



The Comprehensive Spending Review and the dangers of reducing sworn officer numbers

08.10.07

Jan Berry, chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales, says:

“Over the last few months we have begun to witness a reduction in police officer numbers and I was particularly struck that during the autumn political party conferences and the “non general election campaign”, not one party official chose to speak of police officer numbers. That tells my colleagues a lot about the uphill battle we are facing to maintain sufficient numbers to tackle crime and disorder.

“Instead this government is intent on continuing its social experiment replacing police officers with unsworn police staff with limited powers and responsibility; and all at the expense of the police constable.

“But I question whether this experiment is in actual fact a cheaper alternative; Chief Officers busy juggling budgets have identified a series of policing tasks that, at first sight, require less skills and powers. PCSOs are one such example, being a support, additional eyes and ears - purely a visible presence on the streets. But they failed to think this experiment through. The result has been confusion amongst the public who see a police uniform and have certain expectations of the individual, expectations that cannot be met by unsworn officers. Now we understand there are proposals for supervisor PCSOs, which will merely exacerbate the problem.

“Can we afford the luxury of a growing number of non-sworn police staff and maintain the current number of police officer. The danger of further eroding police officer numbers is that our resilience to tackle increasing criminal activity as well as the unknown threat of terrorism, floods and foot and mouth will be further damaged as non-sworn staff can only perform limited functions. They cannot be deployed anywhere in a force area as a multi-skilled police officer can.

“A sample survey of Federation branch boards indicates that most forces are reducing police officer numbers and increasing police support staff numbers. The Comprehensive Spending Review and predicted budget cuts are likely to further exacerbate this problem.

“Whilst sharing UNISONs concern that PCSOs should have standardised and appropriate uniforms, I would urge caution against any move to make CSO uniforms more like those worn by police officers. That will only create greater

confusion amongst the public, and may result in CSOs facing hostile situations for which they have neither the powers, equipment nor experience to deal with.”