



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Policing and organisation of vigils relating to the safety of women in public places, HC 1334](#)

Wednesday 24 March 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 March 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; Ruth Edwards; Laura Farris; Simon Fell; Andrew Gwynne; Dame Diana Johnson; Tim Loughton; Stuart C McDonald.

Questions 1 - 57

Witnesses

I: Anna Birley, Reclaim These Streets; Griff Ferris, Legal Observer, Black Protest Legal Support; and Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP.

II: Chief Constable Craig Guildford, Chief Constable, Nottinghamshire Police.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Reclaim These Streets](#)

[Black Protest Legal Support](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anna Birley, Griff Ferris and Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this evidence session of the Home Affairs Select Committee looking into the vigils that took place on the weekend of 13 March and the policing decisions that were taken. Next week the Committee will be launching a separate inquiry into violence against women and girls. This inquiry is looking particularly at what happened on that weekend. These events follow the tragic death of Sarah Everard. Of course, we are not taking any evidence connected to that case and we are very mindful of the continued distress to her family and friends, who are in our thoughts.

We have taken considerable written evidence and we will be taking evidence from the Met Police and from others in due course. We are very grateful to the witnesses who have come initially to give us first evidence today.

I welcome the witnesses we have today: Anna Birley from Reclaim These Streets; Griff Ferris, Legal Observer with Black Protest Legal Support; and Bell Ribeiro-Addy, local MP covering Clapham Common. Thank you very much, all of you, for your time. Can each of you give us your very brief assessment of the events that took place surrounding the vigil on Clapham Common and the issues it raises, starting with Bell Ribeiro-Addy, the local MP.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you very much, Chair. As the local MP, during that period of time I was involved in various discussions surrounding the event that was due to take place. They all surrounded discussions about the investigation at the time. The event had arisen from a group of local women together to discuss what had happened and what they could do to respond to what had become a negative feeling in the community, particularly among women. A vigil was organised and publicised and various discussions had been had with the council and the police about a plan to make sure that it went smoothly.

Towards the end of the week this all seemed to go wrong, with the police seemingly removing their support for the event and claiming that it was illegal. We know that Reclaim These Streets then ended up taking this to a judicial review and were later forced to cancel the event on the basis that it would be illegal and they would be threatened with prosecution.

As the local MP, I and other surrounding MPs contacted the local police force to express that there would be a major issue because, regardless of whether the organisers cancelled the event, people would still attend Clapham Common on the day—as they did all throughout the day, as we saw people laying flowers—and that it would be best if they allowed the event to continue because that would be a nice organised way to ensure that people were keeping safe at this particular time, especially given the coronavirus pandemic.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Without any leadership of the event, we saw that at some point different individuals from different organisations got up and made speeches. As I found out later when I went to Clapham Common after the disturbing scenes that we all witnessed, the police explained that people had begun giving political speeches and, as such, they had to remove them from the bandstand. Obviously the images we saw were completely unacceptable, particularly given the incidence in which people were coming together to commemorate Sarah Everard and all the women who lost their lives to violence.

In my community in the days following we saw similar events—protests, not similar events, because this was a vigil—protests being held in central London, which seemed to be policed quite well. No one was threatened with prosecution, no one was manhandled in that way and people were able to go about voicing their concerns in a way that was supported, so there was a lot of discontent about why the vigil was not allowed to go ahead.

My constituents are extremely upset about what has happened. They continue to be extremely upset about what has happened and it has caused a major rift in terms of how they view the police, which is a shame because the local police, as far as we knew, were very, very supportive. It seems that at some point a decision was handed down from Scotland Yard to cancel the vigil. Now attention has moved away from that area, all of the cameras are gone, and, with the decision that was handed down from up high that has caused this rift, our local officers are now left to deal with the fallout from that.

Anna Birley: Thank you for having me and for organising this inquiry. It is important that, as Bell says, we are able to understand that rift between the police and our local community, especially women, and look at what lessons we can learn.

Reclaim These Streets is just a group of local women who got together and felt sad and angry with a huge amount of grief around the disappearance and death of Sarah Everard, but also a huge frustration. The problems with our local women's relationship with the police began when they were knocking on doors and suggesting women stay at home for their own safety while this was ongoing. What that made us feel was that yet again women were being asked to change their behaviour to tackle violence against women, rather than looking at the root cause of violence against women and why men perpetrate that violence.

We wanted to organise a vigil to commemorate all the women who have disappeared, felt unsafe or been killed at the hands of men, but also to show solidarity with each other, to feel safe by being together in a public space that we had had constant images of police searching throughout the week previous, and to say that we were tired of being told that it was our responsibility to stay safe.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What happened after that is it spiralled out of all expected control. We did not anticipate it being more than a few hundred people but it quickly grew in size. I and another of the organisers are local councillors. We had seen that a number of other events and gatherings were being discussed and organised online. We felt that by bringing everybody together we were in a good position, both in terms of our community links and experience organising in the community, as well as our links with the council and with the police, to be able to create a safe event that took into account public health, that worked collaboratively with authorities so that we could make sure that in every sense women's safety was prioritised.

We had a good relationship with our local police and continue to do so. They have been proactive since the event in organising regular meetings to discuss how we champion women's safety going forwards and address some of that loss of trust. I am grateful for their work.

What changed was when it clearly went up a rung in the hierarchy of the Met Police, and officers from New Scotland Yard said that they would not be willing to allow a vigil to take place. They were very obstructive, despite the fact that we had proactively reached out to them. They referenced the four Es and that we were already on stage one of engagement, even though we had engaged with them rather than them engaging with us. We ended up having to go to court to get clarity on the law and to understand how human rights, and specifically Articles 10 and 11, fitted into the coronavirus regulations and the role that the police can play in that.

We wanted the judge to make it very clear that the police had a responsibility to undertake a proportionality exercise so that they could weigh up our rights. They did not. They continued not to and we saw a vigil go ahead without all of the stewarding and first-aid support and Covid-safe measures that we had planned putting in place.

Griff Ferris: Good morning and thanks for having me. I am giving evidence in my capacity as someone who was a legal observer at Clapham Common with Black Protest Legal Support. Black Protest Legal Support is a group of Black and Brown lawyers who provide volunteer legal observers to monitor the police presence at protests on the streets. It has a network of hundreds of lawyers to provide pro bono legal advice and support for protesters. Black Protest Legal Support is led by Black and Brown lawyers. It has white legal observers who stand in solidarity with the other legal observers from Black, Brown and racialized groups, but the evidence and anything I say is in my position as a legal observer and not as a spokesperson for the organisation.

