

CRIME AND DISORDER COMMITTEE

18 JANUARY 2011

Present :- Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)
Councillors Mark Cory, Bill Frame, Nigel Offen,
Dennis Willetts and Julie Young

Substitute Members :- Councillor Beverly Davies for Councillor Nigel Chapman
Councillor Jackie Maclean for Councillor Andrew Ellis
Councillor Barrie Cook for Councillor Theresa Higgins
Councillor Philip Oxford for Councillor Gerard Oxford

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Nick Barlow
Councillor Kevin Bentley
Councillor Margaret Kimberley
Councillor Kim Naish
Councillor Tim Young

5. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 August 2010 were confirmed as a correct record.

6. Plans to minimise disorder at future demonstrations

The Crime and Disorder Committee convened a meeting to consider the effect of the disorder caused to the citizens, businesses and to the transport infrastructure of the Borough by student protesters demonstrating in the town centre, and the plans to minimise disorder in regards to any future demonstration by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts.

Chief Superintendent Alison Newcomb, Essex Police, Councillor Tim Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety, and Ms. Ann Wain, Executive Director attended the meeting for this item.

Rationale

Councillor Willetts addressed the Committee to explain the rationale for this debate. Councillor Willetts said the request was made out of the desire to purely consider the issue of disorder, not the reasons that lead to the demonstrations in November and December 2010. Councillor Willetts said the freedom of expression was a fundamental right to all citizens, in this case the right to demonstrate, but equally, those citizens not demonstrating had a right to go about their day without fear, disorder and inconvenience that Councillor Willetts believed was not a good advertisement for Colchester.

Councillor Willetts said at the time of the demonstration public transport was disrupted for many hours, not confined to the town centre, but extended widely throughout the Borough.

Councillor Willetts concluded by saying he was not questioning the right to demonstrate, that he had no objection to this, but felt there was a need to review the extent of disorder caused during the demonstrations and how any future demonstrations would be controlled.

Have Your Say

Mr. Daniel Swain, a post graduate student from the University of Essex addressed the Committee saying he was proud to see young students involving themselves in political engagement, challenging the political agenda. The reality of the winter demonstrations was that the students had not had the opportunity to vote against the changes they were demonstrating against.

Mr. Swain said students should be allowed to demonstrate outside the Town Hall, and given the number of demonstrators at the previous demonstrations it was inevitable, given the narrowness of pavements that the students would overspill onto the town centre High Street. Given the strength of the demonstrations Mr. Swain said students needed the right to spill onto the road.

In response to Councillor Cory, Mr. Swain believed the demonstration was a very peaceful one, and to Councillor Frame, Mr. Swain confirmed throughout his adult education he has remained a student activist.

Mr. Andy Abbott, a local town centre resident addressed the panel and spoke about the disruption caused by events other than the student demonstrations that are held in the town centre. Events such as the Annual Bike Race, Christmas Fayre and Remembrance Sunday do cause disruptions, some on a larger scale than that experienced by the recent demonstrations, with some events requiring the High Street to be closed for the whole day, not just a few hours.

As a town centre resident Mr. Abbott said he accepted that some events will cause disruption. Mr. Abbott concluded by saying he would expect disruption from time to time, which on these occasions was about students expressing their democratic right to protest.

In response to Councillor Maclean, Mr. Abbott said he did not participate in the demonstrations, he was at work, and in response to Councillor Cook, said he did not believe the High Street was closed too often, accepting we live in a tolerant society, and provided advance warning is given through the media residents can make alternative arrangements.

Professor Ted Benton addressed the panel, saying a certain amount of inconvenience had been caused to pedestrians and bus users. As far as the demonstration was concerned, it had been good natured, but accepting it had caused some disruption, this was a small price to pay. People have fundamental rights, and many of the demonstrators were under the age of eighteen.

Professor Benton said he believed some of the comments of Councillor Willetts had been exaggerated, and people should be tolerant and accept the little amount of

inconvenience caused by the demonstration.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Professor Benton said he accepted that some residents of West Bergholt had been inconvenienced through disruptions to public transport, which was unfortunate, and he sympathised, but that was the price for living in a democracy. In response to Councillor Cook, Professor Benton said a judgement had to be made when anticipating how the demonstration will develop and making the decision to close the town centre High Street, though from the previous demonstrations, evidence suggested they had been good natured with a good relationship between the students and town centre people.

