

Activist Guide to Protests, Policing & Privacy in the United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

Why this guide? Protest is a fundamental right in the UK, but it comes with complexities. In recent years, new laws and policing methods have emerged that affect how protests are managed and experienced ¹. This guide equips activists and organisers with practical knowledge to exercise their rights **lawfully and safely**, understand police tactics, protect their privacy, and navigate challenges such as counter-protests and surveillance. Written in a neutral, evidence-based manner, it's for anyone involved in public demonstrations: from first-time protesters to seasoned campaign leaders, legal observers, and public officials. The aim is to help readers **plan and participate in protests** while balancing their cause with the need to stay safe and within the law.

Scope: The focus is on **England and Wales**, where recent legislation like the Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Act 2022 and Public Order Act 2023 introduced new protest-related offences and police powers ¹. Key differences for **Scotland** (with separate public order procedures) and **Northern Ireland** (with the Parades Commission and specific laws) are noted. The guide highlights *lawful, harm-minimising approaches*, steering clear of any illegal or confrontational tactics. You'll find references to authoritative sources (like UK laws, police guidance, court cases, and human rights standards) for further reading or validation.

In this guide: We start by summarizing your rights and the legal framework for protests in the UK (Section 2). We then detail **policing strategies and units** you may encounter (Section 3), including command structures and equipment, so you know what to expect. Next, we cover **surveillance technologies**, like CCTV and facial recognition, and how to safeguard your privacy (Section 4). The guide then walks through the **phases of protest involvement** – planning and preparation (Section 5), traveling to the protest (Section 6), participating safely (Section 7), handling **counter-protests and opposition** (Section 8), and leaving and post-event follow-ups (Section 9). Finally, there are *checklists* and *appendices* (Section 10) with further resources, a timeline of developments, key terms, and references.



(Above: Typical protest lifecycle)

2. The Right to Protest: Law and Restrictions

2.1 Peaceful Assembly and the Law

Your rights: In the UK, you have the legal right to hold and attend peaceful protests. This is grounded in the **Human Rights Act 1998**, which incorporates the **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** ¹. **Article 10 (freedom of expression)** and **Article 11 (freedom of assembly)** protect your ability to express views and gather with others. These rights cover not just mainstream opinions, but also “**views that may shock, offend or disturb**” as long as they are expressed peacefully and within the law ¹.

Limitations: These rights are *qualified*, meaning authorities can impose **proportionate restrictions for legitimate purposes** (like preventing serious disorder, crime, or protecting others’ rights) ¹. By law, any restriction must be:

- **In accordance with law:** There must be a clear legal basis (typically under specific statutes).
- **For a legitimate aim:** e.g. public safety, preventing crime, protecting rights of others.
- **“Necessary in a democratic society” and proportionate:** the least intrusive restriction needed for the aim.

In practice, **most protests in Britain are peaceful and need no police intervention** ⁷. But when police expect a protest to cause significant disruption or risk to others, they can use specific powers to manage it (see Section 3). Knowing these rules helps you anticipate and respond appropriately.

2.2 Notice and Conditions

Advance notice: In **England and Wales**, if you plan a **march or procession** on public roads or open spaces, the law (Public Order Act 1986) requires **written notice to the local police at least 6 days in advance** ¹. The notice should include date, time, route, and organiser contacts. (If it’s genuinely spontaneous, lacking 6 days’ notice might be excused, but expect questions.) No notice is required for **static assemblies** (e.g. rally in a square), except in certain specially designated areas like near Parliament.

Conditions on protests: Police **can impose conditions** on both marches and assemblies under Sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986, **when they reasonably believe** the protest may result in **serious public disorder, property damage, serious disruption to the life of the community, or intimidation of others** ¹. Conditions might dictate:

- **Route or Location:** e.g. “do not enter a specific street or facility”.
- **Timing & Duration:** e.g. “protest must end by 5pm”.
- **Numbers & Size:** rarely used, but can set a cap on participants or require splitting into groups.
- **Noise limits:** Under the *Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Act 2022*, police can (for the first time) restrict a protest due to noise if it causes “serious disruption” or nearby “serious unease” ¹.

Failure to comply with a lawful condition, **after it’s communicated to you**, is a criminal offence (punishable by fine or up to 3 months imprisonment for most breaches) ¹. Police must communicate the conditions to the participants (often via loudhailers or written notice). In 2025, revisions to the law made it possible to convict you for breach of conditions even if you didn’t personally know about them, as long as they were considered clearly communicated to the group – so staying alert to police announcements is crucial ¹.

Note for Scotland & NI: In **Scotland**, organised processions must notify local councils and police 28 days in advance (subject to exemptions) ⁶. Councils (with police input) can impose conditions or even ban a procession if necessary for public order or safety. **Static protests** are not subject to notification, but police use similar powers (common law breach of the peace, etc.) to manage them. In **Northern Ireland**, the process is more formal: 28 days’ notice to the Police Service of NI and the Parades Commission, which can impose conditions on parades and related protests to balance community rights and prevent disorder.

2.3 New Offences and Legal Changes

Recent laws bring new restrictions:

- The **Public Order Act 2023** criminalises disruptive protest tactics such as **“locking-on”** (attaching oneself to objects, buildings or people) and even **carrying equipment** intended for such acts ¹. It also creates offences for

“tunnelling” (protest tunnels) and **interference with national infrastructure**. Penalties can be up to 51 weeks in jail ¹.