I am not a part of the leadership committee. I am one of its many volunteers, but I was present at the protest last Saturday as a legal observer and was inside the Clapham bandstand for the majority of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

evening, where much of the worst police aggression and violence happened.

It was due to the police aggression and repeated threats of arrest and fines to everyone in the bandstand, including our legal observers, that only two of us were able to remain inside the bandstand and witness what happened. My other legal observer colleague who was there—a director of Black Protest Legal Support and a woman of colour—was subject to significant police aggression and harassment. She is not able to be here herself instead of me today due to work commitments.

Q2 Ms Abbott: In your written evidence, talking to the organisers now, you describe the measures you took to make sure any event could be as Covid-19 secure as possible. What advice led you to take those measures?

Anna Birley: Those were measures we were developing proactively ourselves. We came up with a list of ways in which we felt that the event could be made safe and then presented them to police and council officers, asking for their feedback but also for any further suggestions we might have missed. We had registered for QR codes from the Government's test and trace so people could check in when they came. We were working with a number of trade unions, who have experience stewarding similar gatherings, in order to make sure we had experienced stewards on the ground to enforce social distancing and mask wearing, but we were very much open to any suggestion.

As it went on, we kept asking the police and offering additional suggestions, like staggering start times, to see if there was anything that would be deemed acceptable. Their view remained that essentially any form of gathering, whether or not it was Articles 10 or 11 of the Human Rights Act, would be unlawful. It was a blanket ban.

Q3 Ms Abbott: The day began quite peacefully. The Duchess of Cambridge came and laid flowers. Why do you think events turned the way they did and we saw the very distressing scenes that we did?

Anna Birley: I was not present. As organisers, we were threatened with criminal prosecution under the Serious Crimes Act and personal fines of £10,000 each, so none of us were present on Clapham Common on Saturday evening because we did not want to be arrested under the Serious Crimes Act, and I cannot afford the fine.

We had asked in advance that it be policed locally, that local police who understood the frustrations the community were feeling were policing it and we also asked that they try to ensure as many female officers were on site as possible. Not having been there, I cannot confirm the number of female officers, but it is very stark that the arrests seemed to be made by male officers. My understanding is that none of the arresting officers were Lambeth officers, they were New Scotland Yard officers who came from elsewhere. I do not know whether that might have contributed.



Q4 Dame Diana Johnson: I would like to ask a few more questions about what you were saying earlier on, Anna, about the relationship with the Lambeth police and that being different in terms of what happened once New Scotland Yard got involved. Could you go into a bit more detail about the differences between the local experience and then what happened when New Scotland Yard got involved? Why do you think that was?

Anna Birley: The differences, to start with, is that our meetings were fairly friendly. They seemed grateful that we had been in touch on day one of beginning to organise and open to discussing how we could—in their words—navigate a way through. That felt like quite a constructive conversation. They were officers who both I and my colleague Jess, who are both councillors, have had interactions with previously. We also involved one of the assistant directors from the council, in charge of community safety, and he was hugely helpful and helped make sure that those meetings were constructive.

When we met New Scotland Yard officers, the tone changed. We found them to be very obstructive. It came across that they were disregarding local officers' leadership. It is a small thing, but the Lambeth police would talk about a vigil and everything we wrote was about a vigil and they referred to it as a vigil. New Scotland Yard officers talked about us as protest organisers. I think that said a lot about their understanding of the strength of feeling and grief that we were feeling in the local area.

Q5 Dame Diana Johnson: Were these senior officers at New Scotland Yard that you were having these discussions with?

Anna Birley: Yes.

Q6 Dame Diana Johnson: What you were saying earlier on about being a councillor and having relationships already with the local police and also using the local council as another voice for the community, it seems to me that that is an ideal setup to be representing your community in that way. Do you think that that was important, having your role as a councillor? I am concerned that there may be other women who do not hold elected office, who may want to do this and have no way of trying to have conversations with the police. Yours sounds like the right way of doing it. Do you agree that it is going to be very difficult for other women? Sorry, that was a long question.

Anna Birley: It is all right. I agree entirely. There are two parts to what I would like to say on this, if I may. One is there were lots of other women elsewhere in the country who have perhaps never organised something before, who were not local councillors, who received very hostile and sometimes, they felt, aggressive, treatment from their local police forces. As a councillor, you get used to hostile treatment sometimes. That is part of the job description but I think it was very intimidating and scary for some of those women elsewhere.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The second half of that is the police maintain that they do not have a blanket ban on protests—for want of a better word—but it is very difficult to see, when they are unable to work with two local elected officials, supported by their MPs and by officers of the local council and by local police officers, with a whole host of risk assessments and Covid-safe measures planned. If they cannot work with us, who are they going to work with? It is very difficult to see how in practice it is not a blanket ban on all forms of exercise of Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act.

Q7 Dame Diana Johnson: Finally, you have made very clear that this was a vigil but you are saying New Scotland Yard always treated it as a protest. I imagine you were saying very clearly several times it was a vigil.

Anna Birley: Yes, absolutely. Everything we put out was that it was a vigil. Some of the language in the legal stuff for court uses both terms because it had to draw from other bits of legislation and case histories, but we were very much wanting to plan a vigil. It was going to be a collection of women, socially distanced, with electric candles, because you cannot have open flames on Clapham Common, according to bylaws, and observing a minute's silence and perhaps hearing from somebody in a sombre and reflective way.

Q8 Stuart C McDonald: Thanks to our witnesses for your evidence. Anna Birley, in your written evidence you refer specifically to a police e-mail on 11 March, which says, "We do need to bear in mind that organising an event is still illegal and we are trying to navigate a way through at no notice". From your perspective, was that when you picked up a change in approach from the police?

Anna Birley: I set out in the evidence that we had one reply earlier on 11 March that sought to assist us. They wanted us to provide information to assist them with developing an appropriate and proportionate local response, which sounded constructive. That following reply, talking about whether an event was illegal and that organising any event was illegal, felt like a turning point for us in terms of the language and tone used by police.

Q9 Stuart C McDonald: Was it different people who were sending these e-mails? Was this a change of department that was involved or hierarchy in the police force?

Anna Birley: I do not have the e-mails right in front of me but I am happy to confirm to you in writing afterwards exactly who was copied in and hit 'send' on those ones. The attendance in meetings certainly changed. As well as local officers, there was the addition of New Scotland Yard officers and the tone changed when they were in the room.

