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Dear Police and Crime Panel member

I would like you to raise an issue with our PCC. This is the issue of the PFI deal for firearms training facilities. I like you want the best for our Police Service and the public and the proposed PFI deal with Blue Light Partnerships and Avon and Somerset police is not the best deal, it's the worst deal possible.

As you may know, Wiltshire Police have a statutory requirement to have well trained/qualified firearm officers. They need to be trained and re-certified approx. every six months. This is currently done in-house at Wiltshire Police firearm training facilities at Devizes, Westbury and Chilmark (this one is hired). These facilities could be improved upon, for example there is inadequate heating at Westbury but having said that, the facilities are Chilmark are very good and realistic.

The Cost:

The proposals for the new PFI deal involve a bespoke firearms training facility in Portishead, west of Bristol. On a bad day a three hour drive from Salisbury. The interim financial statement produced by the Wiltshire Police Authority has allocated £700k each year for this deal, under the new Winsor proposals this equates to nearly 30 Police Officers.

The cost of £700k for a facility that the force does not need and is not wanted by the firearms teams themselves; is a waste of money. The opportunity cost of 30 new Police Officers is a scandal.

The cost however, does not take into account two issues, Firstly; the cost of travel, accommodation and overtime associated with the move. Firearms team, trainers and trainees will all have to travel to and from Portishead and be accommodated there. This has not been included in any of the forces calculations and is not part of the £700k cost. My calculations (please do your own) demonstrate that this will add between £150-200k extra to the cost each year.

Secondly, PFI deals mushroom in cost. I've attached one document from Unison that demonstrates this, a link to the Public Accounts Committee report on PFI (which was damning) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubacc/1201/120102.htm> and I'd urge you to read Private Eye on the PFI issue). The evidence that PFI deal costs rise is irrefutable.

The Unison report shows that PFI deals rise in cost and from the NHS experience they rise between 33% to 229% between initial business case and final business case (see page 8 of the report). If I were to assume that this firearms PFI deal was similar, and would rise by the mean average of the NHS examples, then the total yearly cost of the deal will be £1.3m.

You may think I'm being alarmist, but more recent experience shows that once PFI deals are sold on the market to private equity firms, the costs can rise even further. This is why NHS hospitals built under PFI deals are now running into billions and having to be bailed out by the government.

So the total cost to the force for these unwanted facilities could be £1.6m, again, this equates to hiring nearly 80 new Police Officers. I ask you, what's going to drive crime down more, firearms training facilities in Portishead or 80 new Police Officers?

The People:

Of course no one has consulted with the firearms teams about these new facilities. They've been told, but not consulted. Not a single officer wants these new facilities, not because they do not want brand new facilities but because of the considerable inconvenience, unwanted travelling and disruption to family life that the new facilities will bring. Trainers in particular will be travelling between Wiltshire and Portishead on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

There is a very real danger that a significant number of firearms officers and trainers will walk away from firearms and move back to response or NPT, leaving Wiltshire without a firearms capability. Such a situation would be unthinkable and we should not forget the lessons from the Cumbria Shootings in 2010. If a similar situation were to occur in Wiltshire, you can bet it would happen when we don't have a firearms capability to deal with it. And good luck at the public inquiry.

Don't take my word for it, go and talk with officers within the firearms unit and hear first-hand for yourself about the low morale and effect this is having.

The alternative:

Up to £1.6m would allow Wilts Police to refurbish their existing facilities so that they were much better. Even if this was not an option, Thames Valley Police have a world class firearms facility at Sulhampstead,(closer and easier to get to, than Portishead) we could partner with them for firearms training at a fraction of the cost.

We could recruit significant numbers of new Police Officers.

Finally:

I would raise this myself at one of your meetings but at present they are all in Chippenham and between the hours of 10:00 – 13:00. I work full time so if I attend I have to take a day's leave. Could I urge the committee to move around the county and to hold some meetings in the evening.

Kind regards

Colin Skelton