

# Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM

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Public Access Consultation  
The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime  
City Hall, More London  
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**Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> October  
2017**

Dear Sir/Madam,

## **Response to the Public Access and Engagement Strategy**

The way in which we access police services is changing and it is right that this is reflected in the structure of the police force. Active public engagement is essential in ensuring that the police secure the necessary support of the people it protects. However, not enough is being done to explain the way in which police will work going forward. There is a lack of detail about how the Basic Command Unit (BCU) trial that the Met is currently undertaking will inform choices on police station closures, and MOPAC also needs to give more evidence to explain why well used police stations are being sold, in favour of premises which are less convenient for the public.

Advances in technology mean that the police can engage with the public in innovative ways and I am pleased that these are being taken up. I also appreciate that governmental cuts to the police budget will force the Met to be more creative when interacting with the public. I support measures which will maximise the number of police officers that we are able to deploy on our streets, but would like to see more leadership by the Mayor on public engagement and greater transparency in the way in which decisions about our police front counters are made. Without improvements on both fronts, the Mayor will find it difficult to ensure that the public has confidence in the Met.

The plan is lacking in detail and many residents have serious concerns about the scope and extent of the Mayor's police closure plans. These need to be properly addressed.

## **Contacting the police**

Police stations are local landmarks and a reassuring presence on many of our high streets. Their depletion will only retain the confidence of the public if other methods of communication used to contact the police are suitable. This is currently not the case.

There are big question marks about the police's ability to respond to emergency calls at present. The average time taken to respond to 999 calls has increased fivefold in the past two years and average 101 wait times are currently 500 seconds.<sup>1</sup>

Waiting over eight minutes for a police response is completely unacceptable. Worse still, many people have given up when calling emergency service numbers, and are hanging up due to the length of time taken to receive a response. The Mayor should take greater

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<sup>1</sup> Mayoral response to Question 2017/2917, 13 July 2017

responsibility for his role in the Met's failure to respond to the public in a timely manner. He should also explain the level of resource that he is diverting towards answering emergency calls, including a firm timeframe for when the increased resource allocation will occur.

The launch of the Telephone and Digital Investigation Unit is welcome and could help streamline investigation procedures, saving police officer time. But, again, details are lacking. We need to know the resources available to the Telephone and Digital Investigation Unit, as well as the supervision and oversight measures in place.

Some residents have expressed an interest in ensuring that local Dedicated Ward Officer (DWO) hubs have an established and publicly available telephone line so that they are able to quickly feedback non-urgent local police issues, which 101 officers may have little knowledge about. While it is important that the 101 service is recognised as the primary method of non-emergency police contact, Safer Neighbourhood Teams should have an advertised number where residents can stay in contact and leave messages. Once DWO hubs are established, this information could be provided on the Met's local ward site.

The layout and information provided on the new Met website is vastly superior to its predecessor. I understand that there are some ongoing issues regarding the timely updating of data, but the local neighbourhood pages provide a succinct snapshot of the key issues affecting local areas. Details about local Safer Neighbourhood Teams is another welcome addition, but there is still room for improvement.

The renewed website format is an opportunity for the Met to explain the role of Ward Panels and other community groups, and signpost the work that they undertake locally. There is also scope for the Met to highlight the function of MOPAC and Safer Neighbourhood Boards (SNBs), explain the way in which different policing organisations work with each other, as well as their separate responsibilities. Information about Ward Panels and SNBs has been lacking since their inception, and most people do not know how best to get involved with these groups.

A signposting service, hosted on the Met police website, could provide suitable information about how community based groups interact with MOPAC and the Met, as well as their contact details and the projects they are engaged with. Another service, providing details on where to get appropriate advice for areas such as rental disputes, anti-social behaviour and mental health, could be included and may help free up officer time.

Despite the success of the Met website, it is important that the potential for digital improvements to assist police officers in their duties is not overstated. The Met has a history of difficulties in rolling out technology, with numerous police IT projects over budget and behind schedule. That is why all digital upgrades should be rolled out and fully operational before police stations are sold.

