

Response from Kensington and Chelsea Council to the draft Police and Crime Plan 2013 – 2017

Introduction

The Council welcomes the four-year plan with the ambitious 20:20:20 approach to reducing key crimes, improving public confidence and cutting costs. The following comments are designed to support MOPAC in finalising the plan to make sure that it reaches these targets.

Mission and priorities

The Council agrees with the mission but thinks there should be a more explicit reference to tackling antisocial behaviour (ASB) together with a challenging target to reduce it. Residents in Kensington and Chelsea tell us that they are as worried about ASB as about crime and it should therefore feature in police priorities.

Reforming the policing model and keeping Police numbers high

The commitment to keeping Police Officer numbers high at a time when the budget is being reduced significantly is to be welcomed. Likewise the Council supports the efforts to move more officers into safer neighbourhoods policing.

The Council does, however, have concerns about whether the more flexible approach proposed for safer neighbourhood policing will cut across the valuable work that has been done at ward level with dedicated teams comprising one sergeant, two police constables and three Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs).

It is understood that under the new plans each Ward will have a named Sgt (who may be shared with another ward), one PC and one PCSO. Given shift patterns, and the likelihood of absences for various reasons, this is likely to leave wards without a dedicated local Police presence for much of the time. Although the Cluster Inspectors responsible for 5 or 6 wards will have other PCs and PCSOs at their disposal to deploy flexibly across their areas, this Council thinks that this reduction of a regular uniformed visible presence in each ward will have an adverse affect on residents' feelings of safety and re-assurance. This was one of the issues brought up by local residents at the MOPAC meeting in Chelsea on 31 January 2013.

It is therefore suggested that MOPAC should review the proposed balance between dedicated and flexible staff within Clusters so that there are more ring-fenced, Ward officers. As is the case now, there could continue to be some limited flexibility, to move ring-fenced ward staff to work in other parts of the Cluster to undertake special operations and respond to major fluctuations in demand.

The Council welcomes the plan to increase the number of police officers allocated to the Borough to 523 by 2015. It is recognised however that there are not enough PCs within the MPS at the moment to move quickly to this position. The Council is concerned that the number of police officers in post in Kensington and Chelsea, which is already around 30 Officers below establishment, will fall in the intervening years before rising again in 2015.

The Council would have major concerns if there was any prospect of the number of officers in Kensington and Chelsea falling from the current level, even for a short time, as this would be very much against the spirit of the plan which refers to extra Bobbies on the beat rather than less. It would help to allay our concerns if there was a commitment to make sure that no boroughs get their increase until all boroughs are at their 2011 establishment levels.

The plan is silent on the reductions in police staff and PCSOs in each Borough. It would help to complete the picture of change if this information were provided in the final plan, e.g. in Kensington and Chelsea we are set to lose 18 PCSOs.

Looking ahead it is recognised that a new, sophisticated formula was used to determine the Borough allocation of police officers. When new versions of the previous Resource Allocation Formula were developed in the past there were useful consultation exercises with local authorities which helped to refine the finished product. There wasn't any such consultation this time.

The plan is silent on the formula and it would improve transparency to have a paragraph or two in the final plan on the basic principles applied. The Council would also welcome an assurance that when the new formula is reviewed local authorities will be consulted. In the meantime could you please let Council have details of the methodology used?

The Council welcomes the commitment to retain Borough Commanders and the Council is firmly of the view that they should be at Chief Superintendent level. If there is any proposal to change this in future it would be helpful to get an assurance that local authorities will be consulted before a decision is made.

The Council also considers that Borough Commanders should be given sufficient discretion to allocate resources according to local circumstances and it would be helpful to be explicit about this in the final version of the plan.

'Bobbies before buildings' is to be welcomed but the benefits could be lessened if any of the current safer neighbourhood bases were to be closed. Residents tell us that they are reassured by having these bases in their neighbourhoods and they also cut down on the time officers spend travelling to and from the ward if they are based elsewhere. This was one of the issues brought up by local residents at the MOPAC meeting in Chelsea on 31 January 2013.

It will be important to review in the future the reduced supervisory and management resources to make sure that the bobbies are being effectively deployed.

Front Counters

The Council acknowledges the scale of the savings that the Police must make and agrees that with the introduction of new means of communication it is time to review the spread of station front counters across London and their opening hours. There has been some consultation on this matter but we had expected to receive information on the following issues which would enable us to consider the proposals for Kensington and Chelsea in a London wide context

- Where existing stations are located in west and central London

- Across London what are the main reasons for personal callers at police stations and which of these can be undertaken just as effectively by other means
- How is the need for personal visits to police stations in London likely to change over the next three years
- What does this mean for the number of London police stations in the future and how many hours a front desk needs to be open
- How many front counters are needed per head of population across London and what standard should be put in place for the distance anyone has to travel to a front counter (i) during office hours and (ii) out of office hours

The plan does not mention these issues and therefore it looks like the proposed changes have been driven by local considerations rather than a coherent London wide approach. The final plan would be enhanced by demonstrating that the above factors have been taken into account and a London wide approach has been adopted which recognises that local residents are not concerned about borough boundaries when considering where their nearest police station front counter is.

The Council also thinks it is very important to demonstrate that all the Police Officers who are freed up from having to run public counters are returned to front line policing in the borough where they are based. It would therefore be helpful to refer to the total number of police officers returned to the front line through this change in the final plan.

