

On that side of things, do I think that the decision was reasonable in the circumstances? Yes. Could it have been, or would it be, a different decision going forward? It could have been, but all these decisions depend on the facts and the intelligence that the commanders weigh up over a period of time.

Those things that you have highlighted, as I have said quite clearly, leave questions for me in some of that detail, particularly about the absence of the intelligence. Mike corrected the record very quickly in terms of what was said to make it clear that we did not mislead anybody, and we are very sorry if we gave any of that impression.

I am also very sorry and do regret the focus that this has placed on our local Jewish community in light of all the other events that have happened nationally and globally. That is why we have redoubled our efforts to make sure that, as soon as any of those events occur, we are absolutely behind the community, and we are working with them closely and continue to do so. Each one is on its own merits.

Chief Constable Roberts: Can I just make a point about the police numbers? I appreciate that there is some confusion about this, but one of the reports from the mayor says, "There were more than 1,200 officers to keep any risks under control, including specialist units such as mobile arrest, horse, reconnaissance. From midnight onwards, there were at least 500 officers on duty. This does not include the large number of police officers who worked overtime during the night. Their registration, et cetera, will take a while to come through". There is some variation on the numbers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q293 **Chair:** It is not 5,000, though, is it?

Chief Constable Roberts: No, but that is specifically what was said in terms of the police.

Q294 **Jo White:** Mr Wilkinson, you attended the SAG meetings, but there are no minutes of what you said at them. Can you report to this meeting what you advised the SAG committee meetings?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: The information and intelligence shared at the first SAG was from the silver commander, who highlighted the numbers of layers of intelligence and information that we had on local community tensions, protest and football, and some additional sensitive intelligence. That was shared within the first SAG.

At the second SAG, I reiterated that, in the absence of Maccabi fans, the threat to the football fixture would come down, absolutely, because the risk of potential clashes between football supporters came down, but the threat to the event still remained high because of protest, counter-protest, and some of those ongoing community tensions within it. There was still a high threat to the whole event, not just the football.

Q295 **Jo White:** What was your recommendation at the first SAG committee?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: I did not make any recommendation at the first SAG, but the first SAG recommendation was a preference for no away fans. What is important is that we were part of a number of emergency services partners who were all given the opportunity to put forward a view as to their preference for that fixture. At the first SAG, the silver commander's preference was for no away fans, based on all the information and intelligence, and the significant threat that the whole event posed to all people.

Q296 **Mr Kohler:** Remind us. You were at that first SAG. Did you or the silver commander tell them about your conversation with the Dutch police?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: The information would have been available to the silver commander because I had briefed him the night before.

Q297 **Mr Kohler:** You were there. Did he?

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: My recollection is that all the information that we had was shared at that point and briefed into the SAG.

Q298 **Mr Kohler:** So he did tell them about your conversation.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: He would have shared all the information.

Q299 **Mr Kohler:** You were there. You must know.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: You will have to forgive me. I have not heard the recording from the SAG.

Q300 **Mr Kohler:** What do you recall?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: I recall a very detailed, comprehensive briefing from the silver commander, who outlined all the threats and risks that the fixture was presenting.

Q301 **Jo White:** From both sides, including Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, and also the threats to harm Israeli fans.

Chief Inspector Wilkinson: From all sides.

Q302 **Chair:** Chief Constable, you look like you want to say one word.

Chief Constable Guildford: I have found the taxi thing that we referred to very early on. I will send that through to you as well.

Q303 **Chair:** I would appreciate that. You have indulged us and stayed longer than you were supposed to, so I do appreciate you giving us extra time. As a Committee, we are now going to talk to the city council and other bodies, but we will reflect on everything that we have heard and will be producing a report on this issue. Thank you again for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor John Cotton, Richard Brooks and Anthony Cox.

Q304 **Chair:** We now come to our second panel of witnesses on the issues regarding the decision to ban away fans for the Aston Villa-Maccabi Tel Aviv Europa game. Can I ask our second panel to introduce themselves? Perhaps I will start with you, Mr Brooks.

Richard Brooks: I am Richard Brooks. I am an officer of Birmingham city council. I am the executive director of city operations. That covers a portfolio of the core environmental services of the council, waste collection and disposal, highways, and regulation and enforcement. For the purposes of this Committee, it is also the resilience function, which is where the safety advisory group is housed, and, in the regulation and enforcement function, the environmental health function, which is where the licensing of the ground is done.

Councillor Cotton: I am Councillor John Cotton. I am the leader of Birmingham city council.

Anthony Cox: I am Anthony Cox. I am the city solicitor in Birmingham city council, responsible for legal democratic services and electoral services, which also encompasses governance.

Chair: Thank you. I apologise for keeping you waiting and I am very grateful that you have said you can stay behind a little later.

Q305 **Jo White:** Thank you for coming. Were you in the audience for the previous questioning?

Councillor Cotton: Yes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q306 **Jo White:** Great. My first question is on the quality of the minute taking and the fact that we were not able to gain a full picture of exactly what happened in each of the meetings. Can you answer that, please?

Councillor Cotton: Richard, could I ask you to pick up as director of operations on that?

Richard Brooks: I am sorry if the minutes have not allowed you to get a full enough picture of the events in the in the meetings. There were four safety advisory group meetings, on 7 October, 16 October, 24 October and 3 November. We have provided minutes for each of those. We have provided you with the full minutes in both unredacted and redacted form.

