

Response to the MOPAC/Metropolitan Police draft Public Access and Engagement Strategy



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4 October 2017

This is my response to the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) draft Public Access and Engagement Strategy, published in July 2017.¹

Consultation on the draft strategy opened on 14 July 2017 and ends on 6 October 2017.²

I echo many of the concerns submitted by the Chair of the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee (PCC), and I particularly share the views expressed in that response about the quality and promotion of the consultation itself.

Local meetings were arranged at very short notice in many areas, and I don't believe the implications of this proposal have reached many of the people who are most affected. This includes those without English as their first language and people with accessibility problems. The draft Equality Impact Assessment notes that there may be a larger impact on these Londoners, and yet I cannot see evidence that efforts have been made to reach these people for their views on the changes.

I support the recommendation of the PCC that dedicated ward officers must have support in choosing accessible locations for the more flexible 'contact sessions' they are being asked to arrange in local areas. I also agree that a more detailed assessment of how provision for people with language needs will be made is needed before these plans go ahead.

Dramatic changes need careful appraisal

Overall, I believe these proposals are too dramatic, are 'one size fits all' in nature, and that more detailed consideration needs to be made of each of the front counters, local bases and police stations listed for closure before any action is taken.

The plan takes as its starting point that the provision of front counters will reduce to one per borough. However, borough boundaries are not rational units in terms of where people live, and the needs of different communities. In discussion with Safer Neighbourhood Boards, the PCC heard their view that the major town centres, as identified in the London Plan, should be used as the starting point for where front counters are needed and I agree that this approach would be more rigorous.

I would also like to see individual consideration made of the costs and benefits of closing each of the proposed front counters and local bases. Even if this has to be done in a summary format rather than a full analysis it would be useful for local people to see. At minimum this should include a screening test for equalities impacts in the local area.

The approach of only reducing contact points and assessing needs and investing in new public facilities where needed, seems to be at odds with the policy set out in the 2017/18 MPS Business Plan, which promised a rationalisation programme for its estate that “will prioritise selling the buildings that cost us more than they benefit, and invest in others to create a modern environment for our staff and the public.”³

In financial terms, the case for these changes has been made in press communications in terms of the anticipated savings needed to the MPS revenue budget of around £400 million. However, the consultation document states that all these changes will save only £10 million per year in running costs. The principal benefits will be felt in the capital budget, with approximately £170 million expected to be raised by the sale of assets.

A large majority (85 per cent) of the local bases and contact points listed in the appendix to the draft strategy are leased or licensed rather than owned by the MPS.⁴ This means that, in many cases, keeping a contact point or base open, at least to the end of an existing agreement, will result in only a marginal cost compared with leaving early. Benefits to the community will be able to continue for longer if decisions on the future of leased or licensed properties are only made when a review is needed anyway.

Do officers support these changes?

It is unclear whether officers who work on the ground in the stations and bases that are set for closure were consulted before these proposals were put together. MOPAC must seek their views on the practical problems these changes may cause to their daily work before making any final decisions.

This is particularly needed where changes might affect the work of new dedicated ward officers and safer neighbourhood teams (SNTs). Different boroughs staff and resource these teams in various ways and there may be more impact on current working patterns and local contact from the closure of facilities in some areas than others. Again, a ‘one size fits all’ policy cannot be employed here.

I have heard from several local ward officers that despite the benefits of new technology and spending more time away from desktop computers, neighbourhood teams will still need somewhere convenient in each local area to:

- charge and update their ipads
- change clothes when needed
- hold private meetings
- store their sensitive/hazardous police equipment securely.

Officers appear to be unsure of how a room or locker within a building not owned by the police or another public service can be an adequate replacement for the latter two purposes. It seems likely that, in many cases under these plans, equipment charging and collection will need to take place much further from officers’ wards than currently.

