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Union flag dispute: Cost of policing protests exceeds £15m

The cost of policing the union flag protests in Northern Ireland over the past nine weeks has exceeded £15m, the PSNI chief constable has confirmed.

Matt Baggott revealed the latest figure at a meeting of the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) on Thursday.

The amount is twice that of the £7m it cost to police the six month period from April to September last year - the height of the 2012 marching season.

The flag protest bill includes duty pay and overtime pay to officers and staff.

The protests began on 3 December, when Belfast City Council voted to restrict the number of days the flag is flown at the city hall.

The majority have passed without incident but some have ended in riots.

Addressing a public meeting of the NIPB, Mr Baggott said the protests and the disorder associated with them had resulted in a "high cost to policing both in terms of human cost and financial costs".

The chief constable told the board 146 police officers had been injured in the violence to date, although "fortunately none seriously," he added.

"Serious violence has, in the main, been contained in a few locations thanks to the courage and professionalism of my colleagues," Mr Baggott said.

Briefing the board on the details of the operation, the chief constable said his officers were holding a fragile line between peace and disorder.

"I do believe that we have played a very full and thoughtful part in ensuring that a very tense and volatile situation did not and does not spiral out of control or compromise the future.

"Our response to the situation has drawn both praise and criticism. We've been accused of being too soft, we've been accused of being too brutal. What I believe we have been is utterly consistent in our approach for meeting our duties," Mr Baggott said.

His colleague, Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris told board members that there was a "sense of urgency" that the flags dispute should be resolved before the start of this year's marching season, which is now just weeks away.

ACC Harris said: "The intensity of this has been reflected in the cost undoubtedly, £15.6m for two months. It has been incredibly labour and resource intensive for us as we work very hard to keep communities safe.

"You can compare that against the cost of just over £7m for the six months between April and September last year."

He told board members: "The marching season doesn't start in June, the marching season starts on 23 February. This will be upon us very, very quickly."

In addition to the cost of policing the protests over the past two months, business leaders have also complained that they lost millions in trade because the demonstrations deterred people from coming into the city.

Last month, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) estimated that the flag protests had cost Belfast businesses up to £15m in lost revenue.

In response, the Backin' Belfast campaign was launched to encourage more people to shop and socialise in central Belfast.

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