In terms of the quality of the minutes, they are circulated after the meetings. The minutes from 7 October were actually circulated on the same day to the attendees of the meeting. There was a little bit of a delay after the 16th, but they were subsequently circulated.

We have tried to provide the best minutes for these meetings that we can. We are actually audited by the Sports Grounds Safety Authority on the way that we administer the SAG. It has previously recognised the quality of the way in which we manage these processes, but, if the minutes are not adequate for these purposes, all I can do is apologise.

Q307 **Jo White:** We understand that they are filmed, and it would be helpful for us to have a better picture if you could send us the films.

Councillor Cotton: We can certainly undertake to provide that to the Committee.

Q308 **Jo White:** Thank you. So we can have a context of who you are and what your responsibilities are, could you set out the legal position of your council's responsibilities in relation to the attendance or non-attendance of away fans and how their safety is managed?

Councillor Cotton: I will say something by way of opening and hand over to Tony and Richard to pick up some of those details. I also shared a written statement with members of the Committee prior to this session to set out the context of the role of the safety advisory group, my specific role as the leader of the council and the timeline of events as I understand them.

I also want to make it clear that I am not a member of the safety advisory group myself. I had no role to play in the deliberations of that group. That is a separate operational role. I have also been clear that I respect the operational independence of the advisory group and, indeed, of West Midlands police.

I wish that the safety advisory group had been able to take a different position from the one that it took. I have made that publicly clear and I note that the chief constable referred to that in terms of the interaction I had with him in the run-up to these events. I am absolutely clear that I want Birmingham to be a place where people can come and attend



HOUSE OF COMMONS

football matches freely, without fear of harassment or discrimination. That absolutely remains my view and I am clear that we have to have a robust, independent safety advisory group process.

I also am clear that, while I am the political leader of the council and took a very clear line on the fact that this was not the position I wished to see, it is not my role as the leader of the council. It would be inappropriate for me to interfere in an operational matter and on a process that is led by the evidence that statutory partners, including the police, place before it. I will ask Tony to set out some of the understanding of the legal position as well with regard to the SAG.

Anthony Cox: In relation to the SAG, it was a recommendation from the Taylor report following Hillsborough and other tragedies. The actual purpose of the SAG is in relation to providing specialist advice to the authority in terms of ground safety. That includes fans' attendance at the ground. It provides specialist advice, which is why you have the specialist agencies, such as the police, fire service and all that, contributing to the SAG to formulate the advice.

The advice is then given, as it was in this case, to the event organiser. In this case it was Aston Villa football club. My understanding is that, if there is a disagreement about the advice that is being given, it is then for the council—that falls within Richard's sphere—to see whether there needs to be action taken in relation to the safety certificate encompassing that ground, in this case Aston Villa. That is how any prohibition or restriction would be imposed upon the safety certificate in relation to fans' attendance, for example.

Q309 **Jo White:** Should the SAG take account of any reputational risk to the UK, not just Birmingham, from any decision of banning fans from another nation, in particular in an environment where there is such an international tension?

Anthony Cox: The SAG's primary role is about safety at sports grounds, which is why there was a recommendation to bring those in. They are obviously chaired by the local authority, which was a recommendation within the Taylor report. The predominant focus of the SAG must be a dissemination of information between the people who deal with risks, such as public safety, in other words the police, who have given evidence earlier today. The primary focus must be dissemination of information for members of the SAG to formulate the best advice possible based on all the evidence, with the focus being on safety.

Q310 **Jo White:** You are taking account of the threat perspective. You have circulated in the public domain a redacted account of what you thought the threat perspective is. I want to question why you redacted that when it says that the threat to the local Jewish community is medium, Muslim community low, Christian community low, black community low, Villa community low and Maccabi high. Pro-Palestinian was medium threat on a "higher scale in terms of fixtures this year". Why was that redacted?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What reputational damage would it have done to the authority by redacting that?

Anthony Cox: I cannot speak about the specific redaction. We have specialist advisers who advise on issues of freedom of information requests, which are dealt with in terms of the legislation and the exemptions that we are permitted to apply. That was looked at in terms of the information, in conjunction with the people responsible for holding that information. We also take representations from the people who provided the information to the authorities, including partnering agencies such as the police. Then a decision will be made in relation to disclosure of that information. I cannot specifically comment on that but I will have a look at that and provide information to the Committee if that is required.

Q311 **Mr Kohler:** Can I jump in there? Can I push you on that point? The threat levels were not redacted from the third SAG. Does that strike you as curious? They are redacted from the first SAG and not the third SAG minutes.

Anthony Cox: I would have to go back and look at the basis for redaction.

Q312 **Mr Kohler:** What is your professional view? Does it not seem strange that threat levels are redacted in the first minutes but not the third minutes?

Anthony Cox: I do not have a specific reason for the redactions but you would obviously expect some consistency. If that happened, yes, I would be surprised.

Q313 **Jo White:** I know, Councillor Cotton, that you are concerned about the reputational damage that it has done to your city. Also, I am sure you are concerned about the risk that is now faced by people in the Jewish community. Birmingham University has the largest JSoc in the country. What threat does this pose to them now that this decision has been taken?

Councillor Cotton: You are absolutely correct that the reason why I made the statement I did in response to the chief constable, when he advised me that that was the proposal they would be putting to the safety advisory group, and I made the public statement when these matters went into the public domain was exactly that. I am a very proud Brummie. I was born and bred in Birmingham. I have lived my entire life there. I am very proud of the fact that it is a diverse city. It is a place where people of all faiths and none, and all ethnicities, make their home and I want it to be a welcoming and inclusive place. Anything that detracts from that is a concern for me, which is why I raised those issues.