## **Accessibility**

I was disappointed by the consultation's efforts to explain how the police will interact with elderly and disabled people who feel unable to utilise technological advances. The Met police resources available to engage with people with disabilities is minimal and their dispatch software is unable to incorporate disability identification schemes, such as Pegasus. If the Mayor removes easily identifiable public facing police stations from our high streets,

then the Met needs to ensure that Safer Neighbourhood Teams are fully aware of the challenges that many in their neighbourhood experience. The reduction in the number of the Met's PCSOs has greatly reduced opportunities for vulnerable people to engage with the police service in a more relaxed way. In order to counter these barriers, the Met should implement a voluntary localised scheme to allow disabled people to make themselves known to Safer Neighbourhood Teams.

MOPAC should also ensure that DWOs are established in accessible locations, with suitable disabled access and provision for those with English as a second language.

## **Front counters and police stations**

The number of people visiting police front counters has dwindled in recent years and so it is understandable that the Met is reviewing how best to maximise police officer efficiency. However, the public place a high value on highly visible neighbourhood police stations, which often colour the public's confidence in the police.

The Mayor is proposing a police station closure plan which will cut the number of police stations in the capital in half, while also slashing Safer Neighbourhood Bases. This raises huge concerns about how the Met police will operate going forward. Residents from Kingston, Sutton, Southwark, Haringey, and elsewhere have stressed to me the importance of their front counters and Safer Neighbourhood Bases to local policing. The support and reassurance that these services provide cannot be understated and should not be overlooked. The Mayor's overly ambitious pursuit of capital receipts may damage police services, and I am not confident that the Mayor will be able to deliver the style of policing that he sets out in the timescale suggested. These planned closures should be reconsidered.

The scale of the Mayor's police station closures, as well as the pace at which they are proposed to be axed, alarms many residents. For many, despite this consultation, police station closures feel like a forgone conclusion. There are concerns, despite the proposed hubs, that police officers will spend too much time travelling to their wards.

Closing police counters will not work unless the police and MOPAC improve their engagement with the public. Historically, the police have not been strong at publicising their events, as can be seen by the poor attendance at community contact points. MOPAC and the Met need to consider how best to site and publicise community contact sessions going forward, to truly engage with the public. MOPAC should monitor the success of these sessions and press for local officers to share instances of good practice.

There are a few police stations which are underutilised and costly to run. Selling off these buildings to free up more policing resource seems sensible and uncontroversial. However, the sale of popular police stations in favour of less well used alternatives is another matter. I appreciate the Mayor's explanation for selling these sites, to maximise capital receipts, but I am disappointed that he will not provide further details, particularly when stations in the areas of greatest public need are being sold in favour of cheaper options. People need the full facts to make an informed decision about whether the social benefit that their police station provides outweighs the reduced capital receipts collected by the police.

Constituents have raised concerns about the considerable social and operational disadvantages of selling certain stations, including in Bexley, Ealing, Southall, Hornsey in Haringey, Woodford in Redbridge, Notting Hill in Kensington, Barking and Dagenham,

and Wimbledon. The Mayor has not adequately made the case for disposing of these buildings and I do not support the sale of these stations.

Streatham police station is also marked for sale, despite being refurbished at a cost of £500,000 in 2015. I challenged this decision and was told that the station may now be kept as a police officer hub until 2024. MOPAC should clarify its status to residents at the earliest opportunity. Closing Streatham would be the wrong decision. It is a well-used resource and should continue serving residents as it does currently.

It would be helpful for MOPAC to share details of police station and Safer Neighbourhood Base leases with Safer Neighbourhood Boards, so that they can input into the DWO hub establishment process going forward.

Finding suitable Dedicated Ward Officer hubs is crucial to ensuring their long-term success. The identification of appropriate sites is still in its infancy, but there are several factors which need to be considered when siting these hubs. These are not adequately covered by the consultation.