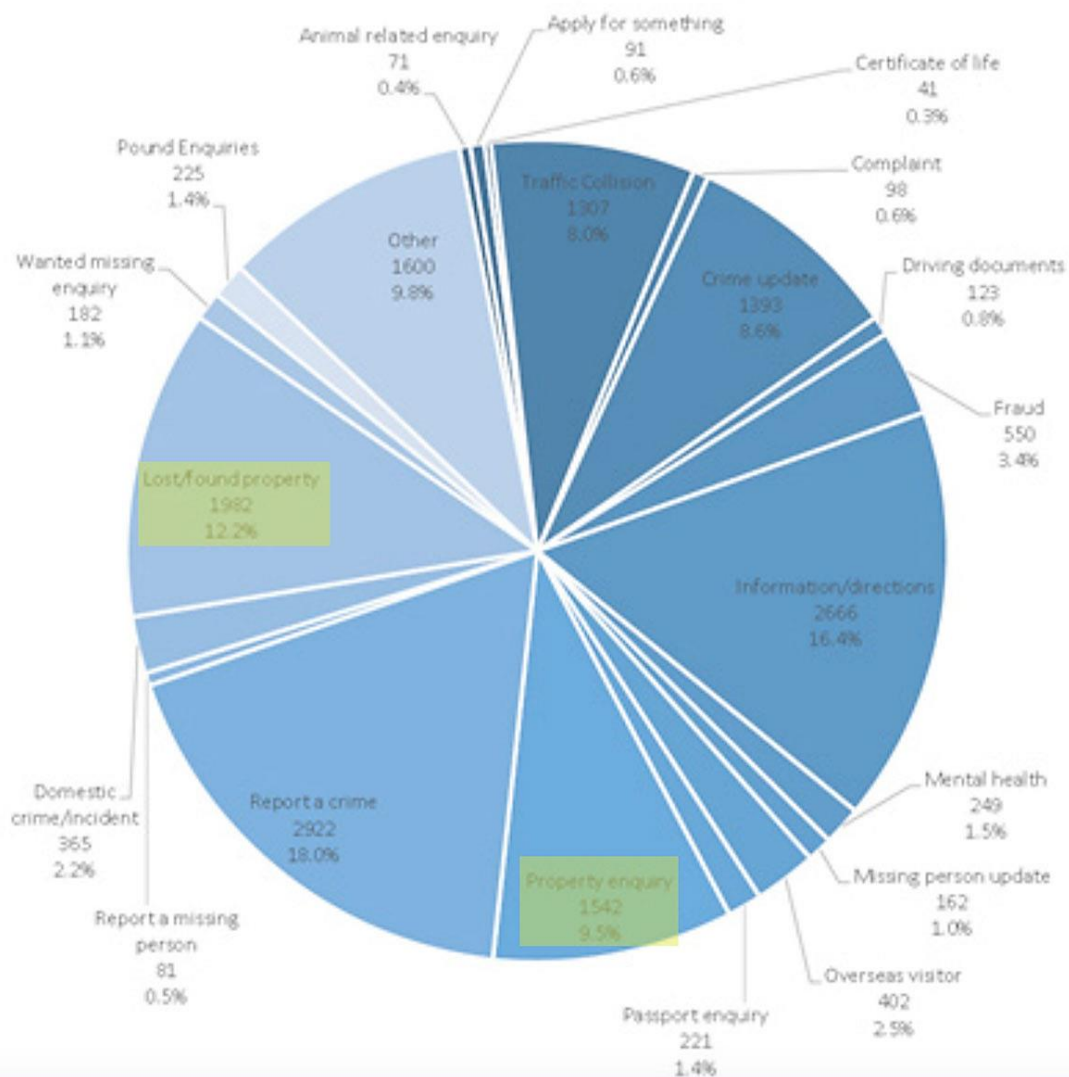
I also have concerns about the potential for reliance on private companies for the provision of police services. Rooms in supermarkets have been suggested in connection with this consultation, though this proposal does not appear in the consultation itself.

I believe that any alternative local police facilities should be in public buildings, owned by local authorities or other agencies, and have private rooms available when needed. The public needs to be reassured they have strong security arrangements in place for equipment that do not depend on private companies.

The wider value to communities of these facilities

Despite the consultation document’s reliance on crime reporting as its measure of the usefulness of a front counter, the footfall survey conducted earlier this year and reported in Chart 6 (reproduced below) shows that people value and use police front counters for many other reasons.

Chart 6: Reasons for visiting a front counter



This variety of uses shows that police front counters are not simply an interface for crime reporting, but have a wider community value. I worry that in some areas these contact points may be the last public facing community space open to the public on some high streets, as libraries, housing offices and community centres are often closing or consolidating in a similar way, due to council budget cuts.