Presentations from Chief Superintendent (CS) Alison Newcomb and Councillor Tim Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety

CS Newcomb addressed the panel and initially explained how the Police approach their policy on dealing with demonstrations.

Demonstrations are overseen by a chain of command, a Gold Commander who oversees the production of an overall strategy, a Silver Commander who carries out the tactics, and Bronze Commanders, leading on the ground.

A strategic plan was acted upon on each of the three policed demonstrations, with the intentions paramount, to ensure the safety of the protestors, the public and the police, to minimise anti-social behaviour and crime, to respond immediately to committed crime and disorder, and all with as little economic impact as possible on the town centre and local community.

CS Newcomb said a balance needs to be struck between the needs of the demonstrators, ensuring the disruption is kept to a minimum, given that a demonstration involving 200-700 demonstrators will create a certain amount of disruption. The first protest in November, the largest of the three, with 700 demonstrators and including a 'sit-down' by 200 demonstrators, involved two arrests, an isolated incident involving a confrontation between two demonstrators, and which had nothing to do with the demonstration. The demonstrators were in the main peaceful, concurring with the comments made by the earlier speakers. CS Newcomb said it was not her wish to employ heavy handed tactics, and the two subsequent demonstrations in late November and early December again went by peaceably, and she was not aware of any shops having to close in respect of the demonstrations, even Top Shop, part of the Arcadia Group, where approximately 200 demonstrators protested in the form of a 'sit down' outside the shop premises.

CS Newcomb said these demonstrations are time consuming for the police, requiring a lot of resource to ensure the safety of all those people involved. Friendly engagement between the police officers and demonstrators was vital in keeping the demonstration good natured. The Police have subsequently received very positive feedback from demonstrators, businesses and local people. CS Newcomb said that as part of the Police post evaluation process, a Community Impact Assessment is completed, involving feedback from all stakeholders, and the feedback received had in general been very positive. CS Newcomb concluded by saying any future demonstrations

would be policed in exactly the same way as has previously proved successful.

In response to Councillor Arnold, CS Newcomb said for the first and largest demonstration, liaison with identified student organisers was undertaken in advance of the demonstration. Planning in advance of the demonstration proved helpful given the unexpected size of the demonstration. CS Newcomb said the two subsequent demonstrations did not have student organisers, but whilst there was no liaison in advance, the demonstrations followed the same pattern as the first demonstration.

In regards to any scope for letting the Bus Operators know in advance of the anticipated disruptions, CS Newcomb responded to Councillor Arnold by saying the Bus Operators were, along with other stakeholders such as the Council notified of the impending demonstrations, but it was within the remit of the Bus Operators if given the warning, to consider the appropriateness of changing routes and scheduling.

Councillor Young addressed the Committee, saying that the evidence given by CS Newcomb and the previous speakers told of a demonstration that had been peaceful, good natured and with very little disorder, though the wording for the reasons for this review, as published in the agenda, suggested something far more serious. Councillor Young said the Council works closely with the local police in many aspects of community safety and the partnership between the two organisations remains very strong.

Councillor Young paid tribute to both the Police and the student demonstrators for the generally good natured way in which the event was held. Councillor Young understood the need for the demonstrators to gather at the Town Hall, a natural focal point for such events.

Councillor Young said the Council took measures to secure the Town Hall building, a point later clarified by Ms. Ann Wain. Councillor Davies later explained that she had been in the Town Hall at the time of the demonstration. Councillor Davies said upon exiting the Town Hall from the rear of the building the noise outside was not as intimidating as it had sounded from within the building. Ms. Wain explained that closing the Town Hall was done on advice from the police, as a precaution to protect the building.

