AFTER THE WHITE PAPER: DELIVERING LOCAL POLICING THROUGH NATIONAL REFORM

A summary report of the Police Reform Summit organised by Cityforum and The Police Foundation

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THE POLICE FOUNDATION
The UK's policing think tank

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About Cityforum

Cityforum has been contributing to public policy debate since 1990. Its highly regarded ‘off-the-record’ Round Table discussions are well known both for bringing together an enviable mix of decision makers and practitioners and for stimulating new thinking in response to some of the most difficult contemporary public policy challenges. The organisation comprises a small, trusted, independent group of experienced individuals and works closely with a large network of Associates including senior public service officials, military, police, intelligence and security specialists, academics and journalists, who provide depth, breadth, genuine expertise and practical experience. They contribute to Cityforum discussions, reports and bespoke advisory work. Cityforum has a particular interest in working with the police and holds several Round Table discussions each year on technological, human resources, value for money and strategic communication questions affecting the service. It also undertakes specialist advisory and monitoring work for individual Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Chief Officers.

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About The Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is the only independent think tank focussed exclusively on improving policing and developing knowledge and understanding of policing and crime reduction. Its mission is to generate evidence and develop ideas which deliver better policing and a safer society. It does this by producing trusted, impartial research and by working with the police and their partners to create change.

www.police-foundation.org.uk

Introduction

In October 2025, senior leaders from policing, government, industry and academia met for the first Police Reform Summit, convened by Cityforum and The Police Foundation. The white paper had not yet been published. Delegates were working from a direction of travel rather than a clear plan: a Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, a stronger Home Office role in performance and standards, and a new National Centre of Policing. Three messages from that event are worth recalling. Forces should not wait for legislation and should build from the bottom up within national standards. Data and technology should be treated as a shared national asset. And reform had to be done with the workforce, not to it.

Much has changed since then. The white paper, From Local to National: A New Model for Policing was published in January 2026. The Police Leadership Commission published its report in July. The Independent Review of Police Force Structures has concluded, and its findings are awaited.

In October 2026 Cityforum and The Police Foundation gathered senior stakeholders again for the second Police Reform Summit, to reflect on the progress and the needs for the next year. The event focused on how national capability, leadership reform and technology could improve policing at the local level. The sessions covered different areas, yet the same concerns kept returning. Current arrangements are fragmented. Improving local services matters more than redrawing structures. And leadership will decide whether reform proposals become practical change. Where the 2025 event asked what reform should look like and how to start it, this one asked whether it is being delivered.



Session one: Standing up a National Police Service

The first session began with local policing. Speakers did not treat a national service as an end in itself. It is a means of improving what communities receive, and the white paper's ambitions on neighbourhood policing, prevention and local accountability were the benchmark. Several contributors warned that debate over national structures could crowd out the question that matters: will officers and staff in any given area be better able to prevent crime, solve problems and respond to the public?

> *"Every element of this reform programme, to a greater or lesser extent, needs to support the improvement of local policing."*

Intelligence took up much of the discussion. Capability varies from area to area and often depends on what a force can afford locally, which is hard to defend when threats cross force, regional and national boundaries. The National Intelligence Model still commands support as the foundation, but there were doubts about whether the structures needed to apply it consistently exist. Speakers did not want intelligence treated as a specialist silo, they argued it should assist with prioritisation and operational decisions across the service.

> *"Intelligence is not simply a specialist enabling function; it underpins and informs every aspect of effective policing."*

Counter Terrorism Policing and the National Crime Agency gave practical examples. Each combines strong national networks and specialist capability with working relationships across local forces, intelligence agencies and international partners, and each also depends on information coming up from local communities. New arrangements will need to reduce the complexity without breaking that fundamental link to communities.

Operational independence is still and should remain a fundamental principle of British policing. However, speakers acknowledged that current arrangements can slow down decision making and action. Reform is a chance to settle who is responsible for what at national, regional and local level, and who oversees those decisions.

The session also questioned whether the traditional split between officers and staff still fits the skills policing needs. Analysts, technology and intelligence specialists will matter more in future with increasing complexity and volume of online and cross-border crime. Continued rhetoric that focuses purely on frontline officer numbers obscures what the service actually needs, which is a greater emphasis on skills and on workforce planning for the future. That is not to say more officers will not be needed in some places. However, the future picture may also call for more specialist staff, and in some areas above additional frontline numbers.



Session two: Implementing the Leadership Commission

The second session looked at the Leadership Commission's findings and what it would take to act on them. Leadership was widely seen as one of the main factors that will decide whether the wider reform programme succeeds. The Commission found significant variation in quality and concluded that current arrangements do not consistently prepare people for what they face.

