

Written evidence submitted by the Metropolitan Police Service

Written Evidence to the Speakers' Conference on the Harassment and Intimidation of Members (2025)

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Policing takes the security of Members of Parliament extremely seriously. Following the murders of Jo Cox in 2016 and Sir David Amess in 2021, immediate steps were taken to improve our service, in the effort to allow MPs to go about their work, without fear for their own safety, free from harassment or intimidation.
- 1.2 The creation of Operation Bridger demonstrates what policing can do when it is resourced and shows the continuous work that is keeping democratically elected individuals safe. Since the investment into Bridger, there have been better conviction rates in comparison with the general population. The police contribution across the UK, through Operation Bridger, has been revitalised, re-focussed and enhanced. The creation of the National Strategic Bridger Team (NSBT) in September 2022 continues to improve the consistency of policing response to Bridger incidents, intelligence and risk.
- 1.3 An offender-focussed police strategy is in place to drive down the threat to MPs from identified suspects and our intelligence gathering around threats, incidents and alerting capability is delivering information on a daily basis to be actioned.
- 1.4 There are 57 Bridger Co-ordinators nationally which equates to one per force across England and Wales (with the exception of the Met which has 12 covering each Borough Command Unit), one for Police Scotland, one for the Police Service for Northern Ireland and one for the British Transport Police.
- 1.5 This report includes context and data sets to highlight the increased level allegations and intelligence being reported to policing, its geographic spread and investigative outcomes. Commentary on culture and perception of threats and intimidation towards MPs, the importance and complexity of victim engagement within an investigation, legislative issues and the complexity of social media in this space.

2. Context and statistics

- 2.1 The NSBT works with Force Operation Bridger Co-ordinators, the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAIT), Members' Security Support Service (MSSS) - part of the Parliamentary Security Department, and other stakeholders e.g. British Transport Police (BTP), Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC), Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP) and the Home Office to align good practice and responsibility.
- 2.2 Over recent years, there has been a steady increase in reports to the PLAIT team. Internal research has been conducted to understand the reason for such increase.
- 2.3 This increase is welcomed, although we do understand that a significant amount of incidents and crimes are not reported. From a policing perspective, there are numerous reasons for this including but not limited to:
 - Internal threshold set by staff/MPs;
 - Downplaying the behaviour;
 - Accepting the communication as the 'slings and arrows' of being in politics.
- 2.4 To ensure the volume of reports maintains a significant upward trend, PLAIT, in partnership with Parliamentary Security Department (PSD) continue to encourage increased reporting. However, there are still barriers to ensuring MPs feel able to report incidents to PLAIT.
- 2.5 To overcome these barriers, additional focus and resource has been dedicated specifically to identifying offenders and then tracking and monitoring them at a national level. The PLAIT team are

able to build a cohort of offenders for monitoring/tracking at a national level through the Op Bridger Tactical Tasking and Coordination Group (TTCG) meetings. This is essential if we are to reduce repeat victimisation and begin to understand what interventions are most effective in enabling us to do this. Looking at only the data for Financial Year 2023-24, the Op Bridger data shows:

- A higher rate of 'Charged/Summoned' outcomes;
- A higher rate of cautions and other resolutions for the most frequent crimes of Mal Comms and Harassment;
- Fewer evidential difficulties;
- Fewer instances of victims not supporting action;
- Fewer completed investigations where the suspect has not been identified.

2.6 As a result, and as with many public protection offences, these offences could be considered 'hidden' crimes.

3. Challenges within the policing of Harassment and Intimidation towards MPs

3.1 Cultural challenge

- 3.1.1 Any prevailing attitude that suggests MP's must accept a level of harassment and intimidation as part of their role must be challenged. This attitude has been encountered with Members themselves; office managers; police officers; the CPS and the Judiciary. Whilst a certain amount of heckling is to be expected due to their role, much of what is brought to the attention of the PLAIT team goes above and beyond that.
- 3.1.2 Clear advice about what Parliamentarians should report to police must continue to be provided to MPs and policing. Also, clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.
- 3.1.3 There is a careful balance to maintain between 'keeping the peace' and 'allowing free and democratic protest' to take place. This is especially true during election periods when the implications of responding too forcefully could be significant and be seen as undermining the integrity of the election. Clear guidance would aid a consistent national response, but importantly should not undermine the police's ability to make key operational judgments based on local demographics.
- 3.1.4 The National Strategic Bridger Team (NSBT) designs and delivers continuous professional development for Force Operation Bridger Co-ordinators and Force Elected Official Advisors, to ensure that they are aware of legislation that can be used to mitigate the threat to MPs and locally elected officials.

3.2 Victim engagement

- 3.2.1 Willingness to support a criminal investigation is paramount for its success. One challenge faced by the PLAIT team is the reluctance by some Members to provide a statement to the investigation. Providing a statement as part of an investigation is standard procedure and without such a statement, it is difficult for officers to complete the investigation, secure a conviction or alternative outcome and reduce the chances of future offending against Members.
- 3.2.2 Another challenging area often arises for certain Members who are more frequently and persistently targeted. These high profile individuals who, are often the subject of enhanced protective security arrangements, can present quite a challenge for two main reasons:
- Often their protective security arrangements are so good that the person intending to target them is prevented from doing so. Staff intercept letters, parcels, emails, and screen the content. Therefore, an individual could be an obsessive/fixated stalker who is never able to complete the offence of stalking or harassment as an 'active' victim is required.

