PERSPECTIVES ON POLICING: PAPER 11

PUBLIC SAFETY, PUBLIC SERVICE

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Introduction

Not radical enough, we're told, was the new Home Secretary's view of the plans to reform policing she had inherited. The White Paper was paused and the front-page of The Times used for some headline kite-flying, testing the appetite for a much bigger change (Dathan and Hamilton, 2025).

As a result, some civil servants have spent their Christmases designing new operating models for policing. Others, I'm sure, will have been considering how best to make the public case for reform.

That's what senior policing leaders agreed was needed back in October when they met at an event organised by the Police Foundation and Cityforum (Higgins, 2025) .

It's one thing to create the perfect model of 12 or 15 forces supported by new national capabilities. It's quite a different challenge to make a compelling case for change that will persuade the public, let alone the many key stakeholders who have to be brought alongside.

So, yes, decide what the change should look like, but spend as least as much time working out how to articulate the why and planning the how.

Like all the best constructions, the foundations of a new policing model are critical to success. That's why the case for change is important and should be spelt out fully by policing leaders.

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Consider this paper, then, as a response to the challenge handed down at the October event, a potential narrative for the public case for reform, covering

- The threats to public safety
- The gaps in capability in the current policing model
- Building a better public service
- Strengthening accountability: engaging the public, partners, officers and staff

Consider it also as an answer to a significant communication challenge, which requires a strategic national approach until reform is agreed and implemented (a multi-year plan combining actions, stakeholder engagement and clear, consistent, nationwide messaging).

It's an approach informed by my own experience as a former communications lead at the Metropolitan Police (2012-2017) and similar roles in sport and higher education; delivering change, working with different government departments and engaging diverse audiences, sometimes confronting them with realities they don't want to hear.

While police leaders and communicators are well-practised and accomplished at responding to emergencies, delivering a strategic communications campaign remains a daunting prospect. It needs a national framework with a national voice, but most of the delivery is likely to be at local level, requiring all 43 current forces to be aligned.

The Home Secretary has led the way in making a public case, seeding the arguments ahead of the White Paper's publication. The narrative is emerging with an emphasis on the inefficiencies of the current 43-force model.

Chief officers will need to play their part, making the case for change to a range of audiences including national and local governments, politicians, business, partner organisations, their own officers and staff and the public, and they'll need deeper insight into the views of each on policing performance and the case for reform. Any organisation would find this task challenging, especially since it will stretch over several years.

Not only that, but making the case for reform cannot be done at the expense of the ongoing need to restore the confidence in policing that's been damaged in recent years. That also needs a concerted national approach to communication, integrated with the case for reform.

Policing leaders with far greater knowledge than I will have their own views on the operational issues I mention. But this is a proposed narrative, with an articulation of the 'why' and a plan for the 'how', not the blueprint for change itself.

The threats to public safety

Police leaders could start by studying recent speeches from the new Head of MI6 and the Chief of the Defence Staff both of which articulate the nature of threats faced by the United Kingdom, in their case to national security (Metreweli, 2025; Knighton, 2025).

1 'The pressing challenge for the immediate future is to make a public case for reform. Government and policing need to explain the arguments for change, the costs of the status quo, and what the local benefits will look like – in ways that move beyond the blunt rhetoric of 'more police officers on the beat.' The sector must find ways to demonstrate and communicate these reform benefits to the public as taxpayers and explain how changing the system will make for a better police service and ultimately a safer society.' See Higgins (2025)

Like their colleagues in the security services and the military, it's the job of the police to protect people from threats to their safety – from criminality, violence and disorder. Clarity about the threats faced, and the gaps in policing capability, is vital to anyone making a compelling case for change.

The range of 'critical national threats' with which policing must deal is set out in the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR) which was last updated in February 2023 (Home Office, 2023). In addition to Terrorism and a 'National Cyber Event,' this lists Violence Against Women and Girls, Serious and Organised Crime, Child Sexual Abuse, Public Disorder and Civil Emergencies.

Some common factors connect these threats:

- They are often borderless, driven by international events, actors and beliefs.
- They are complex policing challenges, requiring a critical mass of specialists.
- Social media is used to propagate threats and is not aligned with local or national policing.
- Strong partnerships are required to provide an effective response. Partners can be international and include others with safeguarding responsibilities, tech giants or corporates most at risk from cyber-attacks.

Terrorism and cybercrime have long been recognised as threats that cannot be managed at the level of 43 forces. National and regional functions have been created to build the specialist capabilities and resilience required.