- The **2023 Act** also allows **Suspicionless Stop & Search** for protest-related items. Under certain circumstances, police can search people in an area for items like glue or chains, without individual suspicion (an extension of the older Section 60 CJPOA power) ¹.
- **Serious Disruption Prevention Orders (SDPOs)**: A new tool to restrain individuals with a history of protest offences from attending certain events, associating with certain people, or carrying protest items, for up to 2 years ¹. Breaching an SDPO is a crime. These orders are controversial and seen by some as a threat to free expression.
- **Injunctions and bylaws**: For targeted scenarios (e.g. preventing protests at particular sites like highways or oil terminals), authorities or private companies sometimes seek civil **injunctions**. These court orders can ban protest activities in specific places under threat of arrest for contempt of court. If you're involved in such a protest, be aware of any known injunctions – violating one can lead to serious penalties (like imprisonment or fines). Bylaws (local regulations) may also affect actions like overnight camps or sound amplification in certain locations.

2.4 “Counter-Protests” and Clashes

Two or more opposing protests at the same time can complicate your rights. **Both groups have equal rights to protest**, but police must ensure neither side's actions aim to **silence or endanger the other**. The law (Article 17 ECHR) states rights cannot be used to destroy others' rights. For example, planning to physically block another group's rally crosses into unlawful territory. The European Court of Human Rights held that *“the right to counter-demonstrate cannot extend to inhibiting the exercise of the right to demonstrate by others”*.

Policing counter-protests: Expect a firm emphasis on **separation of opposing groups**. Police often set up **cordons or “sterile” zones** and deploy additional resources to keep rival protesters apart, to prevent violence and ensure both can be heard (though not in the same space). You may be directed to stay within certain areas or routes distant from the other group. Following those instructions is crucial to avoid escalation or enforcement (as refusing could lead to being moved or arrested).

under public order powers). See Section 8 for more on handling hostile opposition at protests.

3. Policing Strategies, Units and Equipment

When attending a protest, it helps to understand how **police operations** are structured:

Gold–Silver–Bronze command: UK policing of protests uses a hierarchical structure for major events ³. **Gold (Strategic) commanders** set high-level strategy (usually off-site, not on the ground), for instance, deciding overall objectives or authorising special tactics. **Silver (Tactical) commanders** coordinate the operation on the day, making real-time decisions about deployments and tactics to ensure Gold's strategy is implemented. **Bronze (Operational) commanders** control specific sections of the operation on the ground, each often in charge of a particular site or aspect (e.g. one Bronze might handle a specific march route, another might manage a protest camp) ⁴. Protesters usually won't interact with Gold or Silver directly (they're mostly in control rooms). However, the GSB system influences everything from how orders are given to how resources are allocated during the event.

Specialised units and roles: On the frontline, you may notice various types of officers:

- **Police Liaison Teams (PLTs):** Officers often in soft caps or light blue bibs, tasked with engaging protesters in dialogue. They aim to build rapport, share information (like police intentions or safety concerns), and gather a sense of the crowd's mood and any issues. *They are unarmed (aside from standard kit like radio and perhaps baton) and generally not involved in arrests or coercive tasks.* If you have questions or concerns, you can approach them, but remember they're still police and may report intelligence up the chain. PLTs were introduced after 2011 to improve trust; many activists appreciate their efforts, but some remain cautious about sharing too much information.
- **Evidence Gathering Teams (EGTs):** Officers (often wearing orange ID patches or harnesses) equipped with **video cameras** or **long-lens still cameras** ⁴¹. Their job is to film the event impartially: capturing potential offences, but also contextual footage (like baseline crowd behaviour and police actions). They might also record any **loudspeaker warnings** or instructions issued to protesters (to prove they were communicated) ¹. Assume that if you are at a

protest, you could be filmed by EGTs even if you personally aren't doing anything unlawful. The footage is used for investigations and possible prosecutions. Under data protection law, police should delete images of peaceful protesters not suspected of wrongdoing, but in practice deletion may not always happen immediately ¹.

- **Forward Intelligence Teams (FITs):** Plain-clothes or uniformed officers who focus on **identifying and monitoring individuals** in a crowd who might instigate unrest or are known organisers ¹. A FIT might approach individuals for conversation or observe from a distance. Their presence can feel intrusive, and activists often call them “police spotters”. Like PLTs, they gather information, but FITs are more focused on persons of interest, whereas PLTs engage broadly.
- **Public Order Units (PSUs) and the Territorial Support Group (TSG):** These are **riot-trained officers** in protective gear (Level 2 or Level 1 public order trained). A **Police Support Unit (PSU)** is a standard grouping for such deployments: typically **one Inspector, three Sergeants, and 18 Constables** who move and act together as a platoon-sized unit ⁴. They wear flame-retardant overalls (often dark blue), body armour, helmets with visors, and carry riot **shields and batons** for protection ⁴. You'll see them in **police vans** and on foot forming cordons or lines. They may perform **containment** (see Section 7) or move to disperse or arrest groups if needed. PSU officers in London's Met Police are from the TSG (Territorial Support Group); other forces have equivalents (sometimes called Public Order Teams or Support Groups) ⁴. While their appearance is intimidating, remember that **PSU officers are bound by force policy to use force only when necessary and proportionate** ¹. They typically act on command (e.g. to clear a road or protect a site). If you stay calm and follow lawful instructions, PSUs will generally not target you.
- **Mounted Police: Police horses** still feature in UK public order policing. Mounted officers, due to their height and visibility, can **survey large crowds and move quickly** to where needed. Their **psychological presence is significant**: people tend to move when a half-tonne horse comes through. Mounted units are often deployed to **nudge crowds along routes or hold cordons** because one horse and rider can control the space of many individuals. They might be used at the front of a march (to lead or clear the way) or at the back during dispersal to encourage stragglers to leave. While effective, horses can pose hazards if people are densely packed, there have been serious injuries when people collided with or spooked a police horse (for example, at a London protest in 2020

a horse bolted and an officer was unseated after colliding with traffic lights). If you see mounted police approaching: maintain distance, avoid sudden movements that might startle the animals, and follow officer instructions.

