

# POLICE REFORM: LESSONS FROM THE PAST, PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Report of the  
20<sup>th</sup> Oxford Policing Policy Forum  
held 12 May 2025

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# 1. The Oxford Policing Policy Forum

The Oxford Policing Policy Forum (OPPF) is a joint initiative between the Police Foundation, the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford, Thames Valley Police and BT. First convened in 2006, the Forum provides a unique space for police leaders, scrutineers, subject matter experts, government officials, academics, campaigners and other invited stakeholders to discuss the pressing policing issues of the day, under the Chatham House Rule.

After a break of some eight years, the 20th OPPF was convened at All Souls College, Oxford on 12th May 2025 to address the theme **Police reform: lessons from the past, prospects for the future**. This report provides a thematic commentary of the short framing presentations provided and the conversations that ensued.

## 2. Background

At the NPCC and APCC Annual Conference in November 2024, the Home Secretary sketched out a ‘road map’ for a programme of police reform intended to modernise English and Welsh policing and support the government’s Safer Streets Mission.<sup>1</sup> Alongside measures to boost neighbourhood policing, improve police performance monitoring and catalyse crime prevention activity, the announcement included provisions for a new National Centre of Policing to be created, to improve inter-force coordination and provide police support services in a more consistent and efficient way. Initially focused on existing shared services, such as national IT programmes, forensics and air support, the emerging plan offers scope for the new Centre to develop into a much larger operational policing body, taking responsibility for a range of national-level police functions. As such, it represents potentially the most significant structural change to the police institutional landscape in many years.

Delivering structural police reform, however, is far from straightforward. Some attempts, such as the 2005 police force mergers programme ultimately proved unfeasible, while others, such as the creation of Police Scotland from eight regional forces in 2013, experienced significant challenges along the way.

With a Home Office white paper in preparation and a significant police reform programme expected to follow, the Forum provided an opportunity for attendees<sup>2</sup> to reflect on the government’s emerging plans and to learn from the experiences of those involved in previous efforts to reshape the national policing landscape.

## 3. The case for reform

The government’s rationale for initiating structural police reform is multi-faceted. First, the current, predominantly decentralised, policing model is implicated in service quality inconsistencies (described as a “postcode lottery”) which are increasingly viewed as unacceptable. Second, technology is changing the threat environment but also provides opportunities which are both best met in a more nationally coordinated way. Third, the mechanisms for inter-force cooperation in the face of national-level threats and demands are increasingly viewed as sub-optimal. Finally, the fiscal context means that potential economies of scale offered by centralised procurement and shared services cannot be ignored.

Delivering the government’s ambitions for policing – which include reconnecting with the public via the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG) and contributing to the Safer Streets Mission of halving knife crime and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in a decade – requires that these barriers to consistency, responsiveness, and efficiency are confronted and overcome.

The new National Centre, alongside a wider programme of Home Office work to enable the NPG, develop a new performance monitoring system, standardise procurement and reform the police misconduct system (among other activity) is seen as vital to this ambition.

## 4. Qualified consensus

Participants noted the historically unprecedented degree of consensus among system stakeholders on the need for, and proposed general direction of, structural change – as well as the resolution within the government to “do reform with, not to” policing. It was noted that, in comparison to previous more contentious contexts, the extent of this agreement should empower and embolden reform efforts. Warnings were also offered, however, that the clarity of ambition made essential by more vigorous challenge still needs to be realised. It was remarked that, compared to previous governments at an equivalent stage, current proposals still lack detail.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretarys-vision-for-police-reform>

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<sup>2</sup> Attendees are listed at the end of the report.

Questions were also raised about the depth of the apparent consensus, and whether, as more details emerge, fault lines might appear – particularly when “*net donors*” (those likely to lose out, especially financially) become clearer.

It was further suggested that the lack of ‘friction’ around the current reform agenda may indicate that the proposals being tabled are not sufficiently radical or ambitious enough to address the fundamental issues confronting the police service (for instance in relation to the long-standing 43-force structure, which has been deemed ‘too difficult’ to reform by successive governments).

