

WAN column: January 2019

By Martin Stilwell

I was very pleased to see that, at Surrey Neighbourhood Watch's AGM on January 15, Woking's PCSO Lesley Foster was given an award for being the most outstanding police employee.

Lesley was selected ahead of other uniformed and non-uniformed staff across the county. She is very well known to many people in our borough and seems to be 'everywhere, all the time'. Her triumph shines a light on the important work Police Community Support Officers do, and their contribution to our safety and wellbeing.

Policing in this modern era is both difficult and expensive. Long gone are the days when your local copper would know every criminal in town in a way reminiscent of *Dixon of Dock Green*. To better manage resources, the role of PCSO was created in the early 2000s. These uniformed officers carry out a great deal of local community policing. They work alongside regular police officers in reducing crime and making our area safer.

Make no mistake – ~~these~~ **PCSOs** are salaried, uniformed, full-time, shift-working and well-trained officers. However, their powers are restricted when compared to those of a Police Constable. For example, they cannot carry out any arrests, but they can issue fixed penalty notices. Their uniform is deliberately less intimidating than a PC's and the public are more likely to talk freely to a PCSO than a PC, with all the paraphernalia such as handcuffs in full view. Any home visit following a burglary is likely to be by a PCSO rather than a PC. They attend schools and community meetings, can be seen walking about in town, follow up or collect information on low level crime, check potentially abandoned vehicles, and are often asked to accompany PCs to arrests or incidents.

Unfortunately, they are also sometimes subject to the same abuse meted out to PCs by those members of the public who we wish were not in Woking.

In Woking, there are 9 PCSOs, including Lesley, who support the 3 PCs in the borough **neighbourhood** policing team. They all operate from the Civic Offices, where Woking Police **neighbourhood teams** are now based. Working alongside Woking Borough Council staff has enabled the police and council to co-ordinate campaigns and ensure the right person is on hand to resolve any issue.

So, next time you see a PCSO on the beat, stop and have a chat. You will find them very approachable and happy to spend time talking with you. In the meantime, PCs have more time to do the role we want them to do: nab criminals.