- **Dog Units:** Police with dogs are rarer at protests but may be present on standby, especially if there's a risk of significant disorder or in **crowd search operations** (dogs can detect drugs, etc.). Police dogs are usually held behind the lines unless needed (the sight of snarling dogs can escalate tensions). As an activist, you're unlikely to interact with them unless there's a severe breakdown of order. If you do, don't run (it may trigger pursuit instincts), back away slowly if safe.
- **Specialist teams:** Some protests involve **direct action tactics** that require special skills to handle:
 - **Protester Removal Teams (PRT):** These are officers with training and equipment to safely remove people locked on to devices (tubes, barrels) or high places (tripods, treehouses, etc.) ¹. They may use power tools, ropes, climbing gear, etc. PRTs (also called "Cutting Teams" or "Specialist Removal") are typically deployed only when needed, as their work is delicate and time-consuming. If you or others use lockons, expect a patient, slow removal; interfering with PRT officers could be charged as obstruction or worse.
 - **Armed police and counter-terrorism:** In general, firearms officers are *not* deployed to routine protests. They would appear only in extreme scenarios (e.g. credible threat of terrorism or severe violence). Similarly, if a protest is deemed at risk of a terrorist attack due to large crowds (e.g. a high-profile event), you might notice some armed units or additional screening measures. But for most normal protests, you won't encounter firearms units. (Note: the UK famously does *not* use **water cannon** for public order; the then-Mayor of London banned them after buying some in 2014, and the Home Office refuses their use in England & Wales.)
- **Other support roles:** Large operations include **medics** (officers or paramedics to treat injuries), **police negotiators** (if needed for sieges/ hostage situations in extremely rare protest scenarios), and liaison with ambulance and fire services (especially if there's a risk of accidents or injuries).



[4](#)

(Above: Typical composition of a public order Police Support Unit (PSU), and primary equipment carried by riot-trained officers.)

3.1 Police Equipment and Protest Infrastructure

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Public-order officers will wear reinforced **PSU helmets with visors**, fire-retardant coveralls, heavy-duty gloves, and **limb protectors** to reduce injury from thrown objects or close contact [4](#). They carry **long batons** (for crowd control) and often **round shields** (to fend off blows or missiles) [4](#). These shields are large (about 5.5 feet tall) and fairly heavy, so officers sometimes rest or stack them when not needed. Police also use **smaller shields** for specific tasks (like forming tighter cordons or protecting individual officers). UK police do **not routinely carry firearms** at protests; firearms units would only respond to an extreme, e.g. an ongoing terror attack or armed threat.

Incapacitant sprays & other tools: Most UK officers carry **PAVA or CS spray** (pepper spray) for personal protection; it's rarely used in crowd contexts but has been deployed in scuffles. **Taser** electric stun devices have been given to some PSU officers in recent years as a "less lethal" option [4](#), but their use in a crowd is also infrequent, a Taser is typically targeted at a specific aggressive individual (and firing one into a crowded scenario is risky). **Stun grenades ("flashbangs")** are not standard for public order policing in the UK, except possibly in counter-terror operations. The emphasis is on controlling by physical presence, negotiations, and targeted arrests, rather than using high risk weapons.

Vehicles and barriers: Police use **vans (carriers)** to move officers around quickly and as on-street holding bases for equipment and arrestees [4](#). They often park these vans strategically to block routes or protect certain areas (you might see police vans

stationed across a road – they serve both as a barrier and an on-site command post). For high-profile events, police or local authorities may erect **metal barriers** (“**Met barriers**”) or **fencing** to manage crowd flow and protect sensitive locations. You might find protest sites sectioned off by these chest-high steel barricades, with entry/exit points controlled by officers or stewards. These barriers are heavy-duty, stable when linked, and are designed to resist being pushed over. *If you encounter barriers*, respect them, forcing through or dismantling them will prompt a police response and could lead to charges (e.g. “obstruction” or criminal damage if you break them).

Riot police with protective gear and shields in Manchester (2008). Public domain image by Me677.



[5](#)

(Above: Officers in full public-order kit with shields and visored helmets – typical for managing high-risk situations. They form a protective line.)

4. Surveillance and Privacy at Protests

4.1 Surveillance Overview

CCTV: The UK's use of **closed-circuit television cameras** is pervasive. Britain has one of the highest densities of CCTV in the world, by some estimates, London has around **500,000 to 700,000 cameras across public and private networks (roughly 1 for every 15-20 people)**. Many protest sites (city centres, government buildings, monuments, etc.) are under continuous CCTV observation. Even if you don't see obvious cameras, assume you are **likely being recorded** by something, somewhere in the vicinity at any given time. After a demonstration, police can obtain CCTV footage to identify individuals (for example, many arrests after the 2011 England riots were made by painstakingly analysing CCTV and media videos).

Overt police video: In addition to static CCTV, police deploy their own cameras at protests:

- **Body-worn video:** Frontline officers and PLOs often have small video cameras on their uniforms. Metropolitan Police policy is to record “where it is lawful and necessary” – for example, when giving a warning or carrying out a search or arrest. Typically, they will announce “You are being recorded on body-worn video”. Bodycam footage is later saved as evidence or retained for a period in case of complaints.
- **Drones & Helicopters:** Police may use **drones** for aerial surveillance, particularly at large outdoor events (concerts, protests, sports). Drones provide a bird's eye view, helping police gauge crowd size and movement. They also record high-resolution video from above. Drones should be identifiable (often a small quadcopter hovering overhead). Less frequently, a **police helicopter** might orbit a major demonstration, serving similar purposes; it's costly, so mostly reserved for when needed (also used for traffic management in large marches).

ANPR and travel surveillance: cameras along roads will capture the license plates of vehicles traveling to and from protest areas. If you drive or are in a hired coach, your vehicle's details may be logged. ANPR data can later be used to trace who was present (for instance, identifying convoys of minibuses or recurrent vehicles). We cover how to mitigate this in Section 6.