The need to ultimately confront these more contentious structural issues, brought policing’s national decision-making processes into focus. The current requirement for multiple independent parties to reach agreement on nationally important issues was widely viewed as a potential barrier to effective reform. It was suggested therefore that attention to system-level governance – for instance clarifying how local interests could be reflected in the oversight of national delivery bodies – should be made a priority to enable the ongoing change process.

## 5. Clarifying the ambition

Given the range of imperatives being offered and current gaps in the detail, several participants made calls for the government to provide greater clarity on its intended ‘end state’ and, particularly given current financial challenges, to be clearer in articulating its priorities. The multi-faceted, and (arguably) somewhat technical, rationale presented to date, leaves room (it was suggested) for accusations of “*Cakeism*” (simultaneously articulating competing benefits, in the context of the need to prioritise) and requires the government to clarify “*what it wants most*”. Others echoed the need to make the ambition more tangible, to draw a clear line between structural reorganisation and publicly recognisable service improvement, and to undertake concrete early action to demonstrate intent, efficacy and direction of travel.

## 6. Re-engaging with the public realm

While some perceived ambiguity clearly remains, reconnecting policing with communities and improving the response to neighbourhood crimes through the

Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG),<sup>3</sup> emerged as one (perhaps *the*) headline priority of the government’s policing programme.

Attendees expressed several concerns about the implementation of the policy. Some of these centred on the emphasis placed on quantifiable inputs and outputs (most notably in terms of a staffing uplift), which risked leaving the intended outcomes of ‘better’ neighbourhood policing under-articulated and potentially under-realised, (for instance, a focus on visibility and head count might overshadow attention to quality of public interactions and the professionalisation of problem-solving).

Others asked whether an apparent shift in public sentiment towards the public realm over recent decades, with safety concerns being replaced (to some degree) with a more generalised sense of deterioration and neglect, might require a shift away from policing as the dominant mode of response.

Most prominently, however, attendees tabled reservations about the financial implications of the NPG, particularly for smaller police forces, warning that proscriptive staffing allocations could lead to service erosion in less ‘discretionary’ areas (such as emergency response and crime investigation), while pointing out that previous ‘nostalgic’ versions of neighbourhood policing had never been fully implemented and that the perennial mismatch of resource and ambition had left successive models in a state of permanent roll-out.

## 7. Recalibrating localism

What one participant called the “*centrally driven localism*” represented by the NPG can be viewed as one aspect of an attempt by the government to find a more effective reconciliation between local responsiveness and centralised coordination and control. While the previous government had emphasised local adaptation and autonomous priority setting, including through the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), the current administration takes the view that localism (while important) has become ‘unbounded’, particularly in relation to standards, and that societal, technological and economic shifts call for an adjustment towards national coordination.

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<sup>3</sup> This includes a commitment to recruit an additional 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and special constables; increase visible patrols, including in ASB hotspots, and provide named contactable officers in every area.

Although the NPG responds to the critique that policing has become too remote – as one attendee put it, that *“a 43-force model is not local enough”* – it was also argued that the totality of policing experienced by the public amounts to much more than that provided by locally allocated personnel, and that the policing system needs to better articulate the contribution that less visible functions, including those brigaded at regional and national levels, make to local safety. A more holistic and sophisticated narrative around public safety was called for, to open up the political constraints on policing policy, which some attendees felt the public (if not always the media) were ready and able to embrace.

One particularly entrenched example of the ‘stuck’ public, media and political discourse on policing relates to the ongoing fixation with police officer numbers as the popular yard stick of public safety. Participants identified problematic implications for workforce balance, investment in technology and financial resilience resulting from successive governments’ insistence that investment is provided in the form of additional police officers. It was, however, noted that the inclusion of PCSOs and special constables within the NPG uplift commitment represents small progress toward a more nuanced articulation of police capability.