This is another reason to look more closely at the individual value of each facility, including its context.

If it is found that there are no other public service buildings or contact facilities nearby, then MOPAC should consider offering the MPS facility to local public services, or to local community groups to staff as a front counter for enquiries relating to a range of public services, and as a community space.

This could be done on a trial basis at least until the end of current leases without incurring additional expense or significantly reducing the savings made. Police officers could work with the community on making this transition during a handover period, which would also have benefits in helping to cement the local knowledge and recognition of new dedicated ward officers.

The current police lost property function needs attention and could be moved to Transport for London

A high proportion of non-crime related uses of current police front counters are for property issues – either handing in lost property, enquiring if a lost item has been found or collecting items. According to the survey shown in Chart 6, more than one in five visits to police front counters was to collect, enquire about or drop off lost property.

When an item of value is found outside the public transport system most people will seek to hand it in to the police, and the MPS website currently suggests that these should be taken to the nearest police station.⁵

The issue of other uses of front counters was raised at a meeting of the Police and Crime Committee in July 2017, and Deputy Mayor Sophie Linden said “Some of it is for directions, lost property, things that are not police matters. I am afraid it is just one of those things.”⁶

I tend to agree that lost property is not necessarily a police matter, but London still needs a well-known way for the public to hand in lost property to a trusted and convenient location. If the MPS reduces its provision of these locations dramatically, then an alternative should be nominated and this must be clearly communicated.

The obvious suggestion is for TfL, which has an established lost property function of its own (and a dedicated office for collecting items) to become the single ‘official’ public handler of lost property in London, referring only suspicious items to police. I suggest this is done in a more concerted and planned way. Retaining the current advice form at the MPS website could mean many people do not hand in items because the remaining police contact points are too distant to make this convenient.

This proposal could save even more police time and resources than the current plans, and make the handling of lost property in London more efficient than the current situation of duplicating lost property handling across more than one public provider.

If this change is made, then it will of course need to be very clearly communicated to the public and visitors to London, via tourist information offices, posters, leaflets and other materials.

Getting maximum community benefit from vacated buildings

The consultation document says one of the benefits of the proposals is that: “we will be making available sites for development in line with Mayoral and local planning guidance.”

It also says: “We will encourage developers to focus on the potential for affordable housing on these sites and the opportunities to access affordable housing grant.”

The disposals policy of the MPS should go further than mere compliance with planning rules and seek to obtain wider public benefits. This issue has been raised by me before in discussions with the MPS at Budget and Performance Committee meetings in City Hall. I believe the wording “encourage” is not a strong enough promise to make to Londoners for what will happen to these public assets.

Creating a disposals policy that looks at the wider Mayoral goals, including ways to reduce crime through providing better housing, should lead to a much stronger emphasis on requiring housing that Londoners can afford from these sites.

Requests for a policy like this have also been brought up by members of the public at consultation meetings. In response, at the public meeting I attended, Deputy Mayor Sophie Linden stated that there would be a minimum of “35 per cent social housing” on the sites. Later in the meeting her wording was modified to say simply “affordable housing”. Any promise of a minimum amount of affordable housing is welcome if it means affordable according to the Mayor’s definitions of London Affordable Rent and London Living Rent. However, the amount achievable on these sites should be much higher, ideally at least 50 per cent at social rents.

One way of maximising public benefit would be to allow the sites to be bought as part of the Mayor’s new plan for land acquisition announced as part of his draft Housing Strategy.⁷ The details of this plan aren’t yet completely clear, but the Mayor appears to be creating a rolling £250 million fund for land purchase from other public bodies that will then be released at less than ‘best consideration’ rates to councils, housing associations, community builders and developers who offer more than the minimum of social and affordable housing.

I would like to see a much stronger commitment to support the wider goals of the Mayor from MOPAC and the MPS as part of this plan, and for the policy to be clearly set out in writing before any disposals go ahead.

Reviewing specific sites

As proposed above, individual reviews of the rationale for each closure are needed, and some changes already seem to have been accepted as a result of feedback from borough officers and the public. I was glad, for example, to see one new local officer base has already been added to plans for Camden compared with what is in the consultation document, and details of this were presented to the public meeting I attended.

