

Public question to the Surrey Police and Crime Panel – 26 September 2022

1. I am a politics student living in Surrey, and I would like to understand how the PCC's role as an impartial public servant, supported by the OPCC and funded by council taxpayers, is kept separate from the PCC's own political persona. I note for example that the PCC's official twitter account, which is presumably maintained by the OPCC, frequently references and promotes the PCC's personal twitter account, on which the PCC posts party political and occasionally controversial messages.
2. When the PCC/OPCC is considering an initiative or visit in a particular area, does the PCC consult the relevant elected representatives in that area, for example district or borough councillors, or are any communications primarily confined to the PCC's party political colleagues?
3. Finally, are there any constraints on official statements and photoshoots by the PCC/OPCC during pre-election periods, as there are for other public bodies, and who is responsible for maintaining the separation?"

Hugo Tillott

Question 1 response:

Whether or not a Police and Crime Commissioner has a particular allegiance to a political party, it is recognised that it is a political role. In Surrey's case, I have been elected as a Conservative Police & Crime Commissioner. A PCC is able to act in a political capacity and can campaign as a local politician who, as a matter of record, is the PCC. However, all PCCs are bound by the Nolan Principles; the Oath of Office; and rules governing the use of local authority resources. This means that PCCs should not use their Public Office for political purposes. Equally, all staff within the Office of the PCC are politically restricted and cannot act to support the PCC in party political business. In all their activities, a PCC and their staff must, therefore, make the crucial distinction between the PCC as a holder of a Public Office, and the PCC as the individual.

As you rightly point out, the PCC's official twitter account is maintained by staff within the Office of the PCC. Particular attention is paid to our use of social media, ensuring that our official account is not used for explicit or implicit political support. Referencing the PCC's personal account does not necessarily imply support for every tweet made by that account. PCCs are able to use their personal accounts as they wish and any party political views expressed must be made only by the PCC.

Question 2 response:

There are certain times when the PCC has a statutory duty to consult widely with people within the entire police force area – for instance in developing their Police & Crime Plan, or setting the council tax precept. At other times, the nature and extent of consultation and engagement is likely to vary depending on the initiative. It may be with district and borough councillors (irrespective of their political persuasion) or indeed more widely with, for example, the voluntary, business or charitable sectors.

Question 3 response:

Yes. The restrictions placed on local authorities by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity applies also to Police & Crime Commissioners and their Deputies. Guidance has been published by both the Association of Police & Crime Commissioners (APCC) and by the Association of Police & Crime Commissioner Chief Executives (APACE). These pieces of guidance advise PCCs and their staff how to ensure they exercise greater care to observe laws and rules which apply in any event, during the period of heightened sensitivity before elections.

Whilst the actions of PCCs are ultimately their responsibility, the PCC's Monitoring Officer will advise both the PCC and the OPCC staff to ensure that the Office is not misused for party political gain – either deliberately or inadvertently.

Lisa Townsend, Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner