

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for replying to my email so promptly and in time for me to put this matter before Committee on Tuesday.

For the avoidance of doubt, and to ensure that we both understand each other, it think it would be helpful if I were to reproduce those parts of your letter on which I feel it necessary to comment.

"I am sorry that you feel you haven't had a suitable response to your question regarding the Walled Garden and the move of the Sunbury teams to Knowle Green. I believe that the local supervisor, PS Richard Conway has been in contact to clarify how the Walled Garden will be used"

Comment

Sergeant Conway has indeed contacted me to clarify how the Walled Garden will be used. Doubtless, it will be an asset for neighbourhood officers to have a base there and we welcome that, but my enquiries have nothing to do with the accomodation of officers in Sunbury once they are on patrol.

"As you are aware, the review of the Surrey Police estate in 2010 found that many of Surrey's smaller police stations are old, expensive to maintain and little used by members of the public. A survey conducted by the Surrey Police Authority early the previous year also found that less than a quarter of respondents believed keeping local stations was more important than maintaining frontline officer numbers. This prompted proposals to find alternative bases for neighbourhood teams within local communities and share buildings with partner organisations which were presented to the Surrey Police Authority and were implemented to reduce the budget deficit and invest in more police constables on the streets."

Comment

It is perhaps unfortunate that I have involved you at this late stage in the debate but, as I made clear at our meeting with C/I Matt Goodridge, this Association has never been opposed to the rationalisation of estate resources and the re-location of officers with the object of investing more constables on the streets.

"During the consultation period early last year, the then Chief Constable, Mark Rowley, and Surrey Police Authority were very clear in their communications around what would replace police stations, where local teams would be based and the function of any new locations to be used by Safer Neighbourhoods Teams. They stressed that no police stations would be closed before police posts were identified, as the organisation was committed to keeping a base within the local communities for their officers and investing in more frontline officers to police the borough."

Comment

Again, no dispute here. We just have a very different view on what is meant by a police "base" and I could not have made myself more clear to Mr Goodridge, the Chief Constable's representative. The understanding we reached, and which is verified by the minutes of the meeting (agreed with him), is that an alternative local police base would be one where officers paraded and booked off duty. It was this issue which prompted me to write to the Chief Constable in the first place. Mr Goodridge himself accepted that such a base should not be situated miles from the area which was to be policed.

"As a consequence, the Spelthorne teams have benefitted from 6 additional police officers, one of which has been allocated to Sunbury and is currently being recruited. The relocation of the Sunbury and Shepperton teams to Knowle Green is not about removing officers from the streets, but in investing in further resources."

Comment

Again, no dispute on the Chief Constable's objectives. All very laudable and no one is suggesting that the relocation is about removing officers from the streets. As for increased manpower levels, we both know that these fluctuate wildly over time and are subject to the vagaries of competing Forcewide demands. There are no guarantees that what may apply today will still pertain say, in a year's time.

"The Walled Garden will provide a base (with computer access) for the Sunbury teams in the heart of the community, so they will be able to spend the majority of their time on their beat. Whilst the teams will be starting and finishing their shifts at Knowle Green, there are excellent transport links, with buses every 15-20 minutes (25 minute journey to Sunbury Village) and additional vehicles are available to the officers. Following the relocation of other teams across the borough to SBC Offices there has been no impact on their accessibility and visibility to their communities."

Comment

It is this paragraph of your letter with which my Committee takes the greatest exception. The first sentence is all very well but merely serves to illustrate that the officers will not have immediate access to a proper parading base as was agreed with Mr Goodridge. As for the remainder of the paragraph I'm sorry to say that whilst I recognise the ingenuity of your argument, I do not accept the reasoning or its conclusions; and I shall explain why.

There is no direct bus route from Knowle Green to Lower Sunbury. The 216 (the only bus to go by the Walled Garden) runs every 20-30 mins depending on day & time, from Staines bus station and some walking distance from Knowle Green. The 290 (every 20 -30 mins) can be caught at Knowle Green, but only goes to Sunbury Cross. The other bus from Knowle Green is a 117. So if you were to catch a 290 or 117, you would have to change at, say, Ashford to a 216 or 555 (about every 30 - 60 minutes). With walking and waiting time, the journey will generally take around an hour. As a regular user of these bus services it takes one of our Committee members 1 1/4 hours to get home (Lower Sunbury) from Knowle Green - and that is in good weather with no particular traffic hold-ups. To rely on a non-direct bus service with

all the traffic holdups which seem to be endemic around Sunbury Cross (and with which you will doubtless be all too familiar), is totally unrealistic and quite unacceptable. You will, for example, be aware that in order to regulate the service, the 216 is frequently turned round early, eg at Ashford Hospital or Sunbury Cross when traffic conditions are poor; and we haven't even factored in the likelihood of officers being distracted from their journeys by members of the public calling on their services whilst in transit.

I really must choose my words carefully here but shall confine myself to saying your claim that there are "excellent transport links" could not be further from the truth and I'm frankly dismayed that you should believe it to be so. The truth is that the Lower Sunbury Community can expect at best no more than 5 1/2 duty time per officer per shift, with or without the "base" in the Walled Garden; and this, I submit, is unacceptable to the residents of Lower Sunbury.

It is no exaggeration to say that there was a discernible sense of betrayal when this matter was discussed at Committee and the strength of feeling could not have been more apparent. PC Caroline Barnes, by long standing arrangement, had come to speak on local policing matters and I asked her to stay for, but take no part in, the discussions. I recognised the difficulty of her position in all of this but judged that it would be helpful for her to hear our thoughts on the matter. As one might have expected, she remained loyal to her Force throughout and made no observations, personal or otherwise.

In closing, I should say that I recognise your difficult position in this debate. After all, it was with Chief Inspector Goodridge, as the Chief Officer's representative that we reached what I believed to be a contractual understanding. From here on, and without any discourtesy to yourself, I would ask you to forward our emailed exchange for his immediate attention and I would be grateful for your confirmation.

Yours sincerely,

John Hirsh,
Hon. Chairman,
Lower Sunbury Residents' Association,
(LOSRA)