General discussions

Councillor Naish addressed the Committee, saying the disruption to the town centre was minimal compared to the disruption from other events such as The Bike Race and Christmas Fayre, that the argument put forward about the level of disruption was being exaggerated. The Police did an excellent job in policing the demonstration and the students were very good. CS Newcomb said on average the number of arrests made on a typical Saturday evening was between 10-20, significantly more than the 2 arrests during the student demonstrations and this due to a fight that was not connected to the demonstration. The disruption caused was no more than that on any other significant event.

Councillor Willetts apologised if it was felt calling this meeting was seen as picking on

the students. This was not intended, though the student demonstration had triggered the need for the meeting. Councillor Willetts said the Committee has a duty to review matters of crime and/or disorder and the effects this has on the town centre and the Borough. On other major events such as the previously mentioned Annual Bike Race, these are pre-organised and alternative arrangements are or can be well managed. In the case of the demonstrations where very short notice was given, managing advance arrangements may be more difficult to do, and it seemed reasonable that Members should request a review of procedures.

Later in the debate, Councillor Willetts also said he did not think this matter was trivial, and the remit of the Committee was to look at crime and disorder issues in the Borough. This review provided an opportunity for Members and the public to express their views and consider the evidence given, and the views of CS Newcomb were particularly enlightening. It was right to ask questions, hear explanations, and if we as a Committee are satisfied, to say so.

In response to Councillor Frame, CS Newcomb said given there had now been three student demonstrations the Police are confident of managing these events and minimising disruption, anti-social behaviour and crime. The students remain reasonably well organised and would benefit even further by a willing volunteer to lead the students and act as their spokesperson. This would certainly help future planning and ease disruption.

In response to Councillor Maclean, CS Newcomb said she could not give an exact figure of the cost of policing the demonstration, though the officers deployed on the demonstration would have been withdrawn from their usual duties. Officers are drawn from the whole of the County, so the work load is spread.

In response to Councillor J. Young, Councillor Arnold said having sought advice from officers he had agreed to this extra meeting. The Committee is only required to meet once a year, and had met in August 2010, though it is considered good practice to meet more than this if other issues arise. This seemed the opportune moment, and was an opportunity for members to express their views. Councillor Arnold said he would be interested given what had previously been said, whether dialogue could be opened up with the Bus Operators.

Councillor Offen said the right of protest must be protected, and in this instance, congratulated the students for their remarkably good behaviour and the police for their high class policing, handled extraordinarily well.

Councillor Cook said the students undertook their right to demonstrate, for justifiable reasons, and this was a very healthy reaction. Councillor Cook accepted the demonstration had caused minimal disruption to bus services.

Councillor Cory congratulated the students on their peaceful demonstration. There was an issue of the need for better communication between the students and the Police in advance of future demonstrations, to provide a better opportunity to pre-plan. Councillor Cory apologised for any inconvenience caused to local people, but that was the cost of democracy.

Councillor Frame, as a town centre Ward Councillor said he, and as far as he was aware, his fellow ward councillors, did not receive any complaints or negative feedback following the demonstrations and believed that the disruption was fairly minimal. Any future demonstrations, he believed, would see the students improve their organisation and had every confidence that the Police would manage the demonstrations appropriately. Councillor Arnold concurred, saying he believed this review had established confidence in the policing arrangements for future demonstrations, and hoped that a link would be established with the bus operators.

Mr. Ian Vipond, Executive Director addressed the panel and explained that the bus operators are developing a plan for events that require the closure of the town centre High Street, and so that when future demonstrations are known, provided sufficient advance notice is given, alternative bus routes and/or schedules can be implemented to minimise any disruption to public transport users. Mr. Vipond confirmed that any future dialogue with the bus operators would pose the question of what help they may need, and responses will be fed into the overall process.

Councillor Arnold concluded the discussions by firstly thanking Chief Superintendent Alison Newcomb, Councillor Tim Young and Ms. Ann Wain for presenting evidence to the committee and responding to member's questions, and secondly, to members of the public for attending the meeting and through 'Have your Say', providing a valuable contribution to the overall debate.

RESOLVED that the Committee;

- i) Commented on, and noted with confidence the policing arrangements for future demonstrations.
- ii) Requested future dialogue with the bus operators to ensure consideration is given to their needs for minimising disruptions to public transport during such demonstrations.