

NICKIE AIKEN MP
CITIES OF LONDON AND WESTMINSTER



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Commissioner Cressida Dick DBE QPM
Metropolitan Police Service
New Scotland Yard
Victoria Embankment
LONDON
SW1A 2JL

BY EMAIL ONLY

22nd June 2020

Dear Cressida,

The Use of Helicopters to Police Protests

Firstly, may I thank you and your officers for the excellent work you are doing during these strangest of times. Policing London is never easy, and I understand that it must be particularly difficult now.

I am writing with regards to the use of helicopters, presumably for surveillance and safety, during protests in central London. For the past three weekends residents in the Cities of London and Westminster have had helicopters overhead for most of the day and, on occasion, early into the morning. As a resident of Pimlico, myself, my family, my neighbours and I can attest to the disruption they have caused.

I understand that the Police have a duty to keep protesters and residents safe whilst protecting local businesses, but is there a case for a wider use of drone technology in this policing methodology? I can see several benefits: there would be considerably less noise pollution and disruption to local residents, the environmental benefits are indisputable, and I would assume there would be a financial saving as well.

I fully support the use of helicopters when mission appropriate, in supporting the policing of vehicle pursuits or locating fleeing suspects for example, but perhaps in situations where a helicopter might be hovering in an almost stationary position for a number of hours on end then drones might be more suitable?

Without wishing to impinge on your operational procedures my residents and I would welcome your views on the matter.

As ever, I remain supportive of your excellent work and my residents and I thank you and your officers for your service.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Aiken', written in a cursive style.

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CC:

Kit Malthouse MP, Minister for Crime and Policing



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30th June 2020

Dear Nickie,

Thank you for your letter dated 22nd June and for your ongoing support to my teams in these challenging times.

You make some useful suggestions about the use of drones which I deal with below. However, I also note you're writing as the MP who covers much of central London and as someone who lives and works in Westminster, as you know, I do recognise the amount of helicopter activity there has been above your residence since the protests started.

The MPS have invested significantly in the research and development of drones to develop our capability in this area. We have a designated team who now deploy drones instead of helicopters for incidents where it is appropriate. These will include keeping a visual containment on an address, covering the rear of a premises during a firearms incident, or for calls where a negotiator needs to be clearly heard by a person in crisis. In the last 7 months alone, drones have completed 126 tasks in London, a great number of which would have previously have been completed by helicopters.

Despite significant advances in drone technology, however, they are still not at a point where they are able to completely replace helicopters. A helicopter still offers greater geographical scope, manoeuvrability and speed than a drone. Drones need to be within the line of sight and within a certain distance of the controller at all times, meaning that they can't be moved around corners or behind buildings. In essence this means that the drone can currently only be usefully employed in London when surveying a fixed location, and where the subject of that surveillance isn't mobile. We are also subject to a number of Civil Aviation Authority restrictions on the use of our drones - these can be breached for serious spontaneous incidents where the relevant threshold is met but to demonstrate to the CAA that we operate safely we need to apply for bespoke exemptions when required.

Helicopters also have a frame which can carry much more powerful cameras than those currently held by a drone. This provides an advantage in terms of imagery where distance or conditions may otherwise impact on the quality and enables a helicopter to be used



much less overtly, as it can stand off some distance away from the object that it is looking at if needs be. This imagery is essential in the management of protests, public order, terrorist and major incidents. Finally helicopters have two highly trained officers on board in addition to the pilot who can provide an invaluable commentary to commanders on the ground and direct resources as required. This is especially crucial in fast paced events such as major or critical incidents or high speed pursuits.

The airspace above London is arguably one of the most complex airspaces in the world, not only for commercial aviation with Heathrow and London City, Battersea heliport and military activity but there are also several emergency helicopter services that operate every day in London. Our helicopters are absolutely invaluable in saving lives, preventing and detecting crime and managing complex incidents safely. I am fully aware though that they can be noisy and burn fuel in large quantities.

The MPS will continue to invest in drone technology and to use it instead of helicopters where appropriate, but the speed of change will continue to be dictated by the pace of technological developments in this field.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cressida".

Cressida Dick
Commissioner