Cellphone monitoring: When your phone is powered on, it connects periodically to cell masts, creating data about your location. Police can obtain call records and cell

site data after the fact with appropriate legal process (under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016). They also have hardware called **IMSI catchers** that act like fake cell towers, tricking phones into connecting and revealing their unique IDs. While police don't confirm using these at protests, it's wise to assume the potential. The simplest protection is to **limit your phone use**: e.g. turn it off or on airplane mode when not needed (see Section 5.2), or use a secondary phone. **Note**: emergency calls (999/112) will still connect even if your phone is locked or airplane mode is off; but if totally off, obviously you can't make or receive calls.

Online monitoring (OSINT): Police and intelligence agencies extensively monitor **social media** around protests. Open platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram are scoured for plans, live streams, and post-event boasting of illegal actions. There have been instances where activists' posts were used as evidence for arrests or where private companies forwarded activists' social posts to police (as in a case involving anti-fracking protesters in Lancashire). **Tip**: If you're active on social media, consider adjusting privacy settings, avoiding sharing personally identifying information about your protest plans publicly, and be careful about posting photos/videos that clearly show fellow protesters' faces without consent (for both privacy and solidarity reasons – we cover this in Section 7.3).

Facial recognition: A particularly contentious form of surveillance is **Live Facial Recognition (LFR)** technology (see expanding below).

4.2 Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) and Your Privacy

How it works: Facial recognition software scans video feeds (from CCTV or bodycams) to **automatically identify faces** by comparing them to a set of known images. Police might, for example, use FRT to spot **wanted suspects or persons with banning orders** showing up at a protest. In the UK, LFR has been trialled by police in some public settings, but its routine use is still limited and controversial. If LFR is being used at a demonstration, police policy is to display **clear signage** notifying the public.

Accuracy and bias issues: Many FRT systems historically have had **higher error rates for women and ethnic minorities** (due to training data biases) ⁴. This raises the risk of misidentifying individuals from those groups.

Authorities like the UK's Information Commissioner have warned that blanket face-scanning of crowds could be unlawful if done without strong justification, especially given these biases (ICO, 2021).

Legal status: There's no specific UK law just for police FRT yet, but **its use is governed by data protection and human rights principles**. A landmark 2020 Court of Appeal case (*Bridges v South Wales Police*) held that earlier police use of LFR was unlawful due to lack of clear guidance on who could be on watchlists and how to avoid unjust bias ¹. Police have since updated their policies, but civil liberty groups are still challenging the practice in court (as of 2026). Under pressure from UK and EU regulators, private companies like Clearview AI (which scraped social media photos to create a face database) have been fined and ordered to stop using UK individuals' data ³². Meanwhile, at the legislative level, the EU is moving to ban real-time police facial recognition in public (via its upcoming AI Act), reflecting global unease about this tech's implications.

Protecting yourself: If you're uncomfortable with facial recognition:

- **Look for signs:** Pay attention to event signage or announcements about surveillance. If you see "Facial recognition in use by police" signs or vans with conspicuous cameras, you may decide to adjust your participation (e.g. avoid the core area).
- **Face coverings:** Wearing a **mask, scarf, or other face cover** is an effective way to defeat FRT. Masks have become common since COVID-19 and also help with pollution – you don't need to justify wearing one. **However, be aware:** if police have a section 60AA order in place (see Section 2.2) requiring removal of face coverings, you must comply or risk arrest. In any event (no pun intended), a generic face mask significantly reduces chances of automated identification. Some activists also use designs like **makeup, hats, or reflective materials** to confuse cameras (with varying success).
- **Minimal digital footprint:** Avoid putting your face in unneeded photos or videos. Perhaps ask friends not to tag you on social media posts from the protest. Future employers or adversaries might search for your images too.

Overall privacy outlook: Accept that you **can't eliminate surveillance**, but you can **minimise it** and demand better oversight. For instance, you have the right to submit a **Subject Access Request (SAR)** to police to inquire if your image or data were processed (see Section 9 for how). You can also support campaigns calling for **clear laws** limiting intrusive tech. The UK is grappling with the trade-off: policing agencies argue they need modern tools to identify violent offenders, whereas rights groups caution that pervasive surveillance may deter free expression ¹. As an activist,

staying informed and using simple privacy measures empowers you to protest without unnecessary self-exposure and to hold authorities accountable.

5. Preparing & Planning for a Safe, Lawful Protest

5.1 Before the Protest: Plan & Assess Risks

Know the context: Start by learning about the **specifics of your event**. Is it a static rally or a moving march? How big is the expected turnout? Who might oppose the event? Will media be present? Understanding this helps gauge possible risks:

- **Event type & scale:** Larger, more disruptive actions (like city-wide marches or direct actions) tend to draw bigger police operations than small local vigils. For example, a march through busy roads in London will automatically involve a major policing plan (road closures, liaison officers, and possibly PSUs).
- **Location & route:** Certain sites (Parliament, oil infrastructure, airports, central city squares) have significant **security concerns**. Protests at or near such sites are more likely to face restrictions or visible policing. If your protest is at a potentially sensitive spot (like an army base), check if any **injunctions or bylaws** might apply.
- **Other events & groups:** Consider whether **counter-protesters** or bystanders might create conflict (e.g. far-right groups showing up at a refugee solidarity march). The police often try to **separate rival groups**, perhaps by funnelling them along different routes or cordoning one group at a distance. If you anticipate opposition, prepare strategies to keep participants safe and calm (see Section 8).
- **Legal status:** Determine if your event requires **advance notice** (see Section 2.2). If yes, ensure it's submitted with accurate details. Be aware of any conditions or restrictions the police give you in advance (they might issue a letter or talk to you specifying do's and don'ts).

Gather intel (legally): Knowledge is power. Keep an eye on:

- **Police statements or briefings:** Sometimes police issue press releases or social media info ahead of big protests (e.g. "We will have a zero-tolerance approach to disorder" or "Public should expect road closures on X street from 1pm to 4pm"). If available, these are clues to how they plan to respond and any specific warnings.
- **Local community sentiment:** Are local residents supportive or hostile?