Q10 Stuart C McDonald: The change in approach with the change of personnel, is that what you think was behind this new approach or do you have another inkling as to what was going on here?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anna Birley: When new individuals were involved, the approach changed. I would not want to pin it on a handful of officers. It felt like an institutional change that they happened to represent. Our local force, regardless of who we were talking to, was engaged and open to working constructively and pleased that we had been proactive in reaching out. When New Scotland Yard became involved, it was not simply the individual officers who came across as obstructive, it was clear that they were operating along some sort of central strict guidelines around all events and gatherings being unlawful.

Q11 **Stuart C McDonald:** Bell Ribeiro-Addy, I understand that you were at Clapham Common twice on 13 March. It would be useful to know, when you attended first to lay flowers and pay respects, what the Common was like at that time.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: It was quite sombre. There were lots of people by the time I got there sometime between 5.30 pm and 5.45 pm. People came and as I was leaving more and more people were coming, as we knew they would. People had been coming right throughout the day to lay their flowers. There were police in the area but they were not near the bandstand in the large numbers that we saw later in the evening. They were on the outskirts of the park mainly and their presence was minimal.

Q12 **Stuart C McDonald:** When you returned later in the evening, how did the situation contrast with that?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: By the time I got there, there were definitely visibly more police. A lot of the scenes that had been reported had died down by then but there were still more police in the area. Many of the people had started to leave by then so it was a lot quieter. I took the opportunity to go and speak to the officer in charge to hear from his perspective what exactly had happened.

Q13 **Stuart C McDonald:** Are you able to share what he said to you and were you able to speak to other folk who had been taking part in the vigil as to what their version of events was?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: What the officer explained to me was that everything was fine initially, but he said that people then got up on to the bandstand and began making political speeches, left-wing political speeches, he said and at that moment that is when the police had to come in and stop people from making speeches, because we are not allowed to protest and that signified that it was a protest.

I explained to him what I had heard from other constituents who were in the area who had contacted me and also what I had seen. What they had told me was that at the time one of our local councillors there, Joanna Reynolds, had got up at 6 o'clock and led a one-minute silence, having informed the police, because there was no one there, and asked everybody to disperse. Obviously with no further stewards and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

leadership, as Anna said, people took the opportunity to get up and make speeches themselves.

What had happened, on making these speeches, the police surged forward and as they began to remove people and ask them to be removed, they upset some of the flowers and the candles that were there and I think that set people off. One of the recollections I heard was that when the floral tributes were disturbed, people got quite upset. When women began to be forcibly removed from the bandstand, the crowd began chanting different chants and that is how the situation began to unfold.

But it is not strange that this happened. The event had been planned right down to the last T, obviously, because of the additional considerations of Covid. There were meant to be stewards and there were meant to be people everywhere co-ordinating and directing this event. With no direction, I am not quite sure what was expected to happen. As I said earlier, we did make this point very clear to the local police.

If they at any point had thought that it was illegal, they probably should have said from the outset and asked the organisers to take the event down and not to publicise it, but they did not do that at the beginning. They were offering support and asking to work together to make a plan. By not doing that initially, by not asking, if they thought there was an issue, for the event to be cancelled, they effectively allowed people to attend on that day, exactly as we explained they would do.

Q14 **Stuart C McDonald:** That is helpful, thanks. Griff Ferris, we have had other witness testimony, written evidence, that suggests that that did seem to be where the whole tone of the policing and the event changed, around the minute's silence and thereafter. Is that your recollection of events as well? What triggered the change in policing tone?

Griff Ferris: I have a pretty good contemporaneous note of what happened. From what I remember and what I wrote down at the time, it was around 6.37 pm when a whole load of police came pushing on to the bandstand. They were pushing and shoving the crowds quite aggressively as they came through the crowds around the bandstand. They came into the bandstand and that was clearly the point at which they decided to take some more action.

Previously it had been police liaison officers talking to the people speaking inside the bandstand. But it was the point at which it was about 10 or 12 officers pushed their way through the crowd, pushing people closer together that seemed to be the point at which people in the crowd reacted to the police, the numbers of the police, the fact that they were aggressive with the crowd and the fact that it looked as though—and it was then the case—they had come into the bandstand to start physically removing people.

Q15 **Stuart C McDonald:** Finally, in relation to the High Court declaration on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the legality of the vigil, there are different folks saying different things about what its implications are and what it means. What is your interpretation about what the High Court said and what is your view on what it said specifically about the events that were unfolding on the Common?

Griff Ferris: We were there as independent legal observers, and I am not sure if it is right for me as a legal observer to comment on whether it was lawful or not. I was just there to observe and monitor, but Black Protest Legal Support has said publicly that no current or future legislation can impose a blanket ban on protest, as protected under Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Any attempt to restrict those rights will sharply affect Black, Brown and racialized groups and the issues that affect them, and stifling protests that seek to shine a light on state violence. The regulations I think could never legitimately restrict that right in that sense.

Q16 **Andrew Gwynne:** I have a couple of questions for Anna Birley. Going back to your written evidence, in it you said that following the declaration from the High Court, you felt that the “ball was in the Metropolitan Police’s court”. Given that you and the Met have diverging interpretations of the Declaration, why do you think this was the case?

Anna Birley: We were quite surprised by the police representative in court. Their views were not reflective of the conversations and feedback that we had had from the police in advance of the court case. He did not seem to disagree too much, and the reason that the judge did not give the judgment that we were after was because that he felt that there was no serious divergence in view. He used his judgment as an opportunity to clarify areas of the law, having discussed them. That was that exercising your rights under Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act were a reasonable excuse and could not be overridden by coronavirus regulations or any other piece of law, and that there could not be a blanket ban on protests and that it would be unlawful to have a blanket ban.

We then went into a meeting with the police and they published their statement of understanding and calling on the event to be cancelled while we were still in a meeting discussing with them how we could work with them to make it safe.

I come back to my point made previously. A vigil for a murdered girl with a group of women organised by local elected representatives is the most benign end of any form of exercise of those rights, but the right to protest and the right to disagree and to gather and express those disagreements in a peaceful way, all of that should be permissible. If the response we had is a response others are having, that is quite astonishing.

I am not sure that the court case changed their view. It certainly did not come across in any of their publications afterwards. The lack of a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

concrete judgment—we did not get exactly the piece of paper we wanted to out of the court case, so therefore they were able to say that we had not won the court case against them.

I am not sure that that completely answers your question, I am sorry, but I hope it is helpful.