We have a very strong tradition of interfaith working in Birmingham that goes back some 30 years now. We have some very vibrant community engagement that we do with communities in the city, including our



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jewish community. We also have a good working relationship with the Community Security Trust. We are currently developing our antisemitism strategy for the city, which will draw on the Government's national antisemitism strategy that has been brought forward as well. I am absolutely clear, as the leader of this council, that we will do everything that we need to do to ensure that people of this city, from the Jewish community and all communities, can feel safe and supported.

Q314 Joani Reid: Can I come in there? It is relevant. Has the council adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism?

Councillor Cotton: Yes, we adopted that. I will need to check the record, but I think it was around 2017 or 2018. That was done by means of a vote through full council.

Joani Reid: I will come back to that later if that is okay.

Q315 Chair: As a council, clearly there are levels of risk and you can take the decision that you want no disorder whatsoever, which probably means you never put a football match on again, or you manage the risk. What is your risk appetite here? You wanted the away fans to be able to attend. Were you prepared to accept some form of disorder as a result of that?

Councillor Cotton: My view on this was that I did not want a message being sent out about this city not being a welcoming and inclusive place. I was very concerned that such a decision to ban away fans would absolutely communicate that position to the world. That is not a message I want conveyed around Birmingham.

When it comes to the specifics of safety and risk, that is absolutely rightly considered in the form of a safety advisory group and you want the professional expertise and perspective to inform that decision. It should not be informed by external political perspective. In my view, it would be very difficult for a safety advisory group to take a decision, having received clear assessment from the police and others around what they perceive the risk to be. I do not believe that any council leader would be in a position where they would go against very serious advice that was coming forward in that forum. There is an important balance to be struck there.

Q316 Chair: Was it made clear to you that there were mitigations that could have been put in place, as Lord Mann had recommended?

Councillor Cotton: The timeline of events was that I received a message from the chief constable on 8 October, advising that that would be the advice that was given to the safety advisory group. I responded, as has already been alluded to, to say that I thought that that was not going to send a positive message about Birmingham. However, I respect operational independence of these matters.

I then, on 9 October, asked to meet with officers supporting the safety advisory group so I could assure myself of two things. One was that the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

processes were being correctly followed in terms of how the safety advisory group operates, and the second was to question whether we were absolutely clear on the risk assessment that had been brought forward by the police and other partners. That was an appropriate thing for me to do as leader.

Q317 **Chair:** You were given the intelligence that was used to make the decision. Were you able to see any other forms of intelligence?

Councillor Cotton: I was given the high-level readout on what was being provided to the safety advisory group. I was very clear that I should not get into the minutiae of detail of the safety advisory group meetings. They have to be led by the evidence, based on the partners around the table.

Q318 **Chair:** Were you aware that the peer review had recommended that the least-worst solution would be away fans with reduced allocation?

Councillor Cotton: That was not something I was aware of at that point. The reason I was asking questions is that I wanted to ensure that all options had been looked at.

Q319 **Robbie Moore:** You were just saying that you sought reassurance as part of the process that the procedure had been undertaken appropriately, but were you reassured?

Councillor Cotton: I continued to ask questions on the back of that meeting. Indeed, as you will have seen, there was then further correspondence between the council and the police through officer channels. There was a further meeting of the safety advisory group that took place. My principal concern here was that we were taking a decision that did not detract from the reputation of the city. I fear that the reputation of the city has been affected by the manner in which this was handled.

Q320 **Robbie Moore:** Sorry, to ask the question again, were you reassured that the process had been followed appropriately?

Councillor Cotton: I was reassured that the process, with regard to the operation of the safety advisory group, had been absolutely followed. I followed with interest the proceedings this afternoon regarding some of the information that was provided to that safety advisory group and I am sure that the Committee will draw its conclusions on that in due course.

Q321 **Chair:** What about the interaction between central and local government? One thing that the Baroness Casey review put forward, and something we will consider as a Committee, is where central Government should get involved and whether there was more of a role for central Government. Do you have any views on that?

Councillor Cotton: Certainly, when you have issues of national interest—and this clearly became an issue of national interest—there needs to be interaction between the local authorities and central



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government, but both need to inform each other over the handling of something. It becomes about the UK's reputation as well as the city's reputation. I will be very interested to see what comes forward in terms of recommendations from you in that regard.

Q322 Mr Kohler: I am very concerned about these redactions. There are only two substantive redactions in all the minutes. They are in the first SAG. The first one is with regard to one that has been said: medium threats to local Jewish community. In the third set of minutes, the threat, as I have said, is not redacted, although the reference to the Jewish community is missing. There is also an inaccuracy, in that the first minutes say that the threat to the Muslim community is low. That is summarised in the third minutes as being medium, so they are inaccurate. The redaction is bizarre because the same thing has been redacted in one and not the other.

The other substantive redaction is the one with regards to the police intelligence, or lack of: "in the absence of intelligence, based on conversations with peers and my professional judgment", there are no concerns with Villa fans etc. That has been redacted. Can you think of any legal reason why that should be redacted?

Anthony Cox: There were two bases for redaction. One was involving individuals' personal data, which is probably obvious from the redactions. The second redaction was in relation to law enforcement issues after the police and national intelligence. That is my understanding of why the redactions were applied.

