

Criminal Justice Alliance 16 July 2015

Guest speaker – Nick Alston, Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex and Chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners

Nick gave an overview of his background as a Cambridge scientist before serving in the Royal Navy and then enjoying a long career as a civil servant.

Nick grew up in Essex where his father served in the Police Force for nearly 40 years before retiring as the Deputy Chief Constable. Nick's emotional attachment to Essex policing played a significant role in his decision to run as PCC. Despite not having a specific background in criminal justice issues, he had nonetheless worked alongside UK police and counter-terrorism units in NI during his time in the civil service.

Nick's manifesto for the campaign made four commitments: to make all aspects of policing as local as possible; to increase the professionalism of the police; to encourage local partnership; and to provide strong leadership. His vision as PCC for Essex was to end what he saw as an over-reliance on target-setting. His goals had included: local policing; placing the victim at the centre of the CJS; a focus on domestic abuse; reducing reoffending; reducing youth offending; confronting the precursors to crime, i.e. alcohol, mental health problems, and substance abuse; crime prevention; and innovation and technology.

His priorities for the role of the PCC were to provide day-to-day scrutiny of Essex policing, to promote good governance and accountability, and to ensure better engagement between the police and the public.

On specific criminal justice issues, Essex now has specific planning committees for reducing domestic abuse and reducing reoffending. There is also a Restorative Justice project in place and the PCC is involved with the commissioning of victims' services. While Nick does not sit on the Criminal Justice Board himself, there is a representative from the Essex PCC.

Some of the challenges that Nick faced as PCC were specific to Essex. The spill-over of gang-related crime in London is coupled with the presence of several large crime families in Essex. There is also a high level of deprivation in parts of Essex such as Basildon and Southgate.

Questions & Answers:

Tom Lewis-Reynier, Catch22: One of your manifesto commitments was to increase the professionalism of the police. Could you expand on that?

Essex police had been subject to a substantial amount of criticism in recent years, with a number of highly critical IPCC reports resulting from inadequate responses to domestic violence. 49 referrals to the IPCC have recently been made relating to the professional shortcomings of one specialist team. Nick also described the chasing of target figures as an example of what he deemed to be unprofessional behaviour.

Increasing professionalism is all embracing and includes providing more training across all levels of policing on issues ranging from better interview techniques to mental health awareness.

Sally Benton, Nacro: It's refreshing to hear your thoughts on enhancing accountability and professionalism with the police. What are your thoughts on police reform in the future,

particularly with respect to creating more partnerships and exploring new innovations for early interventions?

Nick described a recent pilot scheme, now county-wide in Essex to drug test on arrest for all acquisitive crimes, working with specialist service providers and with the courts and separately the implementation of a 'street triage' system whereby mental health nurses provide assistance to police officers on the street and also at the police station.

Nick also emphasised that there needs to be a greater body of data-driven evidence for police reform in the future and that many of the studies he has looked at have relied on slim sample sizes.

Shane Britton, Revolving Doors: What are your thoughts on the Conservative manifesto commitment to expand the remit of PCCs?

The Home Secretary wants PCCs to be more involved in the provision of joined-up services, citing the experience of the Staffordshire PCC who is involved in a pilot scheme to ensure better coordination between the police and the courts.

Nick stated that PCCs could become more involved in the new CRC contracts, citing his experience in Essex where the chairmanship of the reducing reoffending board has recently moved from the Probation Service and brought to the PCC. In Essex the PCC now leads a reviewing panel including magistrates that provides scrutiny of out-of-court disposals.

Nick also highlighted PCCs involvement in the commissioning of victims' services and outlined the possibility of greater involvement in addressing complaints against the police.

Peter Wilkinson, RJC: What would your assessment be of RJ services in Essex? Could RJ be used more as a diversionary measure as part of an out-of-court disposal?

When he entered office, RJ was not strongly backed and was considered to be a bit vague. While there are now lots of referrals and agencies providing RJ services, Nick described the judiciary as being 'a bit sniffy' about RJ.

Nick is less positive about RJ as a diversionary measure as the services are still quite isolated in pockets and there is a lack of understanding about the subtleties of RJ within the police, particularly at the middle management level.

Ben Summerskill, CJA: What would an improved police complaints procedure look like?

Nick cited Northumbria where complaints are now taken first to the PCC as the person responsible for police in that region. A new police complaints procedure should also perform an initial triage of complaints and provide mediation, where possible. Nick was also not opposed to continuing police involvement in investigating their own organisations in the event of a complaint. He believed in maximum transparency and noted that Essex Police now, at his behest, publish all professional standards reports, with redaction of names. Finally, high performing officers should be rotated through their professional standards departments.

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