Q17 **Andrew Gwynne:** It is helpful background, thank you. Moving on to the future, we have new regulations that are due to come into force on 29 March that now specifically allow for protests or similar events as an exception to Covid-19 limitations on gatherings. Do you think that this change in the law suggests the police made the right decision in thinking your vigil was unlawful, hence the need to change the law, or do you think that the Government always meant protest to be lawful and they are now providing necessary clarity to the law? Which do you think it is?

Anna Birley: While we do not think the police behaved well towards us, they were also dealt a difficult hand by the Government by being given a set of regulations that did not make clear what the exemptions were and were left to police forces locally to interpret in their own way. It gave a lot of power to police to decide what the law was before something happened, rather than judging after an event whether something required intervention or not. I think that was difficult for them.

What the legal judgment tells us is that at no point would it be lawful to have a blanket ban on protest, whether it is the police enforcing that or the Government saying that. The police were wrong in their interpretation of the law previously, but I think the Government were also at fault for not making that exemption explicit so that the police had proper guidance to work from.

Including it in the new sets of regulations is a positive step but they still create limits on that right to protest. We are not a formal charity or lobbying group. We are a group of women who felt angry and side-lined and unsafe and wanted to come together to express that. We should not have to register as a charity or formal organisation to be able to do so, so there is still a lack of clarity in some of those rules coming in going forwards that will limit the rights of people to protest.

Q18 **Simon Fell:** Mr Ferris, I have a couple of questions for you. Picking up from Stuart McDonald's last question to you, I am interested in your view on what drove the change in police action during the vigil. We have heard plenty of accounts and we have had lots of evidence as to a relatively friendly relationship between the police and those who were attending earlier in the day. What do you think drove that shift?

Griff Ferris: It is not entirely clear why it happened but there was a point at which, as I mentioned before, a number of police officers came pushing and shoving through the crowd. There were about 10 or 12 officers. They came from outside the crowd. I was in the bandstand at the time and I saw them come through the crowds and into the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

bandstand. It was clear that some enforcement action was going to be taken and that is what then happened.

The police started trying to stop the people on the bandstand from speaking. There were a number of banners that had been hung up commemorating what had happened to Sarah Everard and talking about the issues involved. The police started forcibly pulling those banners down. They were crowding the people speaking inside the bandstand, talking to them, physically crowding them and trying to stop them speaking. There was some lo-fi equipment that they had and the police took some of that, a small PA system. They were generally trying to stop the people speaking.

It was clear that previous to that the crowd was welcoming having people making speeches, talking about the events leading up to the gathering. People were visibly emotional and that was a way of them expressing how they felt and trying to understand how they felt and why they felt how they felt. To see the police trying to physically shut that down I think upset people and make them extremely frustrated. That was clear in the way that the crowd reacted and were chanting, telling the police to go home and telling them to leave the people speaking alone.

Q19 Simon Fell: But in your view there was nothing on that bandstand or that was being said or things that were being hung that drove that? It was a police decision to act then rather than something that had prompted them from activity on that bandstand?

Griff Ferris: I cannot speak for what prompted the police themselves, but from what I saw there were people speaking. The crowd was very receptive to that. There were banners and people were speaking about male violence, about male police violence, given the context of the event, but it was not rowdy, there was no violence at all. People were socially distanced. Generally pretty much everyone as far as I saw were wearing masks. It was only when the police started piling into the bandstand and, as I say, pushed people together as they did so, which stopped what social distancing was going on, which clearly made people upset and frustrated at what they saw was an attempt to shut down this form of gathering, which was paying respects, in many ways, to what had happened.

Q20 Simon Fell: Thank you. If you wanted to disperse the gathering in a more proportionate way, given the Covid-19 concerns, if it was around social distancing, if it was around the sheer number of people there, what do you think would have been a more proportionate way for the police to have undertaken that rather than what did occur on the evening?

Griff Ferris: I am not sure exactly how they may have acted differently. All I can say is the next day there was a gathering in Parliament Square, where I was also a legal observer, and I would say there was probably a similar number of people and the police did not pile in and they did not try to stop people speaking. People spoke, the crowd listened and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

eventually after a few hours that crowd dissipated. That was in stark contrast to what had happened.

As far as I was aware, people were there for the same reasons, people were talking about the same things. It was very much about Sarah Everard. It was about what had happened to her, and male police violence and police violence generally. After a few hours the crowd dissipated.

Q21 Simon Fell: We have heard and seen in Anna Birley's evidence that there had been considerable efforts to engage with the local community and the police and the local representatives ahead of the event. If your organisation was planning a vigil or an event like this in a pandemic, is there anything you would have done differently to try to head off some of these things happening?

Griff Ferris: Black Protest Legal Support does not organise protests because we are independent from protest organisers and it is not for us to say how they should be organised, since we are independent to monitor and observe police conduct. In the context of the many protests that legal observers from the organisation have been at, there have always been long-standing concerns about police conduct at protests, whether they are called protests, gatherings, vigils or demonstrations, and the use of force and level of police aggression and harassment at many of those events has always concerned us.

Protests often happen organically, as I think was generally the case on Saturday. They do not necessarily need organisers. People were angry and upset and wanted to express that and pay their respects, so I am not sure how much can always be done by self-appointed organisers at these events. People wanted to pay their respects and express how they felt and so they turned up and did that.

Q22 Tim Loughton: Mr Ferris, can I follow up on what Simon Fell has just asked you about as well? Both Councillor Birley and Bell Ribeiro-Addy have referred to the event on Clapham Common as a vigil. Was it a vigil or a protest?

Griff Ferris: In many ways that is just semantics and I think there is a problem with the conception of something as a vigil or a protest. It depends on what it means to the people who were there. For many people a vigil is a form of protest. Even in the literal definition of vigil, it can be a form of protest.

Q23 Tim Loughton: So you do not think there is any difference between a vigil and a protest?

Griff Ferris: It can be largely semantics but I think it is also ultimately about what it means to the people attending those events.

Q24 Tim Loughton: You see, we have had some interesting written testimonies from people who were there and there is a range of different



views and interpretations on what happened. Most people were agreed that it was pretty unpleasant, the scenes that everybody saw. If I quote from some of the submissions, one woman said that she went to the vigil as a cathartic experience. She also said that most of the tarmacked ring around the bandstand was full, it was not socially distanced. You have just said it was all socially distanced. She said that those on the bandstand clearly held more radical views than those of most of the crowd, which suggests it is more of a protest.