Q323 Mr Kohler: It was basically a lack of intelligence. It is not simply to avoid political embarrassment.

Anthony Cox: Not as far as I am aware. I think that it was done on the basis of the exemptions that were felt to be rightly applicable.

Q324 Mr Kohler: Can you come back to us on both those redactions and the inconsistency?

Anthony Cox: Yes.

Q325 Mr Kohler: That is helpful. Thank you. When you knew that there was going to be a recommendation to ban the away fans, how strongly did you discuss this with the chief constable? How far did this conversation get?

Councillor Cotton: I responded to a text message I received from the chief constable on 8 October to say that, as I set out earlier, I thought this was a decision that would reflect badly on the city. I thought that it was the wrong decision. However, I also emphasised in that message that I respected the operational independence of the police and the safety advisory group. That was the message I very clearly conveyed back to the chief at that point.

Q326 Mr Kohler: Did you go outside the city politically? Did you address this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

nationally?

Councillor Cotton: No. My view is very straightforward that it was for the safety advisory group to act on the basis of the intelligence and information that was put before it by statutory partners. I thought that it would be inappropriate for me, as a politician, to start to step into that space, having already conveyed my concerns around the wider impact that it would have upon the city.

Q327 **Mr Kohler:** What about the resource perspective? There is an issue of resources in addressing these risks. Was there not an element there where you could talk to one of the political masters in Whitehall?

Councillor Cotton: Again, I would have expected such conversations to be based on information and intelligence that went to the safety advisory group. We have a long-established process that the safety advisory group considers those, with the appropriate professionals sat around the table, and then would come forward with recommendations and proposals. I thought that it would be crossing the line, frankly, from the point of view of my responsibility, to step into that space. I thought that the process should be followed, and I am sure that the process was in terms of the group itself.

Q328 **Mr Kohler:** Did you quiz them as to the process having been followed or did you assume it had happened?

Councillor Cotton: No, I asked a series of specific questions. When this process started, I must admit that my knowledge of safety advisory groups and the whole process was somewhat limited. It was not something I had come into contact with, so I had to learn a number of things.

Chair: We are all learning.

Councillor Cotton: Yes, exactly. The reason I convened that meeting with officers on the 9th was to understand what the role of the safety advisory group is. Where does this fit in, in terms of the legal framework? What is the appropriate process to be followed in these circumstances? I was assured that the appropriate process was being followed from the point of view of the city council, as the convener of the safety advisory group. Clearly, that safety advisory group can act only on the basis of the information that is placed in front of it. That is probably the issue that we are teasing out here this afternoon.

Q329 **Joani Reid:** I asked earlier about whether your local authority had adopted the IHRA definition. You said yes, which is nice to hear. I think that you are right. I think that this incident has damaged the reputation of Birmingham as a whole. It has allowed people to spread myths about Israelis being uniquely evil and unable to come here and behave properly in the UK. Do you think that it is appropriate for councillors who have predetermined views, antisemitic views, to sit on the SAG and be part of this decision-making process? That is my first question.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Councillor Cotton: I suppose that there are two points that come out of that question. One is the role of elected members and whether they should indeed sit on safety advisory groups.

Q330 **Joani Reid:** That was my other question.

Councillor Cotton: Birmingham is unusual but not unique in that respect. We will come back to that, because I have some views on that. If any member is participating in a safety advisory group meeting, or indeed any other meeting, I would expect them to abide by the code of conduct. I would expect them to abide by declaring any interests or issues that had arisen that would be seen, potentially, to prejudice their judgment. I note that on the agenda for the safety advisory group there was a point at which people were expected to disclose any prejudicial interest. That is absolutely right and proper.

Q331 **Joani Reid:** It was not in this case, was it?

Councillor Cotton: My understanding is that, on 24 October, where a decision was taken, disclosures were made. One member recused themselves from the meeting on that basis.

Q332 **Joani Reid:** I am not going to push this, because I appreciate that that is not your responsibility. However, it is your responsibility in my understanding—and I have a question for you in a minute—that, if you have adopted the IHRA, where your fellow councillors are making antisemitic statements and generalisations on Twitter and in public meetings, that is a problem. What action should be taken as a result of that?

Secondly, how did these councillors find themselves on this committee? Why was it felt that it was appropriate that someone with these views would be making a decision of this nature?

Councillor Cotton: I would expect any member who participates in any meeting to declare interests appropriately. I would expect them to abide by the councillor code of conduct and, indeed, any commitments that we have collectively made as a council, including respect for the IHRA, which, as I say, we passed in 2017. We have a disciplinary and standards machinery that can deal with breaches of that nature. If there were those issues, I would expect that to be pursued through those mechanisms.

Q333 **Joani Reid:** Are there any ongoing investigations into the conduct of those councillors on the SAG?

Councillor Cotton: I am not aware of any such at the moment, but obviously the standards process is separate to my role as leader of the council. That is right as well.

Q334 **Joani Reid:** Who appoints the councillor members of the SAG?

Councillor Cotton: Councillor members of the SAG are appointed at full council at the annual general meeting.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anthony Cox: That is correct. Formerly, the councillor representatives on the SAG were appointed by the licensing and public protection committee. I think that there was a report in April 2019 from the then assistant director, questioning whether councillors should actually be on the SAG at all.