The consultation questionnaire asks Londoners whether MOPAC and the MPS should “consider low-cost alternatives to front counters for communities over 45 minutes from

their nearest front counter” and I believe keeping open existing bases with leases still to run would be a suitable low-cost way of doing this.

Two local bases which officers value and use, where considerable investment has been put into SNT facilities, and where leases have several years to run are below. These are just two examples that have come to my attention via local people but I suspect there are many others with a case to preserve them, if individual assessments were made.

Streatham High Road police front counter and base

This was created in 2015 to replace a nearby police station, and has a front counter and SNT base converted from a shop. Around £500,000 was spent on the new, fully accessible, facility, and when I visited it was well used, with residents seen queuing for the front counter service. The nearest alternative front counter proposed in the strategy is at Brixton some distance away. Lambeth is a large borough and the building is used as a base for three ward teams, due to its location between the wards. The lease on the building runs until 2024.

There seems to be very little sense in throwing away such a recent investment, and local residents are dismayed that the base they fought hard for not long ago is now proposed for closure. Nearly 2,000 people have signed petitions opposing the plan online and on paper.⁸

Highgate Road police base

This base is used by the local dedicated ward officers and PCSOs and was converted from a shop several years ago, with additional facilities and private rooms for meetings. Highgate is an outlying ward in Camden and the convenience of this base is helpful. I believe that the lease on the shop building runs until 2019.

A community centre nearby is being rebuilt by the council and a dedicated space for the police team is being proposed within that project. However, the very earliest the new building will be ready is 2020, and it is unclear whether Kentish Town police station has enough space to accommodate these functions either now (if the base is closed) or for a year if the base is kept until its lease runs out.

In addition, I have been contacted by residents concerned about the proposed closure of the 24-hour police station at **Notting Hill**. I am particularly concerned about this proposal in the light of the trauma and continued public need for reassurance following the Grenfell Tower disaster. With this station receiving more than four crime reports per day, it should be preserved as a public point of contact for this community. Councillors and more than 2,000 residents have also written and signed petitions in support of this station.⁹

Summary: my key proposals for change and review of these plans

1. These plans should be reviewed, with more attention given to the appraisal of individual front counters and local police bases. It is likely to be found that the value of many of these exceeds the savings that could be made if closed, especially for leased or recently renovated properties. The review should look at:
 - the views of officers who use each facility
 - the wider value to the community, as well as the context, including whether the removal of a facility will lead to a high street or community losing its last public service contact point
 - allowing more facilities to remain until the end of their leases, before further review.
2. For the lost property functions carried out by the police, the Mayor should consider moving these officially to TfL. This could potentially increase efficiency overall within the GLA, though will need careful communication if it is to be done well.
3. The property disposal strategy for assets that are to be closed should be co-ordinated with the Mayor so that it fits into his overall land and housing strategy, with the maximum possible provision of social housing— ideally a guaranteed 50 per cent across the sites. Looking at this in terms of the wider Mayoral goals including reducing crime should lead to more emphasis on housing Londoners can afford and less on maximising only financial returns for the MPS.

References

¹ The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and Metropolitan Police Service Public Access and Engagement Strategy. Draft strategy for consultation, July 2017
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/public_access_strategy.pdf

² Consultation website: <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/mopac-consultations/share-your-views-accessing-met>

³ Metropolitan Police Service business plan 2017-18 https://www.met.police.uk/globalassets/foi-media/priorities_and_how_we_are_doing/corporate/mps_business_plan_2017_2018.pdf

⁴ Response to MQ 2017.3615
http://questions.london.gov.uk/QuestionSearch/searchclient/questions/question_295463

⁵ See: <https://www.met.police.uk/report/lost-or-found-property/>

⁶ Transcript of Q&A. PCC 20 July 2017
<https://www.london.gov.uk/moderngov/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=240&Mid=6281&Ver=4>

⁷ Mayor's housing strategy: City Hall to buy land for affordable homes. Press release 6 September 2017
<https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-launches-housing-strategy-for-london>

⁸ <https://www.change.org/p/jonathan-bartley-save-streatham-s-new-police-base> and
<https://www.change.org/p/sos-saveourstations>

⁹ <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/newsroom/all-council-statements/council-joins-campaign-save-notting-hill-police-station> and <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/save-notting-hill-police-station>