In relation to the specific proposals for Kensington and Chelsea, the Council recognises the case for retaining the 24/7 front counter at Notting Hill Police Station and closing the front counter at Chelsea Police Station. As indicated in the comments below under 'Public Access Points' the Council is firmly of the view that no change should be made until alternative access points are available and that there is good publicity about the option to go to Belgravia police station instead. The Council is also of the view that, at the earliest possible opportunity, the current front desk at Notting Hill Police Station is improved to bring it in line with best practice for customer service reception areas.

The Council also recognises the case to reduce the opening hours of the front counter at Kensington Police Station but is firmly of the view that this reduction should be from 24/7 to 14/7. 8 AM to 10 PM would be the most appropriate opening hours for the location.

The Council has previously proposed that there should be discussions with Fire and Ambulance Service partners and London Boroughs to see what scope there is to share buildings to provide the right level of front counter services. A reference to this in the final plan would be welcome.

When decisions have been made about the future of front counters in London it will be important to spend time getting the publicity right both in terms of giving advance warning and being clear about the other ways to contact the Police. It would therefore be useful to make reference to this publicity in the final plan and to give a commitment

that the opening hours of front counters will not be changed until the new public access points are in place.

Public access points

The principle of providing more physical locations where the public can have face to face contact with the police is very welcome. There are, however, already opportunities in Kensington and Chelsea for the public to interact with the Police in this way, e.g. ward briefings. The Council would expect these new opportunities to be additional to what is currently provided.

It is important to be clear about the purpose of these extra opportunities for public/police engagement. They are clearly not meant to be a direct substitute for front counters at police stations but it is less clear, from the Plan, what their functions are. The Council is therefore of the view that it is important to make this explicit in the final plan. As its contribution to this matter the Council is of the view that such access points should have some confidential space where residents can report crimes through officers using the police IT systems. They should be places for residents and victims, not offenders.

As with front counters, the Council thinks that decisions should be based on ensuring that across London there is a reasonably, consistent approach to this matter e.g. having a consistent number of day and evening hours when such points are 'open' in each Borough.

The Council is already working with Police colleagues to see what opportunities there are to use its buildings for this purpose. It is important though to note that the Council and other public sector partners will need to consider whether they need to ask the Police to cover any additional or opportunity costs arising from regular use of its property in this way.

The Council would expect to see specially trained officers manning public access points and would also expect them to be Police Officers rather than PCSOs. The Council would also need to be convinced that one officer is enough to look after each access point. The principle of locating them in busy areas is sound. Good publicity will also be crucial.

Crime prevention

The Council has noted the reference to Safer Neighbourhood Boards (SNBs) and understands that consultation will soon be starting on plans for their introduction. The Council will respond to this consultation but, in the meantime, wishes to express a degree of concern about a possible overlap with the statutory crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) in each Borough. There should be some early discussion about clarifying the respective roles of SNBs and CDRPs and in particular their memberships. The Council also wishes to ensure that there is direct Councillor representation on the SNBs.

The £1M crime prevention fund to be established in 2014 is to be welcomed. Decisions about applying resources to local problems are best made locally and the Council would therefore welcome a discussion with MOPAC about how this money can be delegated to make sure that this happens.

Volunteering

The innovative proposal to offer a 50% council tax rebate on the Mayor's precept to those who volunteer as special constables is to be welcomed. There are many other local people who volunteer to help the police and local authorities reduce crime, antisocial behaviour and the misuse of drugs and alcohol, e.g. appropriate adults, and the Council would welcome a discussion with the MOPAC to see whether it would be possible to extend this rebate to other groups of volunteers.

A safer London for women

The focus on improving safety for women and girls is to be welcomed. Local authorities have an important role to play in commissioning services and it will be important for the London Crime Reduction Board to work very closely with London Boroughs as they prepare their plans to fund a pan London domestic violence service to make sure there is no overlap or duplication.

The guarantee to fund London's 4 Rape Crisis Centres until, at least, May 2016 is also to be welcomed. This Council has previously put forward the case that there should be a change in the way individual boroughs provide financial support to rape crisis centres, to ensure a fair and equitable process across London. The best way to do this is through the London Councils Grants Scheme rather than individual boroughs. This is the normal way in which Councils fund voluntary organisations providing services across more than one Borough in London.

One of the reasons for doing this is that it makes sure that there is a reasonable degree of equity about how much each London borough pays, as contributions to the London Councils scheme is based on borough populations. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the North London Rape Crisis Centre as the use of its services by residents is very uneven between boroughs.

Other issues

Changes had been made to custody arrangements in London and it is important to keep these under review. There has been some local concern about the increased time taken by local Police Officers in getting to the new custody facility at Wandsworth. It would be useful to review these arrangements as new custody facilities come on stream elsewhere in London to make sure that time taken moving prisoners is kept to a minimum. The effect on the important appropriate adults' service also needs to be considered. The Council would be pleased to help provide local information in reviewing these issues.

Some early initiatives from the new Police and Crime Commissioners are worthy of further consideration as the Plan is developed, e.g. seeking to extend the powers of PCSOs to tackle a wider range of ASB problems, creating a reservist force, similar to the Territorial Army, to be called upon for a set number of days each year.

Councillor Feilding-Mellen

Cabinet Member for Civil Society

5th March 2013