As a result of that, later in 2019 a decision was taken that councillors who sat on the SAG should be appointed by full council itself. They were appointed on the basis of one representative of three of the main political parties and one ward member for the area covered by the safety advisory committee, I presume with the intention that they could contribute to any local issues that arose within the community. In essence, they are selected through the annual governance process of the council in selecting who sits on what committee.

Q335 **Joani Reid:** Did you have any discussions at any point that recognised that there were councillors—some of your councillors—who were campaigning publicly to not just ban away fans but stop the match in its entirety? Did that at any point come to you as leader of the council?

Councillor Cotton: No, that did not come to me as leader.

Q336 **Joani Reid:** You did not see the tweets.

Councillor Cotton: No. I was not aware of specific tweets. I try to stay away from Twitter, to be honest with you, these days as much as possible, but, no, I was not aware of that position.

Q337 **Joani Reid:** Sorry, I missed the very beginning of the meeting. Are you the legal counsel?

Richard Brooks: No, I am the executive director for city operations. I am responsible for the part of the council that administers the SAG and the licensing function that regulates the grounds.

Chair: Mr Cox is the legal counsel.

Q338 **Joani Reid:** Can I ask about predetermination? For my sins, I used to be a councillor and chaired a planning committee for a number of years. Predetermination was a really important principle in local government. Is that applicable to the SAG?

Anthony Cox: The SAG, in essence, is not a decision-making body. It is actually a body that provides advice. Any councillor who has a really strongly opposed view, where it would impact upon their ability to reach a fair decision based on the facts, should consider whether they should be sitting within the committee. I probably do not need to tell you this. From what you are saying, there is a difference between being predisposed to something and predetermining something.

Q339 **Joani Reid:** I completely agree with you. In that case, do you think it was appropriate that councillors who were campaigning publicly to stop the football game in its entirety were on the SAG, which made the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decision to ban away fans? Is that legally and morally appropriate?

Anthony Cox: There are a number of things in answering that. Each individual member of a committee, councillor or otherwise, has to take a personal decision as to whether they can make an informed decision based on anything without predetermining something. Certainly in the terms of reference of the SAGs there is a question raised about whether there is a conflict of interest or issues such as predetermination. On the agenda of the SAG meeting that took place on 24 October, there was quite specific advice given in relation to people declaring interests. As the leader has already said, I understand that one councillor recused themselves.

Q340 **Joani Reid:** That was after the decision was made.

Anthony Cox: That was based upon previous social media posts. It would be an unfair expectation of the chair of that committee to trawl through every social media post that someone has done, so it is very much a personal obligation on the individual involved.

Q341 **Joani Reid:** I appreciate that you do not want to trawl through people's social media. Who would want to do that? However, in a case like this, which has such huge public scrutiny on it, were you not concerned that such councillors had sat on the SAG, went to a meeting and then recused themselves, rather than you taking the moral and leadership role of removing them from the committee?

Councillor Cotton: I would expect any member who had a perceived conflict of interest to take that on their own responsibility to remove themselves from such a meeting. If I had been in that position myself, I would certainly have recused myself from a meeting.

Richard Brooks: In relation to these four meetings, it is useful to be clear about the sequence of events and the involvement of the individual councillors. The 7 October meeting did not provide advice. It established the planning assumption, but did not provide advice. There were two councillors present at that, and I think we accept that they should have declared interests, but they did not.

At the next meeting, on 16 October, advice was provided, so the advice that there should be no away fans, but that advice was provided unanimously by all the partner members of the safety advisory group. That is significant in relation to the involvement of the two councillors, and there was an opportunity for them to express dissent. The meeting on the 24th is then when I think we get it right, where we have declarations of interest and recusation.

Joani Reid: It is clear that there is a very serious error of judgment here, which has really harmed the confidence of the Jewish community in Birmingham, when such people, with such predetermined views of the Jewish community and of Israelis, were allowed to be involved in that committee meeting. I would encourage you to reflect on that and think



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about it. That is all I have at the moment.

Q342 **Peter Prinsley:** I am Peter Prinsley. I am sorry I was a bit delayed. I was trying to get a Holocaust memorial debate agreed. I am the MP for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket.

I have been listening to this and I would like to ask a question similar to the question I asked the police officers before. The thing is that the SAG, as everybody has said, can act on the intelligence that it receives, but actually it is acting on its interpretation of the intelligence that it receives. The question is what the risk is of this being politically prejudiced. That appears to be a belief that is held by many.

My question is how this could be realistically refuted if I were to say to you, "My belief is that there was political prejudice on that safety advisory group on your council and you, first, failed to notice it and, secondly, if you had noticed it, did not do anything about it, and this resulted in the advice to ban the match". From what we have been hearing about all of this over more than one session now, it seems that there was a great deal of confused information that was being fed into the SAG. There is a suspicion also that there was a predetermination and some of the information was therefore changed in order to fit with the predetermined decision. That is the belief, I believe, of many of the members of the Birmingham Jewish community. It is that that needs to be addressed.

Councillor Cotton: I will ask Mr Brooks to pick up on some of the detail around the operation of the safety advisory group in this context. From my perspective, and having listened to the earlier discussion here this afternoon, the safety advisory group can operate effectively only in an atmosphere of candour and confidence in the material that is placed before it. The judgment then has to be made on the basis of the material that is placed before it.

There is clearly some concern around the information that is placed before that group. I do not expect everybody around that safety advisory group table to be subject matter experts or, indeed, try to second guess, particularly around police intelligence. My overall reflection would be that, unless you have some candour and confidence in what is placed before you, you then run into some difficulties. Richard, I will ask you to pick up perhaps some more operational detail on that.