For instance, if your protest inconvenience is minimal or aligned with local interests, less friction is expected. Conversely, a demonstration that blocks a major shopping street on a Saturday might attract anger from the public. This can heighten tension and escalate risk of confrontation. It's useful to incorporate community outreach even basic leafleting or social media posts to explain your cause and expected disruption can help win understanding.

Roles within your group: Effective protest planning often means assigning **specific roles**:

- **Organisers/Marshals/Stewards:** If you have a formal organiser, that person is likely the police's point of contact and legally responsible in part. **Stewards or marshals** are volunteers who help manage the crowd – particularly in marches, they keep people on route, liaise with police or among sub-groups, aid anyone in trouble, etc. Stewards should be identifiable (e.g. wearing hi-vis vests). If your protest is big, recruit and brief enough stewards to cover front, middle, back, and flanks of the crowd. They don't have to do the police's job, but they can quell minor issues before they become big (like isolating someone getting aggressive, or preventing accidental traffic conflicts). Police appreciate well-stewarded protests and are less likely to intervene if they see stewards actively managing things.
- **Legal observers:** Consider arranging independent **legal observers (LOs)** to monitor police behaviour and assist protesters. Groups like **Green & Black Cross (GBC)**, **Netpol**, or the **Legal Defence & Monitoring Group** train volunteers for this. LOs typically wear distinctive bibs (often bright green) and record details of incidents, arrests, and police use of force. They do not participate in the protest itself but provide crucial evidence if something goes wrong and ensure protesters have advice (like handing out "bust cards" with solicitor numbers). As an organiser, you can reach out to these groups in advance to request LOs at your event.
- **Media liaison:** If you expect press interest or plan to communicate publicly, designate a **media spokesperson**. This person should be briefed on key messages and ground rules (e.g. not revealing internal plans or identities of people who don't wish to be public). Having a prepared statement can help steer coverage and avoid misquotes. On contentious issues, a good spokesperson can defend your cause effectively while deescalating negative narratives.

Personal readiness: For each individual:

- **Essentials:** Dress for the weather (comfortable shoes; layered clothing; waterproof if rain predicted). Avoid wearing things that can easily get snagged or pulled. If you wear contact lenses, consider glasses instead if there's risk of smoke/irritants (in case of tear gas, glasses offer some limited protection whereas contacts can trap chemical irritants).
- **Supplies:** Carry drinking water, snacks, and any personal medication you need. A small first aid kit (plasters, bandage) can be useful, though professional medics usually handle serious injuries.
- **Personal ID and money:** *You are not required to carry ID in UK.* However, if you're concerned about the possibility of arrest, having some ID on you can speed up processing at a police station (lack of ID might mean you're held longer until verified). It's your call, some prefer not to carry ID to delay identification. Also have some cash or a charged travel card for transit and a fully charged phone.
- **Emergency contacts:** Write down (in a **notebook or on your arm in marker**) important numbers: a **solicitor or legal hotline** (there are often local ones for protests e.g. GBC's number in London), and a **trusted friend/relative**. Mobile batteries die and phones can be lost or confiscated, so memorisation or writing them down is critical.
- **Signage and gear:** If you're bringing banners or flags, note that **wooden sticks thicker than 1" (2.5 cm)** could be considered potential weapons. Use lightweight poles (or rolled cardboard tubes) for banners if possible. Don't bring objects that can be misinterpreted as weapons, e.g. metal tools (unless you actually need them and are prepared to explain why, but it's better not to bring them at all). *Tip:* If you want to hand out leaflets to the public about your cause, check any local leafleting regulations; some areas require permission to distribute printed material to avoid litter.

5.2 Communication & Digital Hygiene

Secure communications: It's wise to use **encrypted messaging apps** for planning the protest. **Signal** is a popular choice, as it offers end-to-end encryption and features like disappearing messages. Create a group chat for organisers and participants, and maybe a broadcast list for updates. Avoid open social media or unencrypted channels for sensitive details (like exact meeting points that aren't public, personal details of organisers, etc.).

Segregate your digital life: If possible, use a dedicated "**activist**" phone or accounts separate from your personal ones. Buying a cheap pre-paid SIM for use

during protests (and registering it with minimal personal info) can provide a layer of anonymity [2](#). If you have an old smartphone, you can use that with the new SIM, saving your main phone from potential confiscation or monitoring. Even a basic feature phone can suffice for calls or SMS to coordinate.

Social media caution: Social media is a double-edged sword, great for mobilising support and sharing your story, but also a treasure trove for watchers. **During the protest**, think twice before live-streaming or posting photos that show illegal acts or clearly identify participants. Police and others can watch live streams in real time; in one case, police reportedly used livestreams to decide when to move in on a protest camp. If you do use social media:

- Don't inadvertently give away your location to adversaries (turn off geotagging on posts).
- Use privacy settings: consider posting updates to a closed group rather than publicly.
- Blur faces or identifying details of others if you share images (free apps can do this).
- Remember anything public can be archived by anyone (and often is, by law enforcement or media).

Counter-surveillance: Some activists use tools to detect surveillance (like apps that alert about IMSI catchers or known camera locations). If you're very technically adept, that's an option, but for most people it's simpler to assume you're under observation and act accordingly. If privacy is a serious concern (e.g. you fear doxxing or state reprisals), consider engaging in **legal support roles** (like remote research, fundraising, writing) instead of on-the-ground action. Everyone can contribute to a cause in different ways.

6. Getting There: Travelling to and Arriving at a Protest

How you travel to a protest can affect your experience and privacy. Below are some considerations for various **modes of transport** and tips to minimise risks and intrusion:

Walking or Cycling: If you live sufficiently close, going on foot or by bike is the simplest option. It's healthy, cheap, and **leaves minimal data trails** (no tickets or ANPR logs – though you'll likely still be seen on CCTV in public). Traveling on foot in a group may draw attention, so you could arrange to meet friends near the event rather than all arriving as a conspicuous group.

