



Tony Rayner, chairman of Essex Police Federation

## Uniform behaviour

Across England and Wales, workforce modernisation means one thing: less omnicompetent warranted officers and more single-issue civilians - but not in Essex. In the last three years, the Essex establishment has grown by 200 police posts. On September 8, our police authority agreed to finance a further 600 officers within five years, more than 100 by the end of this financial year.

For a decade, Essex has been through the whole process of efficiency savings and value for money exercises, and we have a low government grant. We have the second lowest precept of all the shire counties. However, we still found £6 million to pay for the first 200 and £27 million to pay for the extra 600.

Why then, is virtually every other force reducing police officer numbers in an effort to balance their books? The public want to see more officers on their streets and they are not stupid. They see through the introduction of community support officers (CSOs). They can tell the difference, no matter how carefully chief officers dress CSOs to look like police officers.

Essex has another target: an establishment of 1,000 Special Constables by 2010. Regulars do not always look kindly on Specials. In the past, we have seen them as policing on the cheap and taking away overtime opportunities from real police officers. However, recent experience is that our members are more interested in work/life balance than money these days. They do not want their rest days cancelled, or compulsory overtime after their shift would have ended; they just want to go home. Specials boosting the numbers on a Saturday night, particularly when there will be hundreds of new regular colleagues to ease the pressure of work, ought to be a good thing.

However, there is a down side and it is part of the same con job perpetrated on the public by the government. Special Constables will never have the training and experience of regular police officers. It is bizarre that student officers spend 20 weeks in the classroom, and weeks more with tutors, only to patrol with someone

dressed identically, who has exactly the same powers despite only a few weekends' training. The Specials have no marking on their uniform to differentiate them from regulars. They now drive police vehicles on routine patrol. Incident commanders and radio operators have no way of telling Specials apart from regulars, and in the dark even CSOs merge. Specials should be easily recognisable as such, and CSOs ought to be dressed completely differently to sworn staff, just as Tony McNulty indicated at the Constables' Central Conference this year.

The Special Constabulary and CSOs are dedicated people and they are a source of recruits to the regulars. Nevertheless, we must ensure that they are seen to be different – for their own safety and for the integrity of the service. Finally, all these new officers and Specials will not prevent the seasonal myopia that afflicts police managers. By the time you read this, it will be around Halloween or bonfire night - apparently unforeseeable evenings. No doubt rest days are being cancelled all over the country. When will someone spot Christmas Eve approaching? 'Quick, cancel some rest days because we couldn't be bothered to plan. Let's mess up the officers' lives (again)'.

### What do you think?

Are you losing police officers in your force?

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