

ILEC Conference 2006

Discussion Paper (1)

Current Issues

1) Structure

The structure of the police service in England and Wales has been the subject of considerable debate over the course of the last year in both policing circles and parliament.

Following the *Closing the Gap*¹ report by HMIC (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary)² in September 2005, the Government embarked on a contentious force amalgamations programme. The aim was to merge many of the existing 43 forces into larger units. This, it was said, would create vast economies of scale and better equip forces to deliver protective services and combat cross-border crime. Although disputed by the Government, police authorities predicted that the amalgamations would cost upwards of half a billion pounds.

Opponents argued that the real motivation behind the mergers was not to reform police forces but to create regional super-forces in line with the Government's own controversial plans for regional assemblies. The abject refusal to consider mergers that crossed these regional government boundaries fuelled mistrust.

Opponents also voiced concerns that creating larger forces would detract from the current emphasis on neighbourhood policing; and that larger forces would be more distant from the communities they serve. Few believed that any savings derived from economies of scale would offset the massive start-up costs.

A change of Home Secretary in 2006 saw a change in policy. Although the new incumbent argued that the need for change remained potent, he was unconvinced and unwedded to the existing plans. As a result a halt was called to forced force mergers and the service is waiting to see what developments the future may hold. The question of what is the best way to provide so-called protective services in order to tackle level two crime remains unanswered.

¹ http://inspectors.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmic/inspect_reports1/thematic-inspections/closinggap05.pdf

² <http://inspectors.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmic/>

2) Workforce Modernisation

Police modernisation in the UK can be characterised by what is known as the 'mixed economy' approach: a blend of sworn and unsworn personnel, some with police powers, some with partial powers and some with no powers. The driving force behind this has been the need to improve effectiveness and efficiency, to improve professionalism, and to decrease costs.

Community Support Officers (CSOs) – police personnel with limited police powers introduced in 2002 – are increasing rapidly in number. By 2008 they are likely to reach 24,000 in total (police officer numbers are currently in the region of 140,000).

Not surprisingly, such a rapid introduction of CSOs has put the service under considerable financial strain. Although CSOs were initially funded by a separate funding stream, it is clear that fears that they could lead to a drop in police numbers could soon be realised. A number of forces have already stopped recruiting fully-sworn police officers and numbers nationwide are set to fall for the first time since 2001.

Recent years have also seen the introduction of a wide range of specialist staff to perform tasks previously undertaken solely by police officers. These include civilian investigators and custody officers.

3) Pay, Terms and Conditions

This year, for the first time since 1979, the Police Negotiating Board (PNB) failed to reach an agreement on the annual uprating of police pay. In previous years agreement has been based on an indexation of private sector workers' pay. This annual increase ensured police pay did not fall behind other groups of workers and took into account the dangers officers face and recognised the ban on any form of industrial action.

The Police Federation argue that the real reason behind the pay disagreement is that the Treasury – which ultimately fund police pay – have demanded that no public sector salary rise above 2% (below the rate of inflation). We argue that our pay settlement only reflects what others have already received and that groups with rights to take industrial action, have received more than the Treasury's guidelines. To make an example of police officers, who are restricted from taking industrial action is cause for concern. It also appears the independence of the PNB has been critically undermined by outside interference by the Treasury.

4) Officer Safety

At our annual conference this year we conducted a survey of our entire membership, much of which centred on officer safety. Two conclusions were clear: first, although not wanting to see the police service become fully-armed, most officers wanted to see a swifter armed response with considerably more trained AFO's; second, the vast majority of officers supported the wider roll-out of TASER to either more or all frontline officers.³

³ Nationally, just under 5% of officers are AFOs (Authorised Firearms Officers)

The Police Federation has also sought to improve officer training in a number of ways, particularly monitoring the delivery of refresher and probationer training – the level of which rarely match the nationally recognised minimum standards. Through our research we have demonstrated that officers who are better trained are less likely to be injured and forces are less likely to face litigation. This has been recognised by a recent HMIC (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary) report.

5) Professional Standards

Accountability mechanisms for police officers in the UK, both in terms of misconduct procedures and performance, are under almost constant review.

With officers under such close scrutiny the Police Federation has sought to ensure systems and processes are both fair and transparent in practice – not just on paper. High profile incidents such as the shooting at Stockwell tube station following the 7/7 bombings in London understandably lead to massive media interest. Whilst it is correct that such incidents are closely examined it is a concern that people view them from a position of hindsight rather than taking into account the context and massive pressures officers faced at the time.

We supported the introduction of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) several years ago. Recent events have, however, called into question their independence. They are perceived by officers as being the complainants spokesperson as opposed to an independent investigator. They have been keen to adopt a lower standard of proof (51%/49%) for all cases as opposed to the current position where the balance of probability applies to most cases but with a sliding scale reflecting a higher standard where an officers career is in jeopardy.

Recent attempts to remove police officers rights to legal representation have been fought off where their career is in danger.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and IPCC appear to apply a different standard to prosecution decisions for police officers. Too long is being taken in reaching decisions to prosecute and police officers are being prosecuted on evidence that arguably falls below a prima facie case.