Public Transport (Buses, Trams, Trains, Tubes): Public transit is efficient and merges you with other passengers. Downsides:

- **Ticket records:** Using an electronic pass or card (like an Oyster or contactless card in London) logs your travel times and stations. If concerned, you can pay with cash where available (many city buses are now cashless though). For trains, you can buy a paper ticket with cash. Remember, if police suspect you've committed an offence, they can request these records from the transport operator via a Production Order.
- **CCTV:** Stations, platforms, and vehicles (buses, Underground trains) have surveillance cameras. By taking public transit, you're likely on camera. But given how many people use these systems daily, footage of you might not stand out unless you're already a person of interest.
- **Police presence:** For major events, expect to see police at transport hubs. For example, for big London protests, officers sometimes wait at train stations to monitor inbound groups, they might even hand out leaflets about the law or use stop & search powers if they suspect troublemakers among arrivals. To avoid undue hassle, keep any protest signs or gear inside bags until you reach the assembly point, and remain respectful if approached. If you're carrying something unusual (say, a prop for street theatre that could be misconstrued), be ready to explain its purpose calmly.

Private Car or Minibus: Driving gives you control over your schedule and route, but it's **highly visible to authorities**:

- **ANPR tracking:** As mentioned, **ANPR cameras** will log your car's plate repeatedly along highways and urban roads. Police can retrospectively use

these logs to see which vehicles converged on a protest area and where they came from. If they have advanced intel on a protest, they might monitor motorway routes or set up mobile ANPR to flag vehicles associated with known activists or groups (e.g. vans historically used in protests).

- **Vehicle stops:** There have been instances of vans or coaches carrying protesters being stopped by police en route. Legally, vehicles can be stopped at random under the Road Traffic Act, and occupants can be asked basic questions or even searched if there's a relevant suspicion (e.g. if they think you're carrying lock-on equipment – see Section 2.3 on new search powers). To reduce chances of a stop, ensure things like your vehicle's **MOT and insurance are in order**, this denies an easy pretext. If you're driving a bunch of people, discourage actions like loud chanting or showing provocative flags out the windows while still on the highway; it might attract unwanted attention.
- **Parking & departure:** Plan where to park so you can leave smoothly without being stuck in roadblocks or a "kettle". Consider parking a little distance away and walking to the site. This also keeps your car out of photos and away from potential damage if things get chaotic.

Taxis & Ride-hailing: Services like Uber record your journey details (account, time, pick-up/drop-off), a clear personal log. Traditional taxis, if paid in cash, leave less of a digital trail, but you're still subject to ANPR and possibly CCTV at drop-off points. If privacy is a priority, consider ending your taxi ride a short walk from the event rather than being dropped right at the epicentre.

General travel safety: However you travel:

- **Travel with others if you can.** Not only is it more fun, but it's safer (and sometimes cheaper). Groups are less likely to be singled out. If you're alone, especially when heading back, stick to well-lit public routes and avoid straying into desolate areas or the territory of hostile counterprotesters.
 - **Have a "Plan B":** Sometimes things go awry e.g. train stations may close due to overcrowding, or your intended route might be blocked. Carry a map or charged phone to navigate alternative ways home. Know the last train or bus times to avoid being stranded.
 - **Stay in touch:** Let someone (who isn't at the protest) know your travel plans in broad terms. That way, if you're significantly overdue, they can check on you.
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7. During the Protest: Staying Safe and Engaged

7.1 Safety in the Crowd

Situational awareness: Large gatherings can be unpredictable. Upon arrival, identify key features: Where are the police located? Where are the exits and side streets? Do you see medics, stewards or legal observers? Knowing these can be crucial if problems arise. Keep an eye on the crowd's mood. If you sense tension or see disputes, consider moving away from potential flashpoints (like the front of a contentious police line or where counter-protesters are hollering).

Follow stewards' and organisers' instructions: Many protests have a particular plan (e.g. scheduled speakers or a route to march). The organisers' goal is usually to have the event run without anyone getting hurt or arrested. If they ask participants to, say, **stay on the pavement** or **keep moving** to prevent blockage, try to comply, it's probably to prevent police from justifying an intervention. If you disagree with organisers' requests (for example, if some want to escalate the action in ways that worry you), weigh the potential consequences carefully. It might be safer to step aside than go along with something you're not comfortable with.

Interacting with the public: If passers-by or opponents shout at you, it's often better to **not engage** beyond peaceful discussion. Do not let individuals provoke you into rash action that could be used to discredit the protest or prompt police to intervene. If someone is aggressive, try to defuse (or let a steward/police handle it). The law protects you from harassment; you can report extreme abuse or threats to on-site officers.

Kettling: Be aware of the possibility of **containment** where police form a cordon around a group and keep them confined. In the past, entire crowds have been held in place for hours (it's legal if used proportionately to prevent disorder). If you suspect a kettle is starting (police forming lines around you), you can try to avoid being caught by *staying at the edge of the crowd* or leaving the area promptly. But note: sometimes containment is unavoidable if police commit to it quickly. If you are contained:

- Stay calm and look after each other. Note that you're **not under arrest** when kettled (unless told otherwise), just temporarily detained.
- You can ask to leave if you have a pressing reason (needing medical help, etc.). Police *might* let vulnerable people (minors, medics, journalists) out earlier.

- Use this time to share info with others inside (legal number, water, etc.) and write down any misconduct you witness while contained. Eventually, you will be released, often after being directed to give your name and address or be photographed (police sometimes do this to those leaving a containment, giving false details in that situation could be an offence). At that point, it's usually best to comply and exit.