As we saw in the summer of 2024, keeping public order on the streets proved a stern test for many of the 43 forces. Although specially trained officers are regularly deployed across forces to support colleagues, the Inspectorate's report concluded that police intelligence did not correctly assess the risk from a 'rising tide of disorder' and so resources were not mobilised when they should have been (HMICFRS, 2025) .

Combatting disinformation in social media proved an even bigger challenge. The Inspectorate was bluntly critical at the failure to build capability: "The police service needs to better appreciate that fast-moving events require it to respond with an accurate counter-narrative, innovative in its approach and wide-reaching in terms of its audience." (HMICFRS, 2025)

Although updated in 2023, some of the SPR may need further revision to align with the most recent threat assessments from MI6 and the military. In the speeches mentioned above, the head of MI6 highlighted the threat to the UK's national security caused by the 'export of chaos' on which Russia has embarked while the Chief of the Defence Staff spoke of the 'whole-of-society' response required to combat hostile intent (Metreweli, 2025; Knighton, 2025).

If the aim of hostile state actors is exporting chaos, then the police are on the front line, and public consent and confidence is a precious defensive asset to be nurtured and protected.

If the advocates of reform believe creating that chaos includes some sophisticated attempts to stoke fear of crime (Lee, 2026) or weaponise culture war issues to undermine public trust in police competence and fairness, then they should say so. They should also define what the 'whole-of-society response' is when it comes to the threats managed by policing. And what the public can do to play their part.

Gaps in policing capability

It does not come naturally for leaders to admit publicly any areas of weakness. But the public needs a clear assessment of how policing capability scores right now with regard to the seven Strategic Policing Requirement threats, whether revised to take account of the national security picture or not.

For example, expert scrutiny of police's work to address Violence Against Women and Girls has already demonstrated that progress has been slower than required, despite the great work from the VAWG Programme team (Angiolini, 2025).

The government is now addressing this with a new overarching strategy for combatting violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2025) This includes a commitment to specialist rape and sexual offences investigators across all police forces by 2029. The VAWG example illustrates a conundrum facing governments and policing leaders when they are faced with specific threats. The public demands a response and quickly, so a plan is produced to tackle the threat, but the wider impact on policing priorities and resources is harder to consider. Policing can get 'bent out of shape' in trying to meet the latest risk, but the consequences only become apparent months or even years later.

2 'National police intelligence assessments didn't correctly assess the risk and threat to public safety from a rising tide of disorder. Grading the threat and risk of disorder as "low" was wrong and influenced the timeliness of national mobilisation decisions.' See (HMICFRS, 2025).

That's why the 'whole system thinking' of a reform programme is even more welcome.

Communicating how short-term responses within the current 43 force model align with systemic reform needs to be part of the case for change. More broadly, public and policy makers need a clear evidence-base to show that change to the current policing model is required to provide the specialist capabilities required to meet these threats efficiently and effectively. This includes SPR threats like VAWG, but also others like knife crime, which are not listed in the same category but still represent a major challenge to public safety.

That evidence-base should also include the impact on neighbourhood policing from the constant pressure to create new specialist capabilities to deal with emerging threats.

The consequences have been clear. Neighbourhood officers end up elsewhere, repurposed to deal with serious crimes whose origins often lie outside their county, their city or their neighbourhood or having to do tasks that require skills they weren't originally trained in, like policing social media.

Austerity played its part in the depletion of neighbourhood policing, but this is aided by the current policing model which creates a built-in tendency to raid local policing teams when new 'high harm' offences are prioritised.

Reforming the current policing model to require fewer forces and build 12 to 15 specialist functions rather than 43 must strengthen neighbourhood policing, not weaken it. It must also deliver a more efficient policing model, which balances the effectiveness of specialist capabilities with the delivery of a better public service.

While the case for reform is not driven by reducing the overall cost of policing and making savings, the NPCC Chair, Chief Constable Gavin Stephens has been clear that the current model does not make the best use of the available resources and has spoken of a 'once in a generation' chance to transform policing (NPCC, 2024)

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The aim is to enable officers and staff to be more effective and more fulfilled in their roles, less frustrated by a lack of tools or helpful technology, better supported by specialist colleagues and better able to focus on their own areas of responsibility.

A better public service

Yes, the case for change needs to highlight threats and the challenges the current policing model faces in meeting them head on. That's necessary, but it's not sufficient.

The same Police Foundation/Cityforum event also agreed the public needed to hear what the local benefits will look like (Higgins, 2025). Public Safety is where that starts, but the picture is not complete without articulating how the Public Service will also improve.

