

Policing Extinction Rebellion on the first day of the 'autumn uprising'

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Shift in the life: A forward intelligence officer

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With the 7 October 2019 Extinction Rebellion event being well-advertised, and as we had learned lessons from a similar event in April that year, I was aware of my very early morning deployment weeks in advance. Forward Intelligence Team (FIT) officers were asked for their availability on working days, as well as rest days, for the event.

Because of the limited number of available FIT officers, I knew that I would be deployed. The role of each FIT was to gather intelligence that could help the public order commanders to form a strategy and allocate resources. There were six FITs staggered over three start times, and we all knew that we had a long two weeks ahead. The shortest day over the fortnight was 12 hours and some were as long as 18 hours.

I arranged to meet my FIT partner at Lambeth at 6am. The day started with me getting my uniform and shower kit ready, so I could shower at work and avoid waking my two-year-old son. I had told him that I wouldn't see him much over the next two weeks, and I had made sure that I spent as much time as possible with him the week before. My son often became a conversation piece with protesters when they told me that they were protesting for my kid.

Our patrols officially started at 7am. We were tasked with some of the iconic sites and major central London junctions that were suspected targets for the Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Animal Rebellion 'autumn uprising'. We met our first customer before we'd even made it to our assigned ground! A vehicle crossing Lambeth Bridge, destined for The Mall, was fully loaded with XR paraphernalia, flags and artwork. The occupants were quite open about their intention to use the contents for a family-orientated tent where children could produce artwork.

A quick lap of iconic sites on foot and by vehicle highlighted the vast number of protesters present in and around central London. At about 9am, blockades began to emerge on bridges, major

junctions and iconic sites, including outside the Home Office. We engaged with the protesters throughout. Many were reluctant to offer up specific information regarding intentions and locations, but reiterated that any actions would be peaceful. Several cafés became popular pit stops for protesters and police alike!

As time went on, more complex methods of blockading roads were used, such as parking a heavy goods vehicle near the Home Office, and numerous tents and temporary structures appeared. Throughout the day, we continued to take a tour of different encampments and discovered hundreds of very simply devised wooden boxes with holes in each end. These became commonplace over the fortnight, and they were used to build structures and to enable protesters to lock themselves to each other through the boxes.

Later, we were tasked to attend the Animal Rebellion protest at Smithfield Market, where the protesters had set up an impromptu vegan market with a few hundred people present. On arrival, we liaised with City of London Police, who were dealing with the low-key event. The protesters were very peaceful and courteous, and I lost count of how much food I was offered! After a final lap of the blockades, we were dismissed from the event. In this role, experience is more important than rank. My FIT partner was an expert in recognising the event organisers, so I happily followed his lead.

Since contributing this article, I have been promoted to inspector, working in Westminster on a permanent basis. The planned XR spring protests were cancelled because of the emergency of the COVID-19 outbreak. In recent months, we have had to balance police presence at Black Lives Matter, anti-lockdown and far-right protests, among others. As a Police Support Unit commander, this has presented some interesting challenges around balancing the facilitation of peaceful protests with the necessity for social distancing.

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