Richard Brooks: I can only agree that the safety advisory group relies upon the expert input of its members, in particular of their risk assessments. It does not make a fresh interpretation of the evidence. It is not competent to do so, just as the safety advisory group members would not be competent to investigate the building safety advice or the fire safety advice. In this case, the public safety decision relied extremely heavily on the expert evidence provided by the police.

Q343 **Jo White:** Would you agree with me that these are a really poor set of minutes? First, there is no data regarding the information coming from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the police. Secondly, the only opinions that are recorded are those of councillors who are opposed to fans coming to Aston Villa and repeating concerns that the “community want it stopped”. Would you say that the fact that these councillors avoided campaigning in a public arena for the match not to have Maccabi fans in attendance means that there is a breach in Nolan principles?

Richard Brooks: I firmly believe that the officers who were administering these meetings were trying their very best to apply the Nolan principles and, in particular, to act in the public interest and objectively. The minutes are summary minutes of long meetings. These are two-hour long meetings with 30-plus participants. It is very difficult to capture all of the detail of those meetings.

Q344 **Jo White:** There is a complete absence of the intelligence provided by the police, so that we, as House Members, have been unable to gain a true picture of exactly what was discussed. These minutes are now out in the public arena, so the whole of the country will be studying them. What is being recorded here, we understand now, is not a true picture of what the meeting was informed of. Then you are getting commentary from councillors who do not want Maccabi fans to attend the match. We are getting a very biased picture from these minutes. Would you agree with me?

Richard Brooks: I do not think I can agree that it is a biased picture in the minutes. It may be an incomplete picture and not a perfect record of the meeting, but it is our best attempt to provide an accurate summary of what was discussed at the meeting.

Jo White: In my view, it is not. We are getting an inaccurate picture and understanding of what was agreed at that meeting.

Q345 **Joani Reid:** The fundamental point upon which the decision was made is the police intelligence. This is a genuine question. How can that not be included in the minutes? I cannot get my head around that.

Richard Brooks: Sorry, I do not quite follow. When you say the police intelligence—

Q346 **Joani Reid:** Everyone has told us that the police intelligence informed the decision to ban the away fans. How can that not be included in the minutes? It is not redacted. It is not there and yet we have the antisemitic ramblings of a far-left councillor.

Richard Brooks: When you say the intelligence, do you mean the actual intelligence reports?

Joani Reid: Anything.

Richard Brooks: In advance of the 16th, as you have already discussed as a Committee, we wrote as a council to West Midlands police, asking it to set out its reasoning for its risk assessment, which was a proper thing for us to do. In advance of the meeting on the 24th, we wrote to it. This



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is unusual practice for safety advisory group meetings. It is not normally done. We wrote to all the partners, asking them to set out their evidence in advance of that meeting and, again, the police did that.

Joani Reid: Why is it not in the minutes?

Chair: Or even just noted that "intelligence can be found at appendix C" or whatever it might be.

Joani Reid: "We decided to ban the away fans because they had a conversation on the phone". I just do not understand.

Q347 **Jo White:** All I can understand is that two councillors agreed that the away fans should not be in attendance. From my understanding of the minutes, this is pressure that has come from two councillors, rather than intelligence that has been provided by the police. We have here a biased set of minutes that are inaccurate and giving us a false picture of exactly what went on in those meetings.

Anthony Cox: I was not at any of the SAG meetings. That is fact. I was not at the meetings. Minutes are never a verbatim record of what has been said in a meeting. A lot of this depends on the skill of the actual person taking the minutes to encapsulate the relevant gist of the conversation and what was taken into account in terms of reaching any conclusion. It is the same with council minutes for council meetings.

We are aided now by the fact that a lot of meetings, including this one, are televised and recorded, so there is an actual verbatim record. As I understand what was said earlier, if there is a verbatim record of that meeting, it should be made available to the Committee, because then you have the total record of the meeting. I would be loath to say that minutes are biased in essence. It may depend on the actual person taking the minutes themselves.

Q348 **Chair:** You can see the frustration we have because, at face value, reading those minutes, it does not correlate with other things that we have been told.

Anthony Cox: I fully accept the frustration of the Committee, which has come through in the previous evidence-giving session and now this. As I say, a minute will never be a totally accurate record of a conversation, which is why, if there is a verbatim record, it should be before the Committee.

Mr Kohler: That is really helpful. In defence of the minute taker, it records the fact that there was no intelligence, so maybe that is the answer. We will find out when we hear the recording.

Chair: To go back to the primary purpose here, which you, Councillor Cotton, have set out, the confidence of the Jewish community in Birmingham and the confidence of Jewish people to be in, visit and enjoy Birmingham is paramount here. These minutes do not give that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q349 **Robbie Moore:** To stick with the two councillors and following on from Joani Reid's question about conflicts of interest, predetermined decision making and prejudged views, what is the disciplinary process associated when there is that level of concern that has clearly been expressed?

Anthony Cox: There are a number of methods. As people will probably know in this Committee, the issue of member conduct is being debated, particularly in relation to the sanctions available and the standards regime in general. I think the Government have been making consultations.

Q350 **Robbie Moore:** At Birmingham city council, how is the disciplinary process triggered?