Another witness said that she saw, "A minority of individuals who were, as far as I could tell, all male and they were there to cause trouble. The atmosphere was one of quiet respect and reflection and it is not right to mix protest and vigil and tonight"—last Saturday—"is not the time to protest". Do you agree with some of those views as well, that there were different interpretations on exactly what happened and that there were people there clearly not interested in having a vigil, however we may differ on the definition, but went there with a definite purpose to protest and demonstrate?

Griff Ferris: I am sure that people there had different views on what they were there for and wanted to pay their respects or express how they felt in different ways. I am sure there is a range of feeling about why people were there and therefore how they interpreted the events they saw.

Importantly, there is no exemption for protest or vigil in the coronavirus regulations as the police were policing it, so whatever we want to call it the police were still saying it was illegal. They said it was illegal before the event and they reacted aggressively at the event, saying it was an illegal gathering. Whatever you want to call it, it was policed in an aggressive manner and was said to be illegal from the beginning.

When I arrived, it certainly was socially distanced. I was there from just before 6 o'clock and it was, up until the point at which the police started entering the bandstand and pushing through the crowds. It was at that point that the crowds were physically pushed together and also came together in response to what they viewed as the police trying to shut the speakers down. That is all I can say from what I saw on that.

Q25 **Tim Loughton:** So the crowds were not socially distanced?

Griff Ferris: They were not as a result of the police action, yes.

Q26 **Tim Loughton:** The crowds were socially distanced until the police turned up and then all of a sudden they did not become socially distanced. How did that work?

Griff Ferris: As I have just said, it was because the police pushed and shoved their way through the crowds to get on to the bandstand, which physically pushed people together. A large number of police turned up, they came into the bandstand and they formed a perimeter around the bandstand. This is further along, 10 or 15 minutes. They were pushing



and shoving the crowds aggressively from this perimeter around the bandstand and people reacted to what they perceived as the police trying to shut the protest down, to stop the speakers speaking, and it was as a result of that that the people came together and it was no longer socially distanced.

Q27 Tim Loughton: I am just trying to envision this, because it is quite difficult. If people were socially distanced and there were 2 metres between them, it would have been difficult for the police, when they arrived, to start pushing people around because there would be lots of space. There is a problem here as to whether people were socially distanced close to the bandstand, which most of the testimonies that I have read that have come to us from people who were actually there said that they were not socially distanced close to the bandstand. You are now saying that it was all fine until police started pushing people together, and yet the intention of the police there would be presumably to keep people apart and disperse them, so there is some conflict in what you are saying. Where were you standing?

Griff Ferris: When I first arrived I was standing on the edge of the crowds around the bandstand. When the police liaison officers first moved into the bandstand, I went in there to see what was happening, to observe and take notes. It was from that position that I was there for the rest of the evening in the bandstand, which had a clear view of what was around it, because it was raised, and a clear view of obviously what was going on inside the bandstand.

To respond to what you said about the police making their way through the crowds and it would have been fine if they had been socially distanced, that says clearly you do not believe that the police would have pushed people or shoved people, even if they were socially distanced.

Q28 Tim Loughton: I am not sure I follow that. I do not know. I was not there. Hence, I am just trying to envisage exactly what did happen.

You have said that the police started taking down placards in the bandstand as well. What sorts of things did those placards say?

Griff Ferris: I do not remember. I did not take a note of what the banners and placards said.

Q29 Tim Loughton: Okay, so there could have been placards that were not really akin to a vigil of people who wanted to come and be respectful to the murder of Sarah Everard, but people who had a political agenda who were there. Certainly, some of the placards that I saw on the news coverage had phrases like "F... the police" and things like that probably had an agenda and a political agenda rather than were there at a respectful vigil. Would you agree?

Griff Ferris: That is a matter of perception based on the people who brought those banners and placards to the events. To pretend that a vigil of a woman who was murdered was not in some way political, that the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

issues involved were not political, I do not know how you could reach that interpretation.

Q30 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but I think most reasonable people would say that you do not come along to a vigil that has been organised to pay respect and empathise with the horrific murder of a young woman and bring along a placard that made a statement like, "F... the police". That is not normal kit for a vigil, is it?

Griff Ferris: I cannot comment on those people's feelings but, given the events that led up to that week and what people understood about the death of Sarah Everard and how she was murdered and who by, I can imagine why people were feeling why they were.

Q31 **Tim Loughton:** I think most people would agree that that is not appropriate things to have at a genuine vigil. There does seem to be a big discrepancy here as to what is a vigil and what is a protest. Does Black Protest Legal Support have a political agenda, Mr Ferris?

Griff Ferris: Our only agenda is to provide legal observers at protests to monitor police presence.

Tim Loughton: It has no political agenda?

Griff Ferris: As I said, the only agenda it has is to provide legal observers at protests to monitor police presence.

Q32 **Tim Loughton:** Earlier you just described the role of Black Protest Legal Support as there to monitor police stifling protest that seeks to shine a light on state violence. Isn't claiming there is such a thing as state violence a political agenda?

Griff Ferris: I am not sure exactly what you mean, but I do not think so, no.

Q33 **Tim Loughton:** You have just used that phrase about the role of you and of Black Protest Legal Support. It is about intervening or monitoring the police when they are stifling protests that seek to shine a light on state violence. Can you not see that that is a political statement?

Griff Ferris: First, I am a legal observer and I am a volunteer there. I am not a member of the committee and I am not in a leadership position there, so I do not think it is for me to comment on what you are saying is the agenda of Black Protest Legal Support.

Q34 **Tim Loughton:** But that is what you have just said. You are part of an organisation, whether you are speaking for it or not. You are there as a volunteer of an organisation where you have said its role in part is to shine a light on state violence. That is a political statement. You may agree with it or not but it is a political statement, yes?

Griff Ferris: No, unfortunately I think you are getting mixed up there. I did not say that was Black Protest Legal Support's agenda. As I said, we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

provide legal observers to monitor protests that seek to do so, not the fact that we seek to do so.

Tim Loughton: Well, we will perhaps look at the transcript later because I copied down word for word what you said, but thank you very much.

Q35 **Chair:** Anna Birley and Bell Ribeiro-Addy, did you want to come in on these points?

Anna Birley: Yes, I want to come in on the differentiation between vigil and protest and whether or not that matters in terms of the police response. First, I would say the definition of a vigil is a stationary peaceful demonstration in support of a particular cause, so I am not sure that there is a huge difference. Emotively, a vigil tends to happen after dark with candles and is a sombre occasion and that was partly why we felt it was appropriate language to use in the context. But to be honest, I am not sure if you were to look at two different events of people standing stationary and peacefully you would see a huge amount of difference between a stationary protest and a vigil.

