

The other week I had a wee wander round the shops in Dingwall. I know; it's an exciting life I lead. There were two coppers standing outside the shoe shop talking to each other. They turned around and walked together up the street, continuing whatever conversation they were having. I had no reason to speak to them myself. If someone had snatched my bag (full of valuable points cards and half used lipstick) I wouldn't have hesitated but as I had no crime to report and no need of the time, there was no reason to interrupt them. I wouldn't have butted in unless I thought I had something important to tell them.

Then I heard that the Metropolitan Police have announced they are soon to be sending their foot patrol officers out singly instead of in pairs. I thought more about these two cops. If there had been only one, he or she might have made eye contact with the shoppers on the street. Maybe even said hello or commented on the weather. The point is that he or she could have connected with ordinary people on the streets.

Law-abiding citizens actually have very little direct contact with the police. We sometimes see them driving past on the way to some unknown but doubtless important mission, but many of us only see police officers at big events such as football matches or the Black Isle Show. I haven't spoken to an officer since last year's Loopallu when Inspector Matthew Reiss was wandering around the town chatting to visitors and locals. We passed the time of day pleasantly for a few minutes before he set off down the street talking, as were his officers, to other festival goers and no doubt at the same time on the lookout for drugs and too much drink. If he had been patrolling with another police officer, I probably wouldn't have stopped to chat.

Now I never had any information to pass on, being of an age and demeanour not normally identified for approach by drug dealers and those looking for a fight.

But I have no doubt that had I seen anything suspicious in this regard I would have mentioned it during our brief conversation. The police call it intelligence gathering and it is a useful tool for them to identify and collect evidence against ne'er do wells.

Much is made about the lack of local bobbies in our smaller towns and villages. You might well have your own police officer, and even a station, in your community, but remember he or she (like the rest of us) doesn't work for 80% of the week. Couple that to the fact that when they are on duty, they can be called away to an incident on the other side of the county at any time and it's no wonder that they are increasingly only spotted at community council and ward meetings.

Let's face it, there are only a limited number of officers (92 constables) covering a vast geographical area. At any one time some of them are on holiday, off ill, filling in paperwork or attending court, training courses or meetings. Many more of them are on duty when the pubs and clubs in the bigger towns empty at night and most people are safely asleep at home or too drunk to appreciate their presence.

Whenever I talk to others about this, overwhelmingly I hear that people want to see more officers walking our villages during the day. Will this reduce crime? I doubt it; most of our citizens are law abiding by nature and not because of the presence of our local bobby. Will it make us feel safer? Well it might, but research has shown time and again that increasing a visible police presence only makes the public worry that crime too is on the increase.

However, more police on the beat is clearly what the public are asking for, and patrolling singly rather than in pairs will immediately double the area covered, at the same time making them more approachable. If the means streets of London can be safe enough for single officers, then why not Ross-shire too?