Anthony Cox: I would not class it as a disciplinary process. You have the councillor code of conduct and a standards regime. All councils have a councillor code of conduct. They are locally agreed codes of conduct. Actual individual members are subject to that code. If they fall short of the code, sanctions can be applied for any breach of the code.

Q351 **Robbie Moore:** Has that been triggered in relation to these two councillors?

Anthony Cox: It will be triggered only if there is a written complaint in relation to the specific conduct of members.

Q352 **Robbie Moore:** Here we are. Nationally, concerns have been raised. Councillor Cotton, have you raised these concerns and triggered this process?

Councillor Cotton: I have not raised a concern with standards at this point.

Q353 **Robbie Moore:** Why not?

Councillor Cotton: I have not had placed in front of me a complaint of the nature that would trigger that.

Q354 **Robbie Moore:** You are clearly here raising concerns. You have said yourself in this meeting that you have concerns around the views that were expressed. You acknowledged that you have not seen tweets et cetera, but you have expressed views. Mr Brooks has also raised concerns, but yet disciplinary process or action against those two councillors has not been triggered. I do not understand why not, if you are really wanting to protect the reputation of Birmingham city council.

Councillor Cotton: I would like to reflect, given what I have heard today at this Committee and some of the issues that have emerged, on what the appropriate next steps would be. I do not want to prejudge any standards process, but it is important that I reflect on what I have heard from the Committee here today.

Q355 **Robbie Moore:** Going on to community impact assessment issues, what was your assessment of the advice from the SAG on the level of risks to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

different communities in Birmingham and to the Maccabi Tel Aviv fans? Can you explain why the level of risk changed over the course of time in some cases?

Richard Brooks: I am not sure we can, because I do not think that that is the process for the SAG. The SAG has to accept the risk assessment on the basis of the assessment by the relevant competent partner. We did not—

Q356 **Robbie Moore:** It had no view on that.

Richard Brooks: We had a view, in the sense that we wanted to know how to respond to it appropriately. One important purpose is to enable the whole range of partners, so the fire service, traffic et cetera, all to co-ordinate around the event as it is ultimately operationally planned. That is what we did here.

Q357 **Robbie Moore:** Maybe this is for you, Councillor Cotton. How did the council seek to communicate the decision of the SAG ultimately with those in the community who were being impacted by the decision?

Councillor Cotton: That would have been via the letter that the chair of the SAG had communicated to Aston Villa in the first instance, would it not?

Richard Brooks: Yes, that is correct. Aston Villa football club is one of the two prime recipients of the advice of the safety advisory group, the other being the council itself in its licensing function and other statutory functions. The chair of the SAG wrote, after the 16 October safety advisory group meeting and the 24th, with the outcome to Aston Villa football club.

Q358 **Robbie Moore:** It was just written correspondence and no physical engagement or conversations.

Richard Brooks: They were in the meeting. Aston Villa football club had multiple qualified professional representatives in the safety advisory group meeting.

Q359 **Robbie Moore:** There has been quite a lot of damage. Community tensions have been raised. How, as a council, have you sought to reassure the Jewish community within Birmingham beyond the ultimate decision that was made and the months that have passed since?

Councillor Cotton: As I mentioned earlier, there is ongoing engagement with all our communities, including the Jewish community. As a council, as has been referred to, we adopted the IHRA declaration some years ago. We promote and support Jewish community events. Like many other councils do, we had a Hanukkah celebration, for instance, which I attended, in December. We annually commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alongside that, we have ongoing engagement with local Jewish organisations. There is the work that we are doing around the development of our new antisemitism strategy, which is really important. It is important that that is aligned with the national strategy as well. It also builds on the tradition of interfaith working that we have had in this city over many years, which is something that is very important in a city as diverse as ours.

Q360 Jo White: The police earlier reported that they had picked up, through different inquiries, that there were proposals for people to arm themselves and attack the Israeli fans should they come to the city of Birmingham. Was that fed up to the highest level of the authority? That is a serious safety concern that you, as an authority, should be monitoring and working with the police on.

Councillor Cotton: As the political leader of the council, that was not made clear to me. I do not know whether there is anything from an operational point of view that is communicated through.

Richard Brooks: In this case, it is clear that the police have primary responsibility for public safety and law enforcement in relation to issues such as that. We do have responsibility for resilience and emergency planning. In the event of an attack presenting wider threats, we would activate our emergency procedures, but that was not this sort of issue.

Q361 Jo White: I am surprised. I have served as a councillor for many years at senior level and the security of my community is a No. 1 priority. If any intelligence had come through from any committee, at a senior level, we would have been working very closely with the police to manage that.

Councillor Cotton: Let me be absolutely clear. If such a thing had been communicated to me, I would have done exactly the same as you would have done when you were a senior councillor as well.

Q362 Mr Kohler: Councillor Cotton, your letter tells us that, in the SAG meeting on 24 October, there was a new assessment starting afresh. Have you looked at the minutes? Do you think that that is what happened? It looks just like they reconfirmed their previous decision.

Councillor Cotton: I will refer you back to my earlier answer on this, which is to say that the safety advisory group has to act on the basis of the information and assessment that is placed in front of it. We have already heard how that process works and that the safety advisory group cannot second-guess, particularly when it comes to police intelligence.

I have concerns, particularly having heard the interactions here this afternoon, around some of the information that was placed in front of that safety advisory group. It would be inappropriate for me or anybody else to try to second-guess that. I am concerned, given what I have heard here this afternoon.