Notwithstanding, what the court case told us and what we felt to be true before and know to be true now is that whether it is a protest or a vigil, it would be contravening our rights under Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act for there to be a blanket ban on either. Peaceful protests can have a placard saying anything they like and have every right to express those views in a peaceful way. That is what those Articles protect. Whether or not people have placards that I might personally or you might personally or anyone else might personally not feel appropriate in the context of a young woman being murdered by a police officer—

Chair: That is subject to the court case.

Anna Birley: Yes, sorry. Or by someone else. That is by the by when we are looking at the way the police dealt with the event in the run up to, on the day or in the aftermath.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I want to respond to the idea that perhaps the police could effectively police the politics of what had happened. That was quite concerning to me. As I said, when I visited afterwards and I spoke to the officer in charge, he made quite a point of saying—he obviously did not know who I was—“left-wing political speeches”. I said to him that I do not think the types of speeches that people are making should have had any relevance as to whether or not you police them in a certain way. It is surely not the role of the police to police what people think, to police what people say. My belief was that the role of the police there was to keep people safe.

The idea that different views were not keeping people safe makes no sense, especially when, in the past few weeks and months we have seen the police policing events for people who believe Covid is a hoax, anti-



maskers, anti-vaxxers. That is something that I personally feel is dangerous but those individuals have exercised their right to protest, their right to gather in that way. Even though the politics of the situation are something that none of us here would probably agree with, the police have acted accordingly in facilitating their right to gather and share their views.

Q36 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Can I thank all of our witnesses? We are very grateful for your time this morning. We will be moving on now to our second panel. Just one final question from me to Bell Ribeiro-Addy. In terms of the relationship now between Lambeth police and the local community, is your sense that the police and the community have worked closely together in the past and will do so again in the future?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Yes, we continue to do so. The police, leading up to the vigil and prior, have made special efforts to accommodate the different wishes of the people in the community. For example, they have made sure that there are more female officers patrolling as opposed to just male officers. There are more male police, as we know. They are continuously working through weekly meetings with us to address the issues that have arisen out of this.

I do believe there is a lot of work to be done, given the sensitivities of the case, which I will not mention further, and given what happened in Clapham Common. We continue to strive for a place that people believe that the police in the area are there to keep them safe.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you to all of our witnesses. We will move on now to our second panel. Thank you very much to everybody for your time this morning.

Examination of witness

Witness: Chief Constable Craig Guildford.

Q37 **Chair:** We will move on now to welcome Chief Constable Craig Guildford. We are very grateful for your time this morning. We want to ask you about the policing—you had a vigil event take place in Nottingham that same week—and also some of the wider challenges that you and the police are facing and the decisions being taken in terms of policing different kinds of vigils and protests during the coronavirus crisis.

Can I welcome you and ask you initially about the policing that took place in Nottingham and the vigil that took place and the decision that you took that weekend?

Chief Constable Guildford: Certainly, good morning. Our approach is a longer-term approach and I was pleased to listen to what Anna was saying with regard to the local liaison with police down in Lambeth.

The reality is we are in an unprecedented situation and quite often most of these gatherings and protests would be easy for the police to facilitate.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Our local approach is a long-term one of engaging with stakeholders, in particular with people who do have some views that they want to express. Very often they are local promoters rather than organisers, which sometimes can make things a little bit more tricky.

We work with the local council, with our independent advisory group and what we try to do is engage all the way through so that we try to adopt a no-surprises approach. That is about local relationships and making sure that we are apolitical, we focus on people's safety through the regulations and we try to make sure that our activities are fair and proportionate and consistent. That has been the approach all the way through.

With regards to this particular event, clearly there was a court process ongoing. We liaised early with one of the local promoters. We tried to encourage the individual not to have a public protest or a public vigil but it was very obvious, from some of our contacts and from the feedback that we were getting, that that was still likely to take place due to the strength of feeling. Clearly what we had to do was to keep communicating and put some plans in place. Very much those plans were locally led, a local neighbourhood footprint, with some contingencies in reserve.

Realistically I was also pleased to hear what Anna said around—there was a large presence of female officers at the scene. From my perspective, that really did help because we got the temperature right and also what we got right was the look and feel of our approach to it. There was good social distancing. There was an assembly and in all reality we tried to maintain people's safety while balancing the situation that we had in hand.

Q38 Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Chief Constable. You have just talked about operating the local approach to the vigil in Nottingham. At what point in the planning of that event were you made aware of the High Court declaration in the case of the Reclaim These Streets application in regards to the Clapham Common event and what account did you make of that judgment in your plans?

Chief Constable Guildford: The assistant chief constable who led the operation was informed quite late in the day, because the judgment came late in the afternoon. With regards to the operational planning, we had continued to engage all the way through. Although the judgment came through, some of the local events across the country—from Reclaim These Streets nationally—had been cancelled officially from its perspective.

But of course, with lots of local promoters in various parts of the country you need to make sure that you have a good contingency. We kept talking, that is what we did. It was fairly obvious that the strength of feeling was that people were still wanting to come and express their grief and light a candle.



Q39 Andrew Gwynne: Thank you. It is very clear that different police forces have taken very different views, and you are one police force that engaged with the local community and permitted the Nottingham vigil. We saw what happened in Clapham Common, and in other areas the events were just cancelled.

I would like to pick your brains a bit about consistency, because it has been reported that a memorandum was circulated from Operation Talla on 12 March advising, "Covid regulations do not permit large gatherings" and, "Police must take a consistent approach and cannot waive the regulations for any type of gathering". If that report is accurate, how did that impact on your decision-making regarding the Nottingham vigil?

Chief Constable Guildford: We were focused on the safety. In all things we must ensure that we act proportionately. First and foremost, obviously context is important. The position here was radically different than that that the Metropolitan Police were facing, especially with regards to the individual officer who had been arrested for murder. That was one of the key considerations that I am sure is different.

Also the size of the crowd. Maximum, our numbers were about 150. The line that we held was very much our view was from a command perspective that the event would have been unlawful. On the one hand that is an absolute starting point for us, but we have to be proportionate and realistic. We have to keep people's safety in mind. You have to keep talking to people and engaging and making sure that you are aware of the wider realities of what could come to pass.

Q40 Dame Diana Johnson: I would like to ask you, Chief Constable, about the discussions that you may have had with key stakeholders about whether this should go ahead. I am thinking particularly of the local authority, your police and crime commissioner and your public health authorities in determining how to make sure that the vigil went ahead as safely as possible. Could you talk about those discussions and what points were raised by those stakeholders and how you managed to address them?