- Routinely, those fixated/obsessive individuals are diverted into Mental Health facilities, but once they are deemed to be 'fit', they will often continue to re-offend.

3.2.3 Often, these high profile individuals are simply too busy to be able to provide an evidential statement and statements offered on their behalf by staff members are not acceptable to prosecutors. Also, when high profile events occur, an individual may suffer multiple individual offences which would all require victim statements.

3.3 Social media platforms

3.3.1 Many perpetrators use a wide range of social media platforms to commit offences under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Online Safety Act 2023. Whilst abusive content can be reported and removed, not enough is being done by the owners of such platforms to ensure messages are not displayed in the first place. Policing may make referrals to have content removed, but the willingness for platforms to remove content has diminished.

3.3.2 Officers investigating such offences often encounter difficulties and delays in obtaining evidence, especially where social media platforms are based outside of the UK. With business models which rely on maximising user numbers and advertising revenue, there is minimal incentive for platforms to remove content or sanction users.

3.3.3 Some practical solutions could include:

- Users submitting posts for screening prior to posting;
- Verification of user details;
- Prohibiting anonymous posting;
- Prohibiting the use of a VPN.

3.3.4 This would have a significant impact on those individuals who engage in 'trolling', particularly from countries outside of the UK.

3.4 Consistent approach to recording, investigating and prosecuting crimes

3.4.1 Given UK Policing has 46 separate forces, there will always be an inherent difference in the operational if not strategic response to Bridger management and incidents. Chief Constables are the key to ensuring appropriate leadership is provided within forces on any subject that has both local and national strategic implications.

3.4.2 As with any other crime type or victim, there can be inconsistency in relation to thresholds around when some forces record crimes, where one force will record an incident as a crime, whilst another may interpret the same incident as intelligence only. This could lead to a loss of confidence for victims if the policing response is perceived as a 'postcode lottery.' The PLAIT team, as overseers of the Mercury database and through the multi-agency Daily Management Meeting process, endeavours to provide this consistency by providing advice and guidance in specific cases.

3.4.3 It is important that the police always conduct a balanced, proportionate and impartial investigation into every allegation, whether it relates to Bridger or the general population. On occasions, this can result in the criminal threshold not being met because of insufficient evidence to prosecute, or there being no realistic prospect of a successful prosecution. Regardless of the victim, these outcomes are understandably not always well received but this does not mean the decision was incorrect.

3.4.4 If a crime has been committed, there also needs to be consistency in prosecution by the CPS for the same reasons.

3.5 Legislative Issues

- 3.5.1 There is a significant amount of legislation already in place with intent to directly address matters affecting elected representatives/candidates, or general law to focus on offences such as harassment and criminal damage. For example:
- S42 Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001
 - S3A of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997
 - Public Order Act 1986 and 2023
 - Criminal Damage Act 1971
 - Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act of 2014
- 3.5.2 In some cases, the legislation and its aims are understood, but there is a lack of guidance around the meaning of what activity constitutes an offence. This necessitates officers to interpret whether the activity they have witnessed or has been alleged, would constitute an offence or not. Clearer guidance on thresholds for intervention, to enable a more common understanding of the applicability of election, online safety, and public order legislation is necessary.
- 3.5.3 For example, S97 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 creates specific offence relating to disturbances at election meetings, using the term 'in a disorderly manner.'¹ There is no definition of 'disorderly', so it is a matter of fact for the magistrates to decide on. It has been held to mean 'an offence against good manners, a failure of good taste, a breach of morality, likely to cause a disturbance or to annoy others considerably', but there need be no threat or provocation of violence. It is thought that in the context of a meeting 'disorderly' would require more than a bit of ad hoc heckling - some form of loud and constant chanting and barracking would probably suffice.
- 3.5.4 Another example is S114A of the Act and the offences related to a person who exercises undue influence on a voter. The act is similar in content to offences under the Public Order Act and Criminal Damage Act. It also highlights the specific activity of 'causing spiritual injury to, or placing undue spiritual pressure on', again necessitating the officer to interpret what this activity may entail.
- 3.5.5 Such legislation is infrequently used and requires additional training around awareness and consistency of application by officers.

4. Further information: The General Election – National impact

4.1 Reports of harassment and intimidation made by candidates

- 4.1.1 The 2024 General Election (GHE24) saw a significant increase in reported incidents towards candidates. Between 30 May 2024 and 4 July 2024 inclusive, 481 reports were recorded. 214 reports were recorded for the same period in 2023.

March 2025

¹ S97(1) A person who at a lawful public meeting to which this section applies acts, or incites others to act, in a disorderly manner for the purpose of preventing the transaction of the business for which the meeting was called together shall be guilty of an illegal practice.