The Home Secretary has already articulated that addressing the 'postcode lottery' arising from the 43-force model will be a priority for reform (Sandford, 2025)

The confidence data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales over the past ten years gives some clear indications of where the public think the service provided by police has deteriorated.

The perception that police are less 'reliable' and less effective at 'dealing with local concerns' has been one of the key drivers of the 11-point fall in confidence in local policing from 2016 to 2025. Satisfaction with the way police have dealt with people's cases has also dropped (ONS, 2026).

On top of this, it's noticeable that since COVID and the murder of Sarah Everard, women's trust in policing has fallen further than for men. And some ethnic minority communities continue to see police as less fair and trustworthy than the majority white population. (ONS, 2026).

The government and police are addressing all of these drivers. The Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee – a national offer promising greater visibility, responsiveness and engagement with communities – intends to restore capacity to deal more effectively with local issues. (NPCC, 2025) The work on safer streets and safer town centres is just as relevant.

3 A more detailed analysis of factors which have driven the fall in confidence as evidence in the CSEW will be published in a subsequent piece.

The Public Contact Programme – offering new channels for the public to report crime and receive information – is speeding up non-emergency contact. What's more, the work on setting up personal accounts for individuals to manage their engagement with policing, and vice-versa, means the public could have a police version of the NHS App in place by the end of this Parliament (NPCC, 2025a). The NHS App has been transformational, and this new app could be also.

The Race Action Plan is tackling long-established concerns among minority communities (College of Policing, 2022). Similarly, the VAWG programme is well-placed to develop further insight to understand how the drop in women's confidence is best addressed.

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What has been lacking is a strategic communications plan – joining up actions and words to achieve impact – to ensure the public is aware of all this work to improve the service.

The Crime Survey suggests that at least 75 per cent or so of the public don't come into contact with the police each year (ONS, 2020) If confidence is to increase, they need to be made aware of the benefits of progress, even if they don't experience them personally.

Any communications plan needs to cover all those programmes that are most likely to improve service and drive confidence. Siloed communication – each programme doing its own public messaging – will just confuse the public and won't cut through without demonstrable national actions and messaging.

More than that, communicating progress is an important part of the public case for reform. Firstly, it builds confidence that police and the service they provide are changing for the better. This, in turn, should make the public more willing to listen to and accept the arguments for systemic reform. Secondly, it's vital to align the 'reform' and 'confidence' narratives to demonstrate how progress by the current 43 forces could accelerate with fewer forces working within a new model.

So, it's important for police leaders to start looking beyond the current set of programmes and actions and start describing to the public how reform can help with tackling issues like shoplifting, anti-social behaviour and burglary.

If the dialogue over reform remains solely focused on the specialist capabilities required to tackle the biggest threats to public safety, it risks ignoring the wider benefits that most of the public are more likely to experience.

The police are the people; the people are the police – strengthening accountability

It's nearly 200 years since the Peelian Principles were articulated (2029 is the anniversary) and they remain a staple of speeches about British policing. Yet how many of the British people know they are also 'the police' and, indeed, what is expected of the public in a 21st century model of policing by consent, is much less obvious.

Even if it might seem simpler to leave the public out of the reform dialogue, it's not advisable. Firstly, the formal model of public accountability will need to be rebuilt alongside a new policing model, as the Police and Crime Commissioner function is replaced (Home Office, 2025a).

Second, the informal ways through which policing fulfils (and accounts for) its role in dealing with public concerns: through partnership working, community engagement and direct interaction with the public using its services, must also be central to reform. Aligning and mobilising a wider 'coalition for change' is a key dependency. Finally, because an honest and transparent acknowledgment of where the current relationship between police and public has gone wrong, coupled with a determination to address this as part of the reform, is vital to building trust.

In addressing each of these, it's important to note that making the case for change isn't just about the narrative. When success relies on other partners, how policing engages, listens and acts in response is just as important. Signalling a commitment at the outset to engage in this constructive fashion is essential.

1. Accountability

Let's start with the formal accountability. Make no mistake, it's not difficult to attack a plan that will replace 43 county and city forces with 12 or 15 administrative regions, which may not correspond with any current local authorities or elected local officials, and which can therefore be presented as the antithesis of 'neighbourhood' or local policing.

No one would expect the government or policing to set out a comprehensive answer at this point. But a set of principles that will govern the approach and strengthen accountability after the end of the PCC experiment would be welcome. Moreover, it would help senior policing leaders when challenged in public meetings or the media. Some members of the public are already concerned by the decision to move towards larger, unitary local authorities, with people governed from a seat of power more distant from their locality. This needs to be reconciled with the value of neighbourhood policing, for example, being held to account by representatives who live there.