Chief Constable Guildford: As stakeholders we are all aware of the real, awful situation that we have been in with coronavirus, and we focused around the health regulations and the fact that distancing was important, face masks were important and outside is an important factor. None of us would have wanted the occasion to have taken place at all, if possible, because clearly that was the least risky outcome. But in planning forward what we always do is we engage particularly with community protection, local authority councillors, the PCC's office, good local advice linked into lots of different groups. That helps us form the picture but it also helps us communicate with some of the promoters or organisers. In this case it was more promoters.

We have adopted the same approach with the BLM protest last year and we have also had some anti-vax protests over the last few months too. It



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is about talking, engaging, keeping it wide. We take some advice from our independent advisory group too, and it is trying to make sure that we balance all those risks and keep people safe.

Q41 Dame Diana Johnson: Thank you. Obviously this is a very emotive subject for many people, and you have, as you just said, the need to keep people safe and to ensure that happens. In terms of the people facilitating this and setting it up, I am not quite clear in Nottingham, were they local councillors?

Chief Constable Guildford: No, mainly people who supported the national cause around Reclaim the Streets. More of a local promoter rather than a specific organiser.

Obviously from my perspective and I am sure from the commander's perspective, people like that have influence. It is a matter of keeping the conversation going even though you are realistically aware that they are likely to breach some of those regulations, because the greater good is keeping people as safe as we can. To be fair, the location that they were protesting in, I did not foresee there was going to be a lot of damage to the Brian Clough statue either.

Q42 Ruth Edwards: Chief Constable, it is very good to see you again and thank you very much for your time this morning and also for the incredible work you and your officers do keeping people safe in Nottinghamshire, not least because my constituents in Rushcliffe are obviously some of the beneficiaries of that work.

Nottinghamshire Police obviously took a very different approach, not just to the Met but to a number of other different forces. Did you discuss the approach you were going to take with other police forces? Is policing vigils or protests over the pandemic something that you do routinely discuss with other forces? It would be good to understand a bit more about that.

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, we do. Also the approach is very much trained as a doctrinal approach from the College of Policing in terms of the various command levels of public protest and public order command. I was pleased to see Anna say earlier on about local engagement in the Met and good local relations, and the local MP to the Met in that particular area emphasised that. That is a great starting point.

As chiefs, yes, we do discuss various aspects of coronavirus. We have a regular briefing with regards to regulations that come out. We also discuss things that have happened in different places around the country to try to learn some of the lessons. That is what I want to underline. The operating context here was radically different than what the commanders were faced with in the Met. That is something that needs to be firmly understood. It was different.

Q43 Ruth Edwards: It would be good to explore that a bit further. We have not yet taken evidence from the Met but Sir Stephen House, the Deputy



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has given evidence to the Police and Crime Committee of the London Assembly. He said that they saw a distinct change in tone on Clapham Common at about 6 o'clock. "People began to gather around the bandstand and some people began to make speeches. Inevitably the crowd compacted and compressed to hear what was being said and it became a much more difficult situation for us to reconcile with Covid legislation." He then added that the atmosphere had become "very hostile" and plastic bottles had been thrown at some officers. Did you face anything similar in Nottinghamshire? If you had, how would that have changed the way you needed to police the protest, if at all?

Chief Constable Guildford: Like you, I have only seen the footage from the Met on the TV and read about it in the newspaper. We did not have that situation. We did not have those people. Our intelligence feed was very much that it was a local vigil, the numbers would be relatively low and there was no keen interest from other organisations that would perhaps seek to undermine what the greater good was trying to achieve by registering its sympathy and its empathy with the situation in lighting a candle. That was distinctly different than the scenes that I saw, which were deplorable, around some of the violence towards police officers in the Met on that evening.

The reality is that we have to plan for those occasions. You keep your intelligence developing all the time and you keep assessing the risk. In the background we had some other resources that we could have used should we needed to have used them. But very much from my perspective, this was neighbourhood-led, predominantly with local female supervisors as well, getting into the crowd with our PCSOs. That really helped the tone and it was distinctly different than a crowded bandstand.

Q44 **Ruth Edwards:** Do you think if the situation had been different and you had faced a similar situation to the Met, that you would have had to have reacted differently? Would it have been possible for the gathering to continue to go ahead if you had been faced with similar circumstances?

Chief Constable Guildford: That is a difficult question for me to answer because I am not in possession of all the intelligence and the build-up to the Met protest and the vigil, so that is really difficult. From my own perspective, we have an empowered front-end supervision who could have taken some decisions should they have needed to. They are devolved, empowered and, obviously within our parameters of how we would intend it, best intentions for it to look and feel from a policing perspective. Very much proportionate but should you need to act, you will be backed by the organisation in acting.

Q45 **Laura Farris:** I have been listening carefully to your evidence and I want to ask you about the decision that you took in relation to this vigil and the previous protests to which you have had to respond, the anti-vax protest you talked about and the BLM protest. Do you have, as a force, specific criteria that you consider in relation to every protest in making a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decision about whether or not it is one that you can allow to proceed in the context of the coronavirus restrictions? If so, could you set out what those criteria are?

Chief Constable Guildford: A simple answer is no, we do not. We treat each one on its own merits. That is realistically what lawmakers and what chiefs would want to ensure—that you treat each one as a separate event, that you weigh up all the intelligence and that you continually assess the threat and the risk. That is not just a binary assessment, that is an assessment of risk to protesters, risk to people who are assembling, risk to the police officers, risk to the wider public. That is both from a violence perspective but mainly at the moment from a coronavirus perspective with regards to the risks to public health.

Some of the things that you weigh up are numbers, your intelligence with regards to if anybody specifically is intent on violence. To suggest that we will play it different to a different set of politics is nonsense. We are apolitical. We make rational decisions based on the intelligence that we have and that is our job on behalf of the public. So it is each one on its own merits, it is weighing those risks up.

There have been different regulations, as everybody is aware, throughout the past 12 months and we have to try to keep up with those regulations, but also take a view of public opinion, of partner opinion. We have to make sure that we get the look and the feel right, and our understanding is a longer-term engagement with a lot of these groups. That is what has helped us through the summer with Black Lives Matter, and it has helped us with the anti-vax protests.

Q46 **Laura Farris:** Do you exchange information with other forces? Is there a best-practice set of assessments that you have reached? If so, which of the forces have you had these discussions with?