Several participants spoke about the need for more sophisticated versions of localism, framed in terms of a *“tight but loose”* approach, that either specified the outcomes to be sought, while giving local leaders some scope to adapt delivery to local context, or that began proscriptively, in order to raise standards in areas felt to be under-achieving, but then introduced greater flexibility once an adequate baseline had been reached.

## 8. Capable reform

Reflecting on the successes and failures of previous reform initiatives offers what one contributor described as a *“checklist”* that administrators should seek to satisfy before embarking on costly and disruptive change programmes. ‘Power’ tops the list of prerequisites: both the ‘hard’ power of political conviction and associated funding, and the ‘soft’ power achieved by tabling proposals that stakeholders view as in their own interests, not just ones that serve the ‘greater good’. Governments and officials also require *capability* born of experience and systematic learning, and an *implementation* ‘headset’ to sequence deliverables, monitor progress and make interventions when required. Above all, a checklist for any reform

‘journey’ requires clarity on the destination – again, it was contended that more needs to be done to articulate the objective, rationale, priorities and concrete first steps of the current agenda.

## 9. Unintended consequences

One clear message to emerge from the discussion was that, while every structural design is optimised for something, each is inevitably also attended by potential weaknesses – and that, no matter how successful, all reorganisations can have unexpected and unintended consequences. Reform programmes therefore need to anticipate and mitigate these deficits and risks wherever possible. For instance, while the localising policies of the previous government had sought to increase public confidence and provide greater focus on neighbourhood crime, this has largely not materialised – a failing one contributor attributed (at least in part) to a lack of training and support for PCCs. Elsewhere, it was reported that the centralising reforms undertaken in Scotland had generated controversy when police routine practices from some localities were standardised over larger areas. Unexpected tensions had also arisen between officers and non-warranted staff as a result of workforce reforms, while staff resistance to the loss of heritage and identity that accompanied remodelling had not been sufficiently considered in advance.

One contributor expressed concern that a consequence of greater centralisation might be a stifling of local innovation, noting how influential policing movements such as Operation Soteria<sup>4</sup> and the Right Care Right Person model,<sup>5</sup> had developed from local initiatives. Others observed that current arrangements can make it difficult for effective innovations to be replicated and scaled up across larger areas, and that more centralised coordination might therefore offer benefits. In either case, supporting the innovation pipeline with design, evaluation and implementation support was considered necessary.

## 10. Financial pressure and structural evolution

Questions remained for many about the extent to which current reform proposals engaged with the realities of the financial challenge confronting the police service.

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4 The research-led overhaul of rape and serious sexual offences investigation pioneered in Avon and Somerset Police.

5 A framework for responding to people with mental health need, originally developed in Humberside.

While centralisation was acknowledged as a proven efficiency driver, concerns were voiced that any cost savings would not accrue quickly enough to avoid smaller police forces (in particular) needing to make difficult workforce and service-level decisions, potentially running counter to government ambitions. As noted already, police force mergers (which offer one potential mitigator to financial pressures) are not currently on the government's agenda and are considered politically difficult to deliver.

The discussion did, however, alight on the potential for more organic structural changes to take place, in the context of wider plans for local government devolution, and the possibility that PCC responsibilities (in some areas at least) could transfer to elected regional Mayors. Should this happen, *de facto* force mergers – or at least deeper levels of inter-force collaboration – would seem likely to follow. Given the importance of achieving both system-level efficiencies and synergies with other services under the Mayoral purview, the value of linking policing to the wider devolution agenda was recognised as critical.

## 11. System interdependencies

More broadly, participants were keen to stress the importance of approaching police reform with an understanding of the wider systemic issues that impact on police demand and the outcomes to which policing contributes. Police effectiveness (and public appraisals of it) are intrinsically linked to performance in other service areas, such as mental health services, courts, prisons, probation and local government, and attendees advocated for a wider reform agenda that addressed systemic failings, as well as looking to fix police-specific issues. The interdependency with, and erosion of, third sector provision was also noted.

There were some warnings that progress made on local-level system join-up may be negatively impacted by centralisation. While at the national level, the government's Mission-led approach, and efforts to produce system-level performance measures, were cited as growing recognition of interdependency, cross-government working was acknowledged to be challenging.