At least one Police and Crime Commissioner is already consulting electors on their preferred model of accountability for the future, including retaining PCCs (Devon and Cornwall OPCC, 2025). If a vacuum is left, expect it to be filled in similar ways elsewhere.

2. Collaboration and partnership

Having informal partnerships with communities, local councils or neighbourhood groups may not be regarded as 'accountability' in a formal sense. However, few local issues with which police are asked to deal can be addressed without partners playing a role. This includes the public engaging police to report what's going on.

In fact, many of the issues about which the public are most concerned, including manifesto commitments like knife-crime or violence against women and girls, require police to mobilise partners to work alongside them. Equally, if police aren't themselves seen as reliable partners, confidence falls and effectiveness is weakened.

So, external partners need to have a voice in the reform process. They are critical to the success of whatever new policing model is chosen. Best practice change management would advise that they have some kind of a role in co-creating solutions, without having a veto on progress.

3. The people are the police

The final reason for ensuring the public are central to reform reflects the decline in confidence in British policing. There are many complex factors driving this and it's unrealistic to expect all of them to be addressed within the next three years or so.

It's a big agenda which involves the police working on their reliability and their ability to understand and deal with local issues, be fair and trustworthy and improve satisfaction when the public need to use policing services.

The political and media narrative that portrays the police as unwilling to enforce the law for crimes like shoplifting and burglary, needs to be tackled head-on.

The political consensus that has long underpinned policing by consent should not be taken for granted, especially if pressure for a more ruthless approach to enforcement is allowed to grow.

> ***"If the public are to remain the 'police' as much as the 'police are the public,' a reset of that relationship is long overdue. This is all the more important since the public are better placed to help police than ever before."***

It's vital for policing leaders, with humility, to send a loud and clear signal, 'we get it' and show they understand that 'we need to reform ourselves and the way we engage with the public, explaining what we do, what we can't always do and why, and what we ask of you.' If the public are to remain the 'police' as much as the 'police are the public,' a reset of that relationship is long overdue.

This is all the more important since the public are better placed to help police than ever before. Most have a wonderful tool for gathering evidence of criminality or threats to public safety – their smart-phone and the video and data it contains. They're already sharing information with each other to highlight things like rogue drivers who bump into vehicles and drive off, or suspicious cars hanging round rural properties.

Equally, police also have opportunities arising from technology, like facial recognition software, to use public data to protect public safety.

Addressing the changing relationship that arises from technology, in particular the use of AI, transparently and inclusively, would help ensure reform is also a reset and contributes to restoring trust and confidence.

For the public and partners to see ‘the police are changing for the better’ is an entirely achievable short-term goal. It starts with the language and behaviours police demonstrate at the outset of this journey of reform.

The thin blue line

> ***“You can have a brilliant vision for change and a well-considered strategy for how to achieve it, but neither are sufficient if the people who are vital to its success aren’t ready and willing to change the way things are done.”***

You can have a brilliant vision for change and a well-considered strategy for how to achieve it, but neither are sufficient if the people who are vital to its success aren’t ready and willing to change the way things are done.

So, quite deliberately, I’ve left until last the part police officers and staff should play in developing the compelling case for change.

There’s no need to repeat the data on the number of departures from policing or the proportion of current officers who’ve joined in the past few years. Let’s accept that, in common with other public services, there’s much unhappiness with ‘the job’ (Police Federation, 2025)

Officers and staff are managing demand that, at times, is overwhelming. They find themselves balancing constantly shifting priorities while knowing there are holes in the team and roles left vacant, so resources can be redeployed elsewhere. They’re hearing, face-to-face, public dissatisfaction with the service when the computer still says ‘no.’ And they’re stuck in the middle of a culture war and branded, as Sir Mark Rowley put it, as both ‘woke’ and ‘fascist’ (McShane, 2024).

If the public case for reform does not also offer hope to the beleaguered frontline, the risk is that the chorus of critical voices all reform attracts will exacerbate the number of experienced officers exiting policing and further demoralise the rest.

Like the public, an acknowledgement from senior leaders to their people that ‘we get it’ and ‘this can’t go on without a fundamental fix’ is a good starting-point.

Committing to engage and communicate, listen and act and to keep your promises, is as important a message for officers and staff to hear as it is for the public and partners.

After all, if they don’t believe policing is changing for the better, why should the public?

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