Chief Constable Guildford: Most of policing specialisms have a lead chief officer. There is one around public order, and what we all do is we all make sure that we participate on a local, regional and national basis in learning any lessons. Usually lessons from protests and also from HMIC inspections are fed into a national learning process. That then influences the course content for commanders, which is delivered consistently by the College of Policing.

With regards to where I think you are going with a firm set of “you must do A, B or C”, no. There are some broad considerations but there is some clear guidance with regards to things that you do need to consider in making your overall decision on what it looks like, what it feels like, what tactical approach you are going to adopt, the number of resources, if there is a very pressing need to seek a legal view and so on.

Q47 **Laura Farris:** One of the things that you have said in terms of your preparation for the vigil that you had was that you knew it was going to be neighbourhood-led, you had some idea of size, you had some idea of



the participatory groups and you had had conversations leading up to it. If some of those factors had been different—for example you were concerned about a number of groups who were going to get involved who may have had ulterior motives—how would your response have changed? When would you have reached that decision and what would have been your proportionality threshold where you would have said, “We are going to have to totally change our decision or our approach on this one”?

Chief Constable Guildford: You always need to make sure you have a proportionate and a graduated response. The neighbourhood-led was a consistent decision, a decision taken based on the threat and risk, and how I wanted and how the commander wanted people to be engaged with. That gave people who attended some confidence but at the same time it allowed us to engage in a way that was very much along the lines of we need to maintain social distancing, we need masks on and once this has happened, we need to disperse very quickly. It enabled us to keep communicating.

In specific answer to your question around the element of how does it all change, that very much is dependent on each circumstance. Contingency-wise, if you had a group that were being particularly, let’s say, confrontational, not distancing and causing others distress, then clearly the tactics would change quite dynamically in a graduated way as those circumstances unfolded in front of the commander at the scene. That is why we empower commanders to make some of those decisions.

Q48 **Laura Farris:** There is scope for a dynamic response on the night and that could have been the case in Nottingham had circumstances developed?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, absolutely, and that is the case, I think, in most places because that is one of the things you have to plan for. It is one of the foreseen outcomes, depending on what your intelligence picture is giving you.

Q49 **Tim Loughton:** Chief Constable, I congratulate you. Of the various submissions we have had about the demonstrations, we have had quite a lot that were critical of Clapham Common but we seem to have had some rather positive ones for what happened in Nottinghamshire. To quote from one submission, “I’ve nothing but an enormous amount of praise for Nottinghamshire Police and I felt that they handled this event perfectly. They showed nothing but respect and dignity for those who were there and I think that because of this those attending respected the police for the way they managed the event.” I think that is a great tribute to the way you and your officers handled the events in Nottinghamshire.

I am not sure if you were in on the previous session but one of the witnesses seemed to be unable to distinguish between a vigil and a demonstration or protest. Do you think there is a distinction?

Chief Constable Guildford: I personally interpret it as one and the same and it is very much down to an interpretation. The proposition



HOUSE OF COMMONS

around a vigil I reasonably foresaw to be very similar, if not the same as, a potential protest and obviously planned accordingly.

Q50 **Tim Loughton:** Would you expect people attending a peaceful vigil to bring along placards and to chant anti-police slogans?

Chief Constable Guildford: On occasions, placards, yes. Anti-police slogans, on rare occasions maybe but not in the mainstream, no.

Q51 **Tim Loughton:** You said you particularly deployed female officers. Was that a deliberate intention?

Chief Constable Guildford: Yes, definitely because of thinking about the context, the strength of feeling and the events that had catalysed this in the Metropolitan Police area.

Q52 **Tim Loughton:** You were asked earlier about other demonstrations and you said you plan on a case-by-case basis. Have you had any particular problems with people trying to pull down statues? Probably not Brian Clough, but you never know.

Chief Constable Guildford: No, not with people trying to pull down statues here, fortunately we haven't.

Q53 **Tim Loughton:** Why do you think that is, or have you just not got any statues in Nottinghamshire?

Chief Constable Guildford: We don't have many of those statues fortunately. If it was not for coronavirus, our approach is mainly facilitative. Of course we respect the right to protest. That is what we all stand for and sensibly wherever possible to keep the public safe. That is what we always try to facilitate with the partners that we have and we work with locally.

Q54 **Chair:** A couple of final questions from me. Is the purpose of the protest or vigil relevant to the safety considerations that you have to go through?

Chief Constable Guildford: I think it is always relevant when you weigh up the risks as the strategic commander because you need to be able to look back at your intelligence and see who is involved, do you know who is involved, who is likely to be involved. I think the purpose is one of the key factors in determining numbers too, because different purposes have a different quantum of followers. They are all important parts of the mix, Chair.

Q55 **Chair:** Do you expect to take a view on how to police a protest based on listening to the content of the speeches or what is written on the placards?

Chief Constable Guildford: I always expect my commander on the ground to take into consideration the picture as it is unfolding, because it is a good temperature test as well, and you need to trust them to be able to feed that back up the chain to inform some more strategic decisions. But providing that what is on the placards is not specifically offensive and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it is more of an opinion, it is really of secondary importance. It is more of the feel on the ground, that temperature test of how emotions are running and also the attitude of some people who may come left of field and try to hijack what is a really peaceful activity.

Q56 Chair: With the risk for the police in getting drawn into judging the content of a speech or a demonstration, presumably the concern for you is about its impact on the way a crowd behaves or its impact on public safety issues?

Chief Constable Guildford: Absolutely.

Q57 Chair: On how you manage dealing with protests during the coronavirus crisis and the social distancing issues, if you are faced with a group who are not socially distancing, what is the impact of police intervention, as in physical intervention, to attempt to resolve that? Does that tend to work or does it tend to make the lack of social distancing worse?

Chief Constable Guildford: I think you have to treat each one on its own merits, each circumstance that is in front of you as an officer on the ground. I think you have to be cognisant of ensuring that you do not spark something unnecessarily and you have to keep your eye on the greater good, which is the overall public safety and also the safety of the officers that I am asking to go and do a difficult job there. I think that balance is really important, but it can have an impact if you are seen to be heavy-handed or if you are seen to be not listening. That is why across the police we have the four Es approach to most of the virus regulations and I think that is the right thing to do. It is a sensible approach, but realistically you have to be aware of your wider impact if you choose to act given the moment in time.

Chair: Chief Constable, thank you very much for your evidence this morning. We very much appreciate your time and I thank you and your officers for the work that you are doing at what is undoubtedly a difficult time for everyone during the Covid crisis. Thank you very much. That concludes our evidence session this morning. I thank all of our witnesses for giving us evidence.