

Letter text from ACC Adrian Whiting, Dorset Police, to a number of enquirers who had asked for views on the accreditation arrangements for the Conservative Party Conference 2006.

With regard to the accreditation process I would very strongly refute the suggestion that Central Office have made, that CCO had "passed through all the necessary paperwork for all of the delegates in July of this year". This is simply untrue. Perhaps you will permit me to set out what I hope will be a more complete picture of the circumstances surrounding this year's accreditation process. I will then turn to the more general security issues, and include the specific set of circumstances you mention in respect of exiting the island site.

For quite some time the party conference police forces, originally being Sussex, Lancashire and ourselves, and more recently joined by Greater Manchester, have planned the party conference security operations jointly and shared experience. This has led to a number of developments, some of which you may be familiar with. Perhaps the most obvious is the National Barrier Asset which is seen at each party conference location nowadays.

There has, therefore, been a considerable history between forces of co-operating and learning being shared to improve the policing operations year on year. I am sure that this will also indicate that the police forces involved in party conference policing are only too keen to learn from any lessons that arise and to develop the arrangements so that issues need not be repeated in future years.

As you yourself observe, the matter of delay was not unique to Dorset. Together with my Chief Constable and a number of my Commanders, I took the time to visit the operation in Manchester, and found they too were experiencing a similar problem. I am advised that, albeit to a lesser extent, such problems arose at the Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton as well. In our own case, in Dorset, we undertook the validation process in respect of 9,012 applicants forwarded through the party office organisers and it was a number of these individuals who experienced the extremely regrettable delays and to whom I extend my sympathies for the frustration that they have experienced.

However, such applicants are not the only applicants to seek conference passes and a number of organisations chose to ask us to deal with the applications on their behalf. Typically, these are the service providers e.g. catering and Group 4 Securicor.

In Bournemouth this year we validated 2,659 such applications without significant delays, basically because applications were made in a timely fashion throughout the operation. Incidentally, these applications were typically the more challenging to vet, as a large number were foreign nationals, but we achieved this in good time

I say this because I feel it would tend to suggest that the issue of delay is not something peculiar to the police element of this operation but is actually to be found where the party conference organisers have been involved in the process. Although the 11,671 total number of people validated for the Conservative Party Conference 2006 is a significant one, we had from the outset planned on being able to address numbers of this order.

Working closely with party organisers we had made it clear that the national threat levels, which have been widely made known in public, were significantly increased from previous years. In addition, incidents throughout this year which, irrespective of the fact that we discussed them with organisers, had received significant publicity in their own right, had indicated a variety of methods of attack that might be considered.

As I anticipate you will be aware, the security operations for party conferences attract a specific grant from the Home Office so that the costs do not fall locally. As you would expect, there is considerable audit of the arrangements which have to be agreed between the party organisers and the police and, in our case, are subject to inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

There is an expectation that the operation will be run in both an effective and efficient manner and that arrangements are not put in place unnecessarily simply because the costs will fall elsewhere. Ultimately, all of the cost is borne by the public purse. In discussion therefore, we had raised our concerns that individual checks would take longer than in previous years. Some would clearly be easier than others e.g. individuals who already have a higher degree of security vetting clearance would not take so long as a foreign national who had not been in the UK for very long.

As I expect you will be aware, "Late Accreditation" refers to the period of time when the Late Accreditation office actually sets up and runs near the venue, during the actual conference period. Our Conference Planning Team entered into a written agreement with the conference organisers in respect of a whole range of issues, one aspect of which I have reproduced below:-

"17. Every effort must be made by the party to ensure that the number of applications made to them before late accreditation, but brought to late accreditation for police accreditation, are kept to an absolute minimum. Those applications brought to late accreditation will be processed in normal time and will attract no special treatment. It may be that, due to the time constraints of late accreditation these applications will not be processed in sufficient time for entry to the conference."

Of the 8,663 electronic applications that we received through the party conference organisers this year 2,073 (i.e. 24%) were delivered to us at late accreditation. I personally see this as something of a disregard for the agreement that had been put in place. The more so when it becomes apparent that quite a number of the individuals whose applications were delivered at this extremely late stage had themselves applied to the party in July. Which I would suggest strongly refutes the assertion made to you by CCO.

Even though our agreement was that there would be no special arrangement in place, the fact was that I arranged for additional staff to be drafted in and indeed during three nights of the late accreditation (in conference) phase itself, additional staff worked through the night on two occasions and to 0300 hours on a third at which point, regrettably, they could process applications no further since matters needed to be attended to during daytime when applicants and others might be available eg. to answer questions. The operation had to be put on hold for four hours until the day turn team could progress matters from 0700 hours. This, of course, required me to divert officers and staff from other activities around the force in order to meet this need. There has been a suggestion that the officers departed at 0300hrs on the night mentioned above, without advising the Party staff, but the detective Inspector leading

the police team assures me they did speak, as he had to give information about the physical security of their area of the building to the party staff at that time.

The whole purpose of the agreement, and the discussions in the planning phase of conference, was to ensure that the cost to the public purse was kept within the reasonable bounds that had been examined by the independent inspections of our proposals and to ensure that the entire operation, not only the police element, was an efficient spend of public money. I would respectfully suggest that even though my team showed goodwill in respect of dealing with the issue that had been thrust upon us, the circumstances were not made any easier by what may be seen as flaws in the administration arrangements within the party side of the vetting operation.

