



Mr Simon Ford
Head of Community Safety
Environment & Place
Southend-on-Sea City Council
Civic Centre
Victoria Avenue
Southend-on-Sea
Essex
SS2 6ER

By email: SimonFord@southend.gov.uk

Kelvedon Park, London Road, Rivenhall,
Witham, Essex, CM8 3HB

Telephone: 01245 291600
Fax: 01245 291601
E-mail: pfcc@essex.police.uk
<http://www.essex.pfcc.police.uk>

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Enquiries to: Pippa Brent-Isherwood
e-mail: pippa.brent-isherwood@essex.police.uk

Dear Simon

Notice of Motion - Council Tax Scheme for Southend's Special Constables

I understand that a Notice of Motion was put to Southend-on-Sea City Council's Full Council on 5 September 2024 that, amongst other things, called on the Council to resolve:

- That, as part of the Council's budget-setting process for 2025/26, a new Council Tax Scheme is considered which provides a Council Tax exemption / rebate for Special Constables who undertake a minimum number of hours of duty per year.
- That the new scheme, if agreed, comes into force on 1st April 2025.
- To urgently discuss the need for more Special Constables in Southend with Essex Police, including:
 - Guarantees (outside of a significant emergency) around ensuring Special Constables are deployed within or for the benefit of the City of Southend.
 - How the benefits in points 2 and 4 can be used to drive forward a joint recruitment campaign.

My understanding is that the Motion requests that the Cabinet considers a review of Council Tax allowances for Southend residents who apply, and are successful, in becoming an Essex Police Special Constable and then work solely in Southend. Having discussed the Motion with the Chief Constable, I write to express our shared views, and some matters that the Cabinet ought to be aware of when considering the motion, in the hope that we may be able to work together to develop and implement a response that is beneficial to the Council, Essex Police and the communities they serve.

First and foremost, Chief Constable Harrington and I are delighted that the Council wishes to support the recruitment and retention of Special Constables. However, we would be concerned that, in practice, the scheme that appears to be proposed here may under deliver and therefore disappoint.

Firstly, the Cabinet should be aware that Essex Police is currently experiencing significant challenges in recruiting and retaining Special Constables across the county. This is largely on account of many volunteers leaving the Special Constabulary to join “the regulars” as part of the uplift programme. However, it also reflects the declining trend seen in all types of volunteering nationally since the lifting of Covid restrictions, as people have less free time available than they did during the pandemic, as well as the need for people to prioritise paid work over volunteering due to the current cost of living.

In considering the Motion, the Cabinet should also be aware that the proposals may have implications for the Special Constables involved which – whilst acknowledging the Council’s best intentions - may actually disincentivise applications. For example, it would require further investigation, but seems likely that this would be considered a taxable benefit and therefore impact all their expenses. We assume it would be your intention that residents living in other Council areas, but policing Southend, would be ineligible for the scheme. If, however, they were deemed to be eligible, it is equally worth noting that this incentive would presumably need to take the form of a cash payment, and therefore be taxable.

The force would also need to consider the HR and other resource implications of any such scheme, as it would be administratively difficult for Essex Police to introduce. The proposal could presumably also be difficult for the Council to administer, although that is of course a matter for the authority.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the Council’s point of view, I must also make the Cabinet aware that, by law, the operational deployment of all Constables, including Special Constables, is a matter for the Chief Constable, taking account of all the demands on the force at any one time. As such, the request for “Guarantees (outside of a significant emergency) around ensuring Special Constables are deployed within or for the benefit of the City of Southend” is one that the Chief Constable simply could not give, whether in “emergency” circumstances or otherwise.

The Chief Constable and I noted with interest that it is already Council policy (Minute 83 of the Cabinet meeting held on 25th June 2019) that the City Council should recruit 34 Special Constables to provide support and visibility across all wards in Southend, as this was not a policy that either of us was aware of. Given the context that I describe above, our sense is that the target number is unlikely to be achievable.

For all these reasons, the Chief Constable and I feel that, whilst acknowledging the Council’s clear good intentions, the proposal as currently envisaged would be unlikely to deliver the target outcomes. If, however, the Cabinet wishes to support the Special Constabulary and / or invest in community safety more generally – which of course we would welcome – there are more cost-effective means by which it could do so:

1) Community Specials Scheme

One option would be to sponsor Community Specials as part of our existing scheme. Community Specials have the same police powers, uniform and equipment as regular police officers. They are integrated into their local Community Policing Teams and receive the training and support they need to fulfil their roles. Community Specials volunteer their time to provide a reassuring presence and help the people who live and work in their own communities. As well as carrying out high-visibility patrols in the local area, they help address community issues and priorities as informed by the local council and police intelligence-led tasking. They respond to police-related incidents within the council area and attend suitable local council meetings when they are available to do so. As volunteers, Community Specials are not paid. However, the local council will pay their allowances and expenses and have a say in the issues their Community Specials deal with.

2) Employer Supported Policing (ESP) Scheme

The Council may also wish to consider investing in the Employer Supported Policing (ESP) Scheme. This is a national scheme whereby an organisation supports their employees to become Special Constables by allowing them to undertake Special Constable duties during their working hours

without this affecting their pay or other employee benefits. The approach can be tailored to work best for the individual organisation and employee but might, for example, mean allowing an employee a set number of days a month or year to be a Special Constable. There is no contractual commitment, and both employers and employees are free to opt out at any time. The employee gains new skills and develops their existing strengths in a manner that cannot be purchased commercially. These skills are then brought back into their employing organisation, bringing benefits to both the employee and their employer. Involvement in the scheme can also increase job satisfaction and therefore help to retain staff. The scheme can also help an organisation to enhance its corporate image within the community and assist it in meeting its environmental, social and governance (ESG) objectives.

3) Delivering through the Community Safety Partnership

Equally, we would be supportive of the Council investing more in its own Community Safety team and / or Community Safety Partnership, in order to create greater combined capacity to deliver more together in partnership for the residents of Southend going forward. The Council may wish to consider investing in initiatives and resources similar to what Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) have been able to fund in other areas across the county over recent years. For example:

- In Braintree (Witham and Halstead), Basildon, Brentwood (Ingatestone) and Colchester (Greenstead), working with the district and town councils, the Community Safety Partnership has funded Street Wardens to deliver high visibility patrols and proactive work within designated areas to act as a deterrent to criminals, reduce the fear of crime and increase public confidence. In Basildon, the CSP is supported by Community Wardens directly employed by the Council. We have provided many of these resources with the training and equipment to become Community Safety Accreditation Scheme (CSAS) accredited. In Halstead, we have supplemented this with funding for the out of hours salary costs for partnership ASB patrols to be undertaken during anti-social hours. Similarly, in Colchester, the Community Safety Partnership has funded two CSAS accredited security officers who work in conjunction with the Community Safety team and the police to patrol the city centre, including outside of normal working hours. These programmes have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from residents and businesses and have encouraged the reporting of shoplifting by businesses and ASB by residents, enabling them to be tackled more effectively. Older residents, in particular, have said that these schemes have helped them to feel safer in town centres.
- In Brentwood (Navestock), the Community Safety Partnership has funded three months' officer overtime to carry out high-visibility and plain clothes patrols and surveillance to combat fly-tipping in identified hotspots.
- In Witham, Braintree, the Community Safety Partnership has worked alongside the district and town councils to employ a Sports Development Officer to deliver a free sports outreach programme to divert those at risk of involvement in crime away from this lifestyle. The programme consistently exceeded its targets over a 60-week period.
- In Chelmsford, the Community Safety Partnership has funded detached youth work and street pastors to provide diversionary activities and support to the most vulnerable, particularly within the night-time economy, and in Thurrock (Grays) the CSP has funded two Community Engagement Officers as well as a programme of youth engagement and sports development work.
- In Brentwood and Rochford, the Community Safety Partnership has funded taxi ambassadors to help increase feelings of safety and promote safe journeys home within the night-time economy.
- In Braintree (Witham and Halstead), Chelmsford, Colchester (city centre, Greenstead and Mile End) and Thurrock (Grays), the Community Safety Partnership has also funded CSP Project Managers and Officers.

Much of this activity has been match funded by my office and the local council, and I would welcome taking the same approach with Southend-on-Sea City Council.

I hope the above information is helpful to you and the Cabinet in considering the Motion. Should you wish to discuss any element any further, I would be more than happy to do so.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Hirst', written in a cursive style.

Roger Hirst
Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex

cc. Chief Constable BJ Harrington QPM