Use of force: UK police are bound by law to use **only proportionate force when necessary** (as per Criminal Law Act 1967 and common law). In protests, physical force is supposed to be a last resort. Nonetheless, **use of force incidents can occur**, e.g. if trying to push through a police line or resist arrest. If you see police gearing up (donning helmets, raising batons) or if loud warnings are given (like “Disperse or force may be used”), it's a red flag that confrontation might be imminent. To avoid injury:

- Don't put yourself at the front line of a physical clash unless you're prepared for the consequences (both physically and legally).
- If you find yourself there inadvertently, raise your hands to show nonaggression, back off slowly, and move to a less contested space.
- If you are physically struck or pushed by police, try to keep your balance and move with the momentum to avoid falling, and regroup a bit further away. Helping each other up and out of danger is important.
- *Remember:* any attempt to strike back at an officer is likely to result in more force and serious charges.

De-escalation

Keep it peaceful: One reckless act by a few can trigger a disproportionate response affecting many. If you see tensions rising, encourage calm. Film from a distance, not up in faces.

Your choices matter

You control your level of risk. It's okay to leave if things get heated beyond your comfort. Not everyone must stay until the end, leaving early can be a strategic decision for personal safety.

7.2 Managing Counter-Protests and Opposition

Facing a hostile crowd: At times, protesters encounter not just the police but also **belligerent opposition groups** (for example, far left counterdemonstrators such as

Antifa or Stand Up To Racism, or local residents angry about disruption). Such situations can be volatile. Here's how to handle them:

- **Physical separation:** The police will generally place physical separation (lines of officers, vehicles, barriers) between rival groups. *Do not try to break through these lines.* They're there to keep you safe and to prevent fights. Engage with the other group **only verbally**, if at all, and from a safe distance. Hurling objects or physically challenging them will nullify your "peaceful" status and invite police action.
- **No provocation:** Don't taunt or provoke the opposition. Responding to slurs with slurs, or throwing things, can escalate a war of words into actual violence. It also undermines public sympathy for your cause. Maintain the moral high ground, use chants or signs to convey your message instead of personal insults.
- **Buddy up and watch out:** Stick with your buddies if moving near counterprotesters. Isolate any agitators in your own ranks who may try to incite brawls. Document any **attacks or police inaction**, if the other side gets violent and you feel police aren't intervening sufficiently, calmly call attention to it (e.g. shout to police for help, film it clearly from a safe position).
- **If things go wrong:** In worst cases, police may lose control, and direct clashes can occur. If you find yourself in such a situation (e.g. two rival groups breaking through lines and scuffling), the priority is **personal safety**. Try to move away from the melee. If you can't, make yourself less of a target (avoid wearing obvious symbols, cover your face to avoid recognition, don't get isolated). As soon as you can exit, do so and find others or a place of shelter until order is restored.
- **Legal ramifications:** Remember, being in a fight, even if you think you're defending your side, can lead to serious criminal charges (affray, assault, etc.). Law enforcement will likely arrest people from both sides if a fight happens. It can be hard to prove self-defense in a chaotic mass brawl, so your best bet is **not to get into one** if it can be helped.

Police approach to opposition: Police have a duty to allow **peaceful counterprotests** just as much as your protest. They will usually keep equal distance, trying not to appear to favour one side. However, if one side clearly turns violent, police focus will shift to containing that threat. Don't be surprised if police direct more attention to one group than the other based on who's causing harm. Your

goal should be to ensure it's obvious that your group is **peaceful and law-abiding**, so any crackdowns target the aggressors, not you.

7.3 Documenting the Protest

Filming/photography: You have the right to film/photograph the police and the events at a protest. Doing so can create a vital record. That said, some police may object or ask you to stop, as long as you're not obstructing them, **you are allowed to continue**. A polite response is "I'm exercising my lawful right to film in a public place." Filming from slightly back rather than right in officers' faces can reduce friction. If asked for a copy of your footage by police, you're not obliged to provide it on the spot, they'd need to use formal legal channels (e.g. a court production order).

Be aware of others' privacy: Blurring faces of fellow protesters in any footage you share can help protect them. And be cautious: if you film other protesters committing unlawful acts and share it publicly, that could be used as evidence against them.

Interactions with journalists: Many protests attract reporters. They may interview you or film you. It's up to you if you want to speak. If you do:

- Stay on message about your cause; don't get sidetracked into hypotheticals or off-the-cuff remarks that could be taken out of context.
- If you're worried about repercussions (like at work or from police), you can decline being named or identified.
- Remember that journalists can be allies in amplifying your message but they are not advocates, they have their own job to do, which might include getting a "good story" even if it casts your protest negatively.

Digital safe storage: After the protest, promptly back up important photos or videos (especially if they show contested incidents). Store copies with a trusted person or in the cloud. This ensures evidence is preserved if your device gets lost or confiscated later. UK police guidelines say they shouldn't delete personal recordings, but there have been rare reports of such incidents, so better to have duplicates.

8. Ending the Protest – Dispersal & Aftercare

8.1 Dispersal and Leaving the Area

How protests end: Many protests have a natural end (speakers finish, or a scheduled end time is reached). Organisers often announce the conclusion and encourage people to head home. If the protest has a carnival-like atmosphere, people may mill around even after it's officially over. Usually this winds down peacefully. Sometimes, though, a lingering crowd can turn into something else (e.g. a sit-in, or a smaller breakaway march). Police become less tolerant of unsanctioned gatherings post-event and may declare an **unlawful assembly** or use **dispersal powers** under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (a 'Section 35 dispersal' order) to clear remaining people. If you hear an order like "This is an unlawful assembly, you are required to disperse," it's time to leave promptly or risk arrest.