> *"The overall quality of police leadership is inconsistent and fails to provide the policing that the public deserves."*

Sergeants and inspectors received particular attention. Evidence presented, from the Commission's own research including a large-scale survey of sergeants and inspectors and from the panel, suggested that many first-line leaders take up their roles with little preparation and little continuing support. That points to a wider failure to treat leadership development as a core part of the day job and a career-long commitment, it is often seen as something concentrated on for promotion or senior appointments.

Delegates backed clearer development pathways, better performance management and more consistent expectations across forces. Yet, redesigning and implementing better formal training will achieve little if officers and staff lack the time, as well as the encouragement and backing from line managers both to learn and reinforce learning with practice.

There were calls for more transparency and consistency in promotion processes, with the desire for progression to be tied more clearly to performance and competence, as well as leadership potential. Movement between policing and other sectors was welcomed. Experience from other public services and some private industry would bring fresh perspectives into policing and give police leaders a better grasp of the organisations they work alongside.

Culture and organisational justice featured strongly. Speakers talked about misconduct, how people who raise concerns are treated, and the gap between formal policy and day-to-day experience. There was wide spread agreement that officers and staff need to be able to challenge poor behaviour without fear of personal consequences, and that this was not consistently the case at present.

> *"The biggest risk here is silence."*

These issues feed directly into public confidence and trust. Leadership and accountability, specifically trust in the promotion and misconduct processes shape how policing is experienced by its own workforce and perceived by the public. Meaning improving leadership is not only an internal policing matter, it is part of rebuilding public trust and confidence in policing.

Looking forward, current and future leaders will likely face more political challenges such as polarisation, along with fast moving technology changes such as artificial intelligence (AI) and they will need to work across organisational boundaries and make decisions in uncertain contexts. Leadership development has to be built around those demands, not just around established operational and organisational roles.

Session three: Data, technology and accelerating reform

The final session covered data, digital services and AI, and looked at technology as part of frontline policing rather than a back-office function.

Much of the discussion was about how policing can spread and maintain what works across new structures and a reformed policing landscape. Innovation exists across forces, but it does not reliably become national practice. 27 different systems, along with local procurement arrangements make it hard to scale technology even when its value has been shown through practice and evaluation.

> *"National availability is not national adoption."*

Interoperability and data sharing were seen as central to the future of policing. Current systems are fragmented, which duplicates effort and stops policing making full use of information held across forces and partners. Delegates called for common standards, better data quality and more secure, effective information sharing. This does not mean replacing every existing system straight away or even having every system work exactly the same within each force. It does mean having systems that complement one another and provide a baseline of consistency and interoperability, with room for forces to adapt them to local needs. There was support for practical steps that let systems connect and data move between them while longer-term national capability is built. National standards and infrastructure could bring this much needed consistency, while also leaving room to respond to local circumstances.

AI was seen as a significant future source of productivity, and as a test of leadership and governance. At both national and local, there will need to be transparency, clear responsibility for decisions in its use, along with clear explanations to build and retain public confidence. Delegates warned against both excessive caution and unregulated adoption, and favoured introducing it in a controlled way, learning from use and adapting as evidence develops.

The session ended on the relationship between national and local, where the Summit started. A national centre can provide shared standards and specialist expertise that individual forces would struggle to build alone, but its value depends on whether it helps local officers and staff work better. And ultimately if it improves policing experience and outcomes for the public. Technology should be judged on whether it is adopted and what it achieves operationally.



Key takeaways

- Police reform should be judged by whether it improves local policing and outcomes for the public. Structural change is a means to that end, not the measure of success.
- A stronger national centre should support and coordinate local delivery, providing the capabilities, standards and infrastructure that forces cannot easily develop consistently on their own.
- Intelligence belongs at the core of the reform programme. Threats that cross boundaries and borders need stronger national capability, but links to local knowledge and communities must be kept.
- Accountability needs to be clearer. Responsibilities at national, regional and local level must be understood, including how operational independence sits alongside stronger collective decision-making.
- Workforce planning should be built around skills and future demand, not officer numbers alone. More officers will be needed in some places, but the future workforce may also call for more specialist staff.
- Leadership development needs sustained investment, especially for first-line leaders. Learning should run through police careers and be reinforced by performance reviews, line management and promotion.
- Culture and leadership reform cannot be separated. Officers and staff must be able to raise concerns, challenge poor behaviour and trust that they will be treated fairly.
- Technology, data and AI are now core operational capabilities. They need senior leadership, effective governance and a clear link to frontline practice.
- Common data and technology standards would cut duplication and help successful approaches spread. Making a tool available will not change practice if forces lack the ability or incentive to use it.
- Police reform cannot stay at the design stage. Delegates wanted progress on leadership, workforce, intelligence, data and technology now, while longer-term decisions on structures and governance are still being made.

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