

# RIOTS COULD ONLY BE THE START – LANCS COPS

LANCASHIRE police who served on the frontline in the London riots fear there could be more disorder to come if the Government pushes ahead with drastic manpower cuts.

The county sent 76 specially-trained officers to help the Metropolitan Police quell trouble on the streets of the capital.

And, in answer to a questionnaire sent out by the Lancashire Police Federation, the returning volunteers sounded a clear warning that plans to reduce police numbers by 16,000 across the country over the next four years could lead to even more civil unrest.

A Constable from Preston, insisted: “The recent scenes of disorder, rioting and looting will continue and gain momentum if the people responsible perceive a weakening in police numbers, ability to respond or a time delay in responding.”

Police Federation officials are seeking face-to-face talks with Lancashire MPs to spell out the concerns of the frontline bobbies.

They asked officers on duty during the troubles to write down their experiences and thoughts following an exhausting week in the capital where some were asked to work 20-hour shifts in a bid to halt the lawlessness and others had to forfeit time off back in Lancashire to cover for absent colleagues.

They intend to use the first-hand accounts during discussions with politicians as they push for a rethink on budget reductions.

“We are extremely proud of the officers who put their safety on the line to defend people and property during the disturbances,” said Lancashire Federation chairman John O’Reilly.

“But the message they brought back from the riots is a clear one for the Government: It would be folly to go ahead with these swingeing cuts to police numbers.”

One Officer from Accrington, painted a graphic picture of life on the frontline. And he revealed how grateful the public had been for how the heavily outnumbered police coped with the troubles.

“We had a fantastic reaction,” he said. “Whilst patrolling the Oxford Street area I was stopped by a large number of people who would thank us, shake our hands, applaud us and thank us for the hard work we were doing.

“One gentleman, in his own words, stated ‘The Government must be mental to be imposing cuts after what has happened in the country over the past few days.’

“Another stated ‘Even if the government don’t appreciate you, we do. And what is happening proves we need more police on the streets. They should be giving you more money not cutting it.’”

Another Officer from Hyndburn, said: “The general mindset of frontline staff is that such a response is not sustainable for prolonged periods, or in recurring circumstances.

“With requests for staff during the Olympics and further budget cuts on the police service, combined with the social unrest at overall government cuts and high rates of unemployment, staff fear that this is only the beginning.”

Another officer again, added: “Now that the troublemakers have seen the limit of the thin blue line, and that it can be cracked over a number of days, I believe we will see more disorder in the future.

“I would suggest that Lancashire Constabulary, and by extension the British Police, are lucky to have officers who will go to the levels they will, routinely unarmed, facing rioters and looters and fighters and thieves with nothing more than a hollow metal stick and some peppers in a can.”

The full transcript of officers’ responses to the questionnaire are to be made available to Lancashire MPs to illustrate the mood of police on the frontline.

The move is the latest step in a campaign by the county’s Federation chiefs to oppose the Government imposition of 20 per cent budget cuts which will cost Lancashire Constabulary 550 officers and 300 police staff over the next four years.

The Federation insists the Force cannot cope with cutbacks of above 12 per cent without frontline policing being seriously affected. It is urging members of the public to contact their MPs to call for a rethink on police cuts.

\* For further information contact Lancashire Police Federation vice-chairman Rachel Baines on 07917 448455.