Avoiding trouble on departure: Many protest-related arrests happen at the tail end, when numbers have dwindled and frustration might be high. To avoid trouble:

- **Stick with a group when leaving.** This deters harassment from opponents or heavy-handed treatment.
- **Have an exit plan:** Know your route away, and a rallying point somewhere safe to regroup if you get separated or a **"debrief" meeting spot** if you intend to evaluate how it went. This can also help account for everyone (ensuring nobody was left behind in a kettle or in custody).
- **Public transport timing:** If everyone leaves at once, stations can be overwhelmed, sometimes closed temporarily by police or staff. You might hang back until initial crowds clear, but weigh that against the risk of lingering (especially if the police have signalled they want the crowd to disperse). If you hear that station entries are restricted, maybe walk to a station a bit further away.
- **Be mindful of policing operations:** After big protests, police sometimes follow small groups to ensure they disperse. There could also be **stop & searches** under leftover Section 60 orders as you leave. Keep your cool if stopped (remember your rights; ask the reason). It's often a final check to ensure nothing escalates post-protest.

Dealing with Arrests: If a friend is arrested, get the name of the police station they're taken to. In London, arrestees generally go to one of several central custody

suites (some are 24-hour, like Brixton, Lewisham, etc.). Use the legal support number if you have it they often track detainees. You may have to wait a few hours or more for their release (often on bail or with no charge). Have patience; do not try to enter the police station en masse as a protest, it can be misinterpreted as an unlawful assembly. One or two support people at the station are fine.

8.2 Post-Protest Follow-up and Accountability

Recording your experience: As soon as you can after the event, **write down anything notable** that occurred (especially interactions with police or counter-protesters). These notes can serve as evidence or be used in any complaint. If you feel you've been mistreated (e.g. you believe you were unlawfully searched or you saw excessive force), you can file a complaint with the police Professional Standards Department or the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). You have up to 1 year (or more, in some cases) to file a complaint, but doing it sooner is usually better for evidence and memory.

Subject Access Requests (data transparency): Anyone can request their personal data from public bodies. After a protest, a SAR to the police can reveal if they hold data on you, such as images, bodycam footage, or intelligence notes ¹. To do this, contact the force (most have an online form on their website). Provide identifiers (name, date of birth, event, etc.). Don't expect dramatic results – often they reply that either they have no data or give a generic text citing legal exemptions. But occasionally, SARs have uncovered surprising records (e.g. activists found their photo and details on police databases after peaceful protests; one case “Catt v UK” even went to the European Court over retention of such data about an elderly activist ¹). Even if you get nothing, making SARs asserts your data rights and puts the police on notice that people care.

Ongoing legal support: If you're charged with an offence, immediately seek legal advice from a solicitor experienced in protest law. Get in touch with support campaigns e.g. GBC or similar networks often coordinate defendant support, which can help with legal representation and moral support.

Self-care: Don't neglect the **emotional impact** of a heavy protest. It's normal to feel a comedown or anxiety afterwards. Debrief with friends or comrades: What went well? What was challenging? Knowing others share your feelings can be reassuring. Some activist groups set up *post-protest support circles* or offer contact info for counseling if needed. Physical rest is also important – protests can be physically

taxing, so after a long day ensure you get hydration, nutrition, and any needed medical check-ups (especially if you got injured or are feeling unwell).

Continuing the cause: Protests are often part of larger campaigns. After the event, maintain momentum: follow up with attendees (thank them, gather feedback, keep them engaged for future actions), update any petition or social media pages with photos or outcomes, and plan the next steps (e.g. meetings with officials if that was an aim, or more actions). Use the attention garnered to promote your message constructively (maybe write an op-ed or do a public Q&A). Effective activism combines the energy of the streets with sustained community organising and advocacy.

9. References & Further Resources

(All sources are evidence-based and reflect UK context. Legal references are up to date as of June 2026.)

Key Documents & Laws:

- Human Rights Act 1998, **Articles 10 & 11** (peaceful assembly and expression rights).
- Public Order Act 1986, Sections **11–14** (notice requirements and police conditions) [1](#).
- Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, Section **60** (suspicion-less stop and search); Section **60AA** (face covering removal power).
- Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Act 2022 (notably broadened protest conditions power and penalties) [1](#).
- Public Order Act 2023 (created new protest offences: **locking-on**, etc., and SDPOs) [1](#).
- Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (imposes rules on retention of biometric data, relevant to photos of protesters).
- **Bridges v South Wales Police** [2020] EWCA Civ 1058 – landmark ruling on police use of **facial recognition** (held that usage lacked adequate legal framework) [1](#).
- **R (Ziegler) v DPP** [2021] UKSC 23 – Supreme Court case affirming proportionate interference test for convicting peaceful highway obstruction in a

protest context (i.e., minor disruption may be lawful expression; each case needs balancing).

- **Catt v UK** [2019] ECHR – European Court case on retention of data about a peaceful protester; found a violation of privacy as police kept records without ongoing need.

Guidance & Reports:

- **NPCC Protest Operational Advice Document (2020)** – internal police manual on protest policing (partially summarised above) ¹. Emphasises rights balance, liaison, and targeted enforcement.
- **HMICFRS (2021)** – “Getting the balance right?” report on how police manage protests; commented on new restrictions and their proportional use.
- **House of Commons Library (2026)** – “*Police powers: Protests*”, by W. Downs, covers all recent legislative changes and debates.
- **Liberty (2023)** – “Your Rights: Protesting” (online guide) – clear breakdown of what’s lawful and what to expect.
- **Netpol (2019)** – “*Protecting Protest – protest policing report*”, includes insight on surveillance and impact on communities.
- **ICO Opinion (2022)** – UK Information Commissioner’s recommendations on police use of Live Facial Recognition (LFR), highlighting privacy and discrimination issues.
- **Amnesty International (2021)** – “Netpol Police and Protest Report” – documenting protest restrictions and calling for reforms.
- **Green & Black Cross** – Provide legal observer training and free protest support resources, including bust card templates.

(Stay informed: Laws and policies can change. Always double-check if there have been legal updates or high-profile incidents since this publication date and consider joining networks or mailing lists of civil liberties groups to stay up to date on protest rights and restrictions.)