

Petitions Committee: Potential impact of changes to powers to police protests

Activity

The Petitions Committee used an online survey to ask petitioners for their views on the potential impact of changes to powers to police protests, and their experience of attending public protests.

The survey was sent to people who signed a [petition](#) calling on the Government not to restrict rights to peaceful protest, which had received over 248,000 signatures as of 19 April 2021. The survey was also sent to people who had signed a related [petition](#) calling for provisions relating to single person protests to be removed from the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which had received over 12,500 signatures as of 19 April 2021.

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Response

14,213 people responded to the Committee's survey

Methodology

Survey questions which produced statistical results have been included in the summaries of key themes.

Responses to open-ended questions were analysed using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo. Themes were automatically identified and coded using the automated insights tool. This was used as the starting point to code the data and undertake more detailed manual thematic analysis.

Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection.

Key themes

The majority of those who signed the petition did so due to concerns about proposals to increase police powers relating to protests

- The most common concern, shared by **84%** of respondents, were the **'proposals to increase police powers relating to protests'**.
- **7%** of respondents were most concerned about **'how recent protests have been handled'**.

Respondents told us they thought the police already had sufficient powers, and described the proposed extension of powers in the Bill as "authoritarian", "totalitarian" and as bringing about a "police state".

Quotes:

"We are in danger of becoming an authoritarian state. Our right to peaceful protest must be upheld. The police already have sufficient powers."

"Seems like we are becoming a police state and if this Bill goes through, I would say we are then a police state with no democracy or at least not a democracy that is working."

“The extent of these powers regarding peaceful protest are of the sort I would expect to see in a totalitarian state, not a Western democracy.”

“The right to demonstrate opposition to something when government has stopped listening to other avenues is precious. To ban or curtail it is on the road to a totalitarian state.”

There are widespread concerns that increased police powers could limit public scrutiny of the Government

- Almost **95%** of respondents were concerned that proposals to increase police powers **‘could prevent the public being able to hold the Government to account’**.
- Over **75%** of respondents were also concerned that these proposals could **‘result in restrictions being imposed on protests’**, **‘prevent protests from going ahead’** and **‘result in people taking part in protests facing criminal charges’**.

Respondents said that peaceful protest was a “democratic”, “human”, “fundamental” and “basic” right. They were concerned that increased police powers would limit opportunities for people to express dissent, hold government to account and bring about positive change.

Quotes:

“Every citizen deserves the right to protest and to hold Government to account, in order to have an influence on the society in which they live.”

“The right to peaceful protest should be considered a human right. It is the only way the citizens have to hold their governments to account on injustice committed, or to remind governments that they're supposed to work in the best interest of the people.”

“Protests are one of the few opportunities for the public to make their feelings known. Peaceful protest is a democratic right. Protests can bring about social change. It is important to allow people a voice.”

“Many improvements in society only came about as a result of protests, e.g. right to vote, civil rights, addressing inequalities and injustice. These new powers would prevent or make such protests illegal and criminalise protesters.”

The vast majority were very concerned about plans to widen the conditions police can impose on protests

- The **overwhelming majority** (over 90%) of respondents were **‘Very concerned’** about plans to widen the range of conditions that the police can impose on static protests and broaden the range of circumstances in which police may impose conditions on a protest.
- Over **80%** of respondents were **‘Very concerned’** about plans to amend the offence of breaching conditions and to restate the common law offence of public nuisance in statute.
- Only **34%** of respondents were **‘Very concerned’** about plans to ensure vehicular entrances to the Parliament Estate. **32%** of respondents were **‘Somewhat concerned’** and **23%** were **‘Not at all concerned’**.

Respondents were concerned that the current drafting of the Bill was too "broad" and "vague" and that it could result in inconsistent interpretation and application.

Quotes:

"The Bill is dangerously broadly worded. The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental right and should not be limited simply because a protest is noisy or causes annoyance to someone. There should be a presumption in favour of the right to peaceful protest and the police should not be given powers to prevent peaceful protest."

"The term "annoyance" is broad and covers a huge range, this unfortunately will give the police an opportunity to curtail any protest if a single person complains about it. This prevents the public from undertaking their right to peaceful protest."

"I am extremely concerned that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will give the Home Secretary powers to [...] define "serious disruption", which police can then rely on to impose conditions on protests."

"It is right that our representatives should be able to get into Parliament. It is also right that they should be able to see and hear protesters on their way into the parliamentary estate."

Respondents were concerned that the Bill would curtail peaceful, well-managed protests and in so doing, that it risked increasing un-organised, violent protest and riots.

"Restrictions on our right to peacefully protest won't stop anyone on any side of politics from protesting. It will simply mean

there will be no peaceful protests, only riots and violence."

"Protests are meant to be a little irritating, they are meant to be noticed and let the government know how the people feel. Restricting peaceful protests will lead to more protests without official organisers, resulting in more disruption, more issues and less information as to where the protests will be, making them harder to police."

"If people's right to organise/take part in peaceful protest is removed, then there is a real danger that what we will see is a rise in chaotic and violent protest... If you're going to get arrested/fined/jailed for protesting peacefully, you might as well riot."

"When you restrict the opportunity for peaceful protest, the only alternative is violent protest. This Bill is making violent protest more likely, and has all the hallmarks of an authoritarian state."

Most respondents thought police presence and handling of protests was appropriate

- Over **10,000** respondents had previously attended a public protest. **85%** of respondents who told us they'd attended a public protest said there was a visible police presence.
- **62%** of respondents said the number of police present at protests they'd attended was '**About right**', but **38%** of respondents said there were '**Too many**' police.
- **66%** of respondents told us that policing at protests they'd attended was '**Fair**' (police either took no action or took action when necessary), but

34% of respondents said policing was **'Too strict'** (police took unnecessary action).

Respondents told us that their experiences of the way protests were policed were mixed. We heard accounts of protests where police presence was perceived as "reasonable" and "professional" as well as accounts of protests where police presence was perceived as being "heavy handed" or "excessive". Many respondents noted that they had felt better where police had cooperated with protesters.

Quotes:

"The police are experienced in handling protests and generally pitch their response appropriately."

"The police presence at protests I've been at always felt better when the police were there to ensure that the protest was allowed to happen without conflict from people outside of the protest - working with and protecting protestors to allow them to continue peacefully rather than engaging to suppress them."

"Protests are not all the same. In some the police have been very reasonable and in others they have been heavy handed. I have seen middle aged protesters thrown to the ground by the police [...] to try and prevent protesters blocking traffic... and I have been on a march of nearly a million people in London where there was barely a police presence."

"I have attended a variety of protests and marches. In some I have felt safe where the police presence has been minimal and when police clearly cooperated with protesters to

ensure their own safety and that of others in the area. However at others with too many police and police with excessive riot equipment I have previously been surrounded and it has resulted in agitation among the crowd. Essentially when the police have facilitated protests it has been the optimal outcome, when they have tried to suppress a protest it has led to a worse outcome."