Q363 Mr Kohler: I know we will get a firmer view once we hear the actual



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recording, but do you get an impression from the minutes that any really serious attempt was made to start afresh? Did they just rubber-stamp what they had already decided?

Councillor Cotton: Not having been a participant in that meeting and simply based on the evidence that is set out in those minutes, I do not think I am qualified to provide an in-depth commentary on what happened within that meeting. However, it is clear to me from the proceedings that are set out there that information was placed in front of the partners who were sat around the safety advisory group table and that they reached a conclusion based on the intelligence that was placed before them.

Q364 **Mr Kohler:** What effect did the Maccabi club not taking up the tickets have on the context within Birmingham?

Councillor Cotton: It is important to remember that the safety advisory group does not take a decision; it provides advice. The formal role of the safety advisory group is that, if advice is not then acted upon, the council needs to reflect on whether it uses its powers in terms of amending the safety certificates. It is important to understand that that is how the process plays out. It is an advisory group rather than a decision-making forum.

The decision of Maccabi Tel Aviv not to take tickets somewhat changed the dynamic there, because there was then no advice to be complied with or decision to be taken. My principal concern, though, was coming back to the overall position at the start, which was to say, "If we are saying that we cannot allow away fans of a football team to come into Birmingham and safely participate in a sporting event, and if that is then perceived as being a sense of discrimination or targeting of one community, that is not acceptable. That is not acceptable". That was my concern right from the outset with the implications of that advice being provided.

Q365 **Mr Kohler:** We have heard that the decision to ban away fans increased the threat to the Muslim community from right-wing extremists. Was this something you discussed with the parties?

Councillor Cotton: I was incredibly concerned when I learned that that was the advice that was going to be provided to the safety advisory group. A lot of what subsequently unfolded was quite predictable, in terms of right-wing extreme actors stepping into that space and using the situation in Birmingham to pursue their own divisive agendas. That was predictable and that was exactly what was in my mind when I expressed the concerns that I did.

Q366 **Mr Kohler:** You expressed that danger to people.

Councillor Cotton: I was very clear from the outset that this was a likely consequence of what would happen if that decision was to be taken.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q367 **Jo White:** You said that you suddenly had to become very knowledgeable about SAGs and the decision-making process around the Maccabi Tel Aviv match. What police intelligence were you provided with as part of that briefing?

Councillor Cotton: I was given the high-level readout at that meeting on 9 October around what had been provided at that point to the safety advisory group. Also, the day before, I had received a message from the chief constable, conveying that that would be the recommendation they were putting forward based on concerns over what had happened in Holland.

Q368 **Jo White:** So it was the Dutch experience, not the threat.

Councillor Cotton: The message that was sent to me by the chief said that, based on concerns around what had happened in Holland, the recommendation would be to the safety advisory group not to invite the away fans. I subsequently responded by saying, "While I am not going to get involved in your operational detail and it would be wrong for me to do so, I think that that is a wrong decision for the city because of the message it sends out about Birmingham".

Q369 **Jo White:** The police did not inform you of the potential threat to Israeli fans by armed groups.

Councillor Cotton: I was not told anything around armed groups or anything of that nature. If anybody had mentioned the prospect of armed groups, I would have responded quite vociferously because something of that nature is clearly a massive concern that needs to be addressed.

Q370 **Robbie Moore:** Councillor Cotton, I am going ask you the same question that I asked the Policing Minister and the deputy mayor for policing at the last session that we had. You have raised a huge level of concern around the amount of intelligence that was given to the SAG, the advice that was given to the SAG for the decision to be made, predominantly by West Midlands police, and the damage that, ultimately, this decision has cost your city and its reputation as being a welcoming city. Do you have confidence in the chief constable of West Midlands police?

Councillor Cotton: Ultimately, it is not for me to take decisions on those matters. That is a matter for the police and crime commissioner. I will say that, particularly having heard the discussions here this afternoon, I have concerns around the quality and provenance of material that was provided to the safety advisory group. That group can work only on the basis, as I said earlier, of candour and confidence in the material that is placed before it. I have serious questions that I would like to see addressed as a result of this inquiry.

Q371 **Robbie Moore:** Does it concern you that we have had to bring the chief constable in front of this Committee not once but twice, and to get the chief constable to say that he is going to have to come back to us with even more information to provide clarity on questions that cannot be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

answered?

Councillor Cotton: It is very important that we have absolute clarity over what happened in the timeline of events leading up to the Maccabi Tel Aviv-Villa match. It is right and proper that you are holding to account in that way.

I ultimately come back to the point of the reflection that this puts upon my city—a city that I am very proud to call home—that is an absolute paragon when it comes to diversity of its communities. This reflects poorly on Birmingham. This is something that I want to see addressed because I have to tell you, as a proud Brummie, that it is a place that includes all communities. It is a place that is full of vibrancy and life. That is the Birmingham I want to be talking about. I do not really want to be in front of a Committee this afternoon talking about issues that detract from the impression of Birmingham, but it is right and proper that there is clarity around what happened and that people have the answers that they need.

Chair: As a west midlands MP, I will concur. I am not West Midlands police area, but I am a west midlands MP, and I would concur that we need a strong and vibrant Birmingham where everybody feels safe.

Thank you so much for your responses to our questions. There are clearly a number of matters for the Committee to consider. We will stay behind now to consider some further points and what our next steps will be. I am incredibly grateful for you attending and being prepared to stay later than your allocated time. Thank you so much.