## 12. Reform beyond structure

Across the discussion, contributors noted the importance and interconnection of aspects of police reform, extending beyond structural reorganisation. Leadership, and the importance of investing in the professional development and retention of exceptional police leaders, was offered as a crucial enabling priority. A call was made for police cultural reform and linked conversations about diversity, licence to practise and improved vetting to be given prominence in wider discussions about capability. Technology, and the transformative role of AI, was highlighted as comparatively absent for the reform debate to date, with the tendency noted to view it as practical after thought.

## 13. Conclusion

Few (if any) would argue that our policing model is not in need of fundamental reform. Deficits in public confidence, police performance and financial sustainability all warrant government attention. Societal and technological changes mean that it is no longer sufficient to pursue public safety in a fragmented and under-coordinated way. Financial imperatives mean that system inefficiencies need to be identified and designed out. Among stakeholders and commentators convened at the 20th Oxford Police Policy Forum there was little opposition to the core argument that more policing infrastructure should be instantiated at the national level, and that a new national body would provide an enabling anchor-point for much needed modernisation.

However, history tells us that police reform is difficult. Headline consensus may begin to fray as the sought-after detail is added to government plans; there may be calls for structural change to go further; recalibrating the balance between central coordination and local autonomy might prove too great an ask of policing's distributed national decision-making systems.

As the government prepares its white paper, a set of key messages emerge: be clear on what you want to achieve and on what you want to achieve *most*; do not pass up the rare opportunity to be truly transformative; seek to renew the police-public relationship, but be wary of underfunded promises and a reductive default to headcount; anticipate unintended consequences; recognise policing's system interdependencies; and think beyond structures to the wider enablers of police capability on which improvement will also depend.



## 14.Attendees

Mathew Barber	Police and Crime Commissioner – Thames Valley	
Neil Basu QPM	Senior Associate Fellow	The Police Foundation
Maggie Blyth	Temporary Chief Constable	Gloucestershire Constabulary
Kate Brown	Co-Director, ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre	University of York
Charlotte Bryant	Policing Director	Home Office
Ian Caplan	Director for Police Standards and Performance Improvement Directorate	Home Office
Adam Crawford	Professor of Policing and Social Justice & Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice	University of York and University of Leeds
Tom Gash	Director	Leapwise Advisory
Simon Godfrey	Director, Strategy, External Engagement and Growth	BT
Phil Golding	Chief Executive Officer	Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
Rt Hon. Lord Herbert of South Downs CBE PC	Chair	College of Policing
Andy Higgins	Research Director/Interim Director	The Police Foundation
Jason Hogg	Chief Constable	Thames Valley Police
Sir Iain Livingstone QPM	Retired Chief Constable	Police Scotland
Ian Loader	Professor of Criminology	University of Oxford
Victoria Longworth	Acting Deputy Director, National Police Capabilities Unit	Home Office
Rick Muir	Policing Adviser to the Home Secretary	Home Office
Rachel Nolan	Deputy Chief Constable	Essex Police
Sir Denis O'Connor CBE QPM	Former HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary	
Bethan Page-Jones	Head of the National Police Capabilities Unit	Home Office
Sian Penny	Director of Public Safety and Justice	BT
Olivia Pinkney CBE QPM	Senior Associate Fellow	The Police Foundation
Steve Rodhouse	Director General Strategic Projects	National Crime Agency
Mike Rowe	Professor of Criminology	Northumbria University
James Slessor	Managing Director, UK and Global Public Safety Practice	Accenture
Ben Snuggs	Deputy Chief Constable	Thames Valley Police
Ed Stainton	Public Sector Managing Director	BT
John Tizard	Police and Crime Commissioner - Bedfordshire	
Rachel Tuffin	Interim Director of Performance Portfolio	College of Policing
Martin Tunstall	Chief of Staff and Strategic Adviser, Joint Police Reform Team	National Police Chiefs' Council
Sir Tom Winsor	Former HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary	

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