



Sue Kelly is Chairman of Essex Police Federation

## Levelling the playing field

After six years as Chairman of Essex police federation and over 20 years as a federation representative, I'm due to retire in the next couple of months.

As I look back over those years, I would like think that I might have made a difference to female officers in the service, in particular. I'm proud of the fact that Essex has the highest percentage of female officers in the country.

**"...I'm sorry to say there seems to be less female federation representatives elected from their divisions and departments now than there has been in the past...I think the time has come for divisional and department representatives to be given duty time away from their day job to be allowed to do federation duties."**

When I was elected as a representative, I was quite determined to change the perception of certain police specialisms which were seen as very macho and had a culture that deterred many capable women from applying. I've tried to alter that perception, particularly in departments such as firearms. Let's be honest when you're wearing all that equipment, it appears very macho. But my view has always been, well that doesn't mean the behaviour has to be macho as well. I'm pleased to see there is now far greater acceptance of women in those roles. And, when it comes to career progression, there is also a far greater acceptance of women in senior ranks. Although, it's very difficult for them to maintain their work-life balance and it takes a strong person to stick to the hours they should work.

The federation also has its role to play. I'm sorry to say there seems to be less female federation representatives elected from their divisions and departments now than there has been in the past. The reason for that could be

that it is seen as an additional burden, it is extra work on top of your normal duties. I think the time has come for divisional and department representatives to be given duty time away from their day job to be allowed to do federation duties. With changes in health and safety and new disciplinary measures coming into existence, the role can no longer be just an add-on.

The lot of female officers has improved, but we still have a long way to go. As I'm about to leave the service, I've just been handed a case where a female officer has returned from maternity leave having agreed her part-time hours and place of work so she could be close to her child in day care, but also perform a worthwhile and much-needed policing responsibility to the community she serves. She's just been moved to another police station and her role appears to have been taken on by a full-time male officer. She has been completely derailed. We need to think about the kind of message that is sending out. The problem is when women officers go on maternity leave they are often forgotten and fall off the agenda. It is very disappointing to still be dealing with these kinds of issues in this day and age.

On balance, I'd like to think I have been less adversarial in my approach as the Joint Branch Board chairman. I have always believed that joint working is the best route forward and my approach has been to come to the table with solutions to the problems, not just the problems themselves. At the end of the day, we are there to look after officers' interests. The happier they are in their job, the more effective they will be.