The first is that MOPAC has not properly explained the extent to which DWO hubs will have to factor in future growth in London, specifically the creation of new wards next year. The second, much larger, elephant in the room is that DWO hubs cannot be determined before the Met's BCU trial has been concluded and its results analysed.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, no police station sales should take place until this review is complete. It is disappointing that MOPAC did not stress this fact to the public as it significantly impacts where future DWO hubs will be sited, and which buildings may be kept.

## **Engagement with the public**

Throughout the public consultation meetings, the disconnect between the public and the police was highlighted. Several people noted the increasing difficulties associated with recruiting new members to Safer Neighbourhood Boards and Ward Panels and other community based groups. This will not improve unless people are aware of these organisations, and the important work they are carrying out.

SNBs, for example, deliver valuable work, but receive little promotion. Some Boards hold just one public meeting a year and do not have a website, or even easily identifiable contact details. MOPAC and the Met should promote the details and work of community groups through their respective websites and social media channels.

MOPAC should lead on liaising with the Met, Ward Panels and Safer Neighbourhood Boards to ensure that there is a consistent and coherent approach to public relations. The Mayor should also ensure that SNBs are properly integrated into decision making, avoiding the mistakes made by his top down approach to deciding borough priorities.

MOPAC's statement that it has developed "increasingly strong and effective public engagement processes"<sup>3</sup> rings hollow after it publicised public meetings on its proposals two months after the strategy was published. There was just 24 hours' notice provided to the public planning to attend the first public consultation meeting. Some publicised

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Messinger, Southwark Borough Commander, speaking at the Southwark public consultation meeting, 28 September 2017

<sup>3</sup> MOPAC, Police Access and Engagement Strategy, p.33

meetings were subsequently changed with two days' notice, leading to farcical scenes where Councillors in Sutton attended a meeting to find it had been cancelled.

The Mayor lamely attempted to deflect my concerns about MOPAC's delay in publishing public consultation meeting dates when I pushed him on the issue earlier this year.<sup>4</sup> His attempt to blame the Met and borough councils for his failings did not wash then and does not wash now. It is MOPAC's responsibility, as the custodians of the Met estate, to oversee the consultation on its plan.

Public meetings need to be publicised to wider members of the public, rather than just community groups, and notice of consultation meetings should be provided in the original consultation document. The Deputy Mayor for policing needs take an active lead on engagement in future. It was disheartening to see that the Deputy Mayor attended less than half of the public consultation meetings, which pales into comparison to the previous Deputy Mayor, who attended all of them. Hopefully, lessons will be learned on this front.

As said previously, there needs to be more information available about the costs and benefits of retaining police stations and siting DWO hubs. Unfortunately, the opaque nature of the Mayor's Basic Command Unit trial, and his refusal to properly provide the key performance indicators, has left people in the dark about the way in which policing will be structured going forward. This poor example should not be followed when determining which police stations will be kept. MOPAC is asking for carte blanche to sell off police stations, with few details. MOPAC should publicise the analysis being used to calculate police station closures and defend their choices to the public, rather than asking Londoners to blindly accept their decisions.

## **Best practice**

MOPAC has rightly been criticised for the way in which it has conducted its police access consultation by the London Assembly's Police and Crime Committee.<sup>5</sup> The loaded questions and poorly contextualised data provided are unacceptable and should be included in the Mayor's review into MOPAC's consultation practices going forward.<sup>6</sup> There are also issues around the amount of data, the quality of public engagement, and the lack of details provided about consultation dates.

It would be helpful for MOPAC to reflect on how it can meet best practice guidelines in its future consultations.

I hope that the Mayor will reconsider his police station and front counter closure plans and work with Londoners to help shape the Met going forward.

With best wishes,

Yours Faithfully,

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<sup>4</sup> Mayor's Question Time, 14 September 2017

<sup>5</sup> Police and Crime Committee response to MOPAC's Public Access and Engagement Strategy, 28 September 2017

<sup>6</sup> The Mayor stated that MOPAC's consultation process would be reviewed at Mayor's Question Time, 14 September 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Pidgeon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM**

Liberal Democrat Member of the London Assembly