Whilst I can understand that there would be a significant amount of reprioritisation by the party of those who were seeking accreditation, which would of course upset those individuals who may have been in the queue for a longer period of time, the fact is that it became increasingly difficult for my staff to determine what cohesive approach the party staff were seeking to take. As an example, five of my staff received five simultaneous requests from different individuals in the party operation to give a progress report on one individual. It was, therefore, for our accreditation manager to spot that the party had tasked five of our staff separately to the same question, and draw the enquiries together into one place so that one individual undertook them and did not waste the valuable time of four others. Sadly, this was not an isolated occurrence

I would also, reluctantly, indicate that some 35 passes were formally reported to us as "missing" from the Conservative Party Office. They were passes that had been vetted and printed but had been lost by the party operation before they could be issued. This did not indicate to me the normal high standard of administrative arrangements that have been present in previous years and, clearly, dealing with the cancellation of 35 passes, whilst not a difficult task did, nonetheless, distract members of my team.

I say "reluctantly" because we have routinely enjoyed first class working relationships with party organisers and others. Regrettably, in the pressured situation that then arose, relationships became strained and at one point, when we were effectively being deluged by query slips, some of them multiple slips for the same question as I have illustrated above, my accreditation manager found he had no option but to politely close the door between our office and the party accreditation office, station a uniform officer at it, and use that officer to physically convey any paperwork and computer memory sticks between the two offices.

To have done otherwise would have continued to have resulted in a situation where staff were being asked so many questions, and being given so many reprioritisations from the party office, that their primary function could not be undertaken. Fundamentally then I would offer that, with the original agreement not being adhered to, and at a very late stage, we were expected to resolve the problem, irrespective of other considerations for the security of the event. Indeed, there was also a suggestion made to me by the party that there would be a recommendation to Mr Cameron that all delegates be admitted to the conference without a pass. There was a suggestion that physical searching alone be utilised, which tended to suggest that a full understanding of the role of vetting had not been established. I personally think it is difficult to argue that, where for want of compliance with a relatively simple administrative agreement, that additional public funding should be committed. Nonetheless, this is what took place.

Further, I was deeply disappointed by the lines I have subsequently discovered were being promulgated by certain of the party organisers. There had been joint agreement that we would work collectively on solving the matters at hand, would examine in detail what had taken place and would work jointly in offering explanations at the time. There was agreement at the time that party representatives, it being the party's conference, would deal face to face with those people suffering the considerable delays. At first I was happy that they would represent the joint views and, being the party's conference, were best placed to do it.

I agreed to a request that police officers would help administrate the queue and indeed we went further and, in the first instance, partitioned off part of the ballroom area of the Pavilion, which we were using for operational police catering, so that it was available as a more comfortable waiting area for delegates. We then worked with Bournemouth Borough Council, the owners of the Pavilion, to assist in securing the auditorium itself as a waiting area. We subsequently assigned additional officers to help with the added security implications of this re-arrangement.

My disappointment stems from finding that delegates were then being told that the delays were solely due to the police vetting arrangements. This, I consider to have been a very bad misrepresentation since it was far from being the whole truth. The fact that this line was then promulgated to the media put me in the thoroughly undesired position of needing to respond in order to seek to present a more complete picture of the circumstances.

I would venture to summarise that since delays in the validation process occurred across the range of party political conferences this year, and that they occurred in the element of that process where the organisers themselves were involved, the information I have provided above in respect of the timeliness of applications would indicate that the delays were not the fault of Dorset Police. Having said that, on behalf of the force, I have again extended every sympathy to those who were delayed.

I will be looking for next year's conference season to take a different approach, in the light of the experience we have had, and following the debrief with the other forces involved elsewhere this year. I anticipate that the approach for future years will not place any reliance on any agreements between the organisers and the police in respect of the timeliness of submissions but will seek to be able to deal immediately with a significant submission for late accreditation.

The potential downside for this is that I anticipate it will have a greater cost to the taxpayer to approach the issue in this way if applications for accreditation cannot simply be brought much earlier in the year. I have already discussed this with the Home Office and will do so with HMIC as I anticipate that the bids for specific conference grants will need to be larger next year.

In respect of the heightened general security arrangements, I believe there has been considerable national publicity regarding the raised threat levels within UK, and to UK interests overseas. Recent Counter Terrorist operations have revealed publicly the diverse range of methods of attack, the determination of those engaged in such criminality, and the fact that an attacker's own survival is no longer an element of their planning – all very significant changes from previous and other existing threats. At a party conference it is not only the delegates who are at risk, but local communities as well. If an attacker is not deterred from planning an attack by the security in the first

place, then local communities near the venue are at greater risk, for example by an attack that is simply undertaken nearby, or by an alternative attack venue being chosen at the last minute. Our Counter Terrorist and general security arrangements have been based on the national and specific threat levels, and as a consequence our arrangements were very much the same as those in Manchester. The restrictions that such arrangements represent are greater simply because the threat levels are currently higher than in previous years.

I hope that I have been able to assist with an explanation in respect of each of the points you have raised. As ever, I remain only too happy to discuss matters further if would assist.

Yours sincerely,