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If 43 police forces is
the problem, what is
the solution and
how do we get
there?

POLICING POLICY FORUM

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GUEST LIST

Tuesday 13 May 2014

Mr Ron Ball	Police and Crime Commissioner	Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Warwickshire
Ms Deirdre Bryant	Head of Efficiency, Knowledge Support Unit	College of Policing
Professor Iain Cameron	Professor in International Law	University of Uppsala, Faculty of Law
Ms Irene Curtis MBA FCMI	President	Police Superintendents' Association of England and Wales
Mr Chris Eyre	Chief Constable	Nottinghamshire Police
Ms Clare Fraser	Researcher	REFORM
Professor Nick Fyfe	Director, Scottish Institute for Policing Research	University of Dundee
Mr Blair Gibbs	Principal Adviser	Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime
Mr John Graham	Director	The Police Foundation
Ms Erin Grieve	Intern	The Police Foundation
Mr Alan Hardwick	Police and Crime Commissioner	Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Lincolnshire
Mr Bernard Lawson QPM BSc DipAppCrim	T/Chief Constable	Cumbria Constabulary
Mr Robert Leach	Director - Police, Crime and Justice	Capita Secure Information Solutions Ltd
Professor Ian Loader, Professor of Criminology	Centre for Criminology	University of Oxford
Ms Abie Longstaff	Legal and Policy Analyst	The Police Foundation
Mr Barry Loveday	Reader in Criminal Justice, Editor of Police Journal	University of Portsmouth
Mr Ken McIntosh	T/Assistant Chief Constable	North Yorkshire Police
Mr Robin Merrett	Freelance Consultant	
Mr Peter Neyroud CBE QPM MA M.Sc	Affiliated Lecturer	University of Cambridge
Sir Denis O'Connor CBE QPM		
Ms Rosie Phillips	Equalities Policy Branch	HM Treasury
Mr Barry Sheldon	Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner	Office of the Police and Crime Commissioners for West Mercia
Mr Anthony Stansfeld	Police and Crime Commissioner	Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley
Mr Steve White	Vice Chairman	Police Federation of England and Wales
Mr Eric Wood	Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner	Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Warwickshire

The Oxford Policing Policy Forum

The Oxford Policing Policy Forum is a joint initiative of the Police Foundation and the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford. The Forum provides an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders interested in policing to discuss fundamental issues under Chatham House rules. The main purpose is to encourage informal debate rather than inviting an audience to listen to formal presentations. Participation is by invitation only (see guest list).

Background

In the current economic climate, a policing model based on 43 separate forces is difficult to justify. There is widespread concern that the current structure is not cost effective; nor is it equipped to meet the challenges of organised and cross-border crime. However, there is little agreement on what might be a better arrangement.

With this in mind, the 15th Oxford Policing Policy Forum met on the 13 May to ask: *'If 43 police forces is the problem, what is the solution and how do we get there?'*

This meeting of the Forum was chaired by John Graham, Director of the Police Foundation. Two introductory presentations were given; one from Professor Ian Loader (Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford and a member of the Stevens Commission) setting out the options and challenges, the other by Professor Nick Fyfe (University of Dundee and Director of the Scottish Institute for Policing Research) on the lessons to be learned from the recent creation of Police Scotland, which went live in April 2013.

Presentations

Professor Ian Loader

Professor Loader began by saying there is a strong case for greater collaboration: societal changes have led to more cross-border and international crime, as well as a pressing need to make financial savings. There is obvious advantage in avoiding undue repetition of tasks and transaction costs, and in sharing a response to critical national incidents.

Finding a model to replace the current system, however, is no easy task and there is little consensus as to the best way forward. Any solution will therefore involve the balancing of a number of competing factors.

Three new models have been proposed: the first relies on bottom up collaboration; encouraging forces to enter into partnerships or amalgamations as they sit fit. There are advantages with this model: the structure is able to change organically; lessons can be learned from experience along the way; and less money needs to be spent in engineering change. However, there is a danger that, left to their own devices, forces will not merge or will not properly think through mergers.

The second option is to engineer a set of amalgamations with a view to creating 10 or so forces. This would avoid power being centralised, however, it could potentially result in high transaction costs and would require new accountability structures to be set up.

The third model is that of a national police service. In 1962 a minority report of the Royal Commission on the Police recommended a move in this direction. There exist a number of benefits with this model in terms of cost savings on procurement and economies of scale, and it also allows for the creation of clear lines of accountability across one whole force. However it gives rise to concern over the potential impact of the centralisation of power on local policing.

Professor Loader advised the Forum that it was both undesirable if not impossible to discuss force structure without also considering accountability and governance. He also drew attention to the need to consider the potential impact of the Scottish referendum on independence which, he suggested, could greatly affect the future of policing south of the border.

Professor Nick Fyfe

Professor Fyfe outlined for the Forum the creation in Scotland of one national police force following the transfer of responsibility for policing from local to central government. Before June 2010 there were no stated plans to change the Scottish structure, however the funding crisis triggered a reconsideration which then led to the evolution of the Sustainable Policing Project. A number of options were discussed including: eight forces with enhanced collaboration; a regional force structure of three or four forces; and the creation of one single police force. In March 2011 the Project recommended the creation of one single force.

The speed of change was surprising: within a period of 18 months Scotland had moved from a position where the structure of policing should remain in place to planning for a single national force. Professor Fyfe pointed out that the evidence-base for the decision to restructure was relatively weak, reflecting the paucity of research in general on the impact of collaboration. Furthermore, little time was taken to conduct meaningful consultation on the options for reform.

In the case of Scotland, radical change was achieved in part because the Chief Constable of Strathclyde, Scotland's largest police force, was a committed advocate of the project and played a key role in championing the single force option. This has attracted criticism, with some viewing the merger as a 'Strathclyde takeover'.

In terms of detailed structure there is a more complex geography than the phrase 'one national police force' would suggest. Police Scotland has 3 regions and 14 divisions, some containing multiple local authorities. The role of local councils has been greatly diminished and they have far less control over forces in terms of budgets, resourcing or complaints oversight. Their main role now lies largely in contributing to local policing plans.

The principles at the heart of Police Scotland are those of improving the safety and wellbeing of the public, and collaborating for harm reduction. The decision was taken to make budgetary cuts but to protect officer numbers; and further cuts cannot now be made by reducing officers. Alongside this, a culture of targets and performance has emerged, which in some areas of Scotland has not been welcomed.

Discussion

Following the two presentations, the Forum discussed the idea of structural reform in England and Wales, drawing on both the Stevens Review and the changes in Scotland.

The Forum was first and foremost reminded of the poor evidence base world-wide in the field of inter-force collaboration/mergers. Claims have been made that collaboration has resulted in considerable savings, including in Scotland where it has been suggested that savings of £130m have been achieved (largely through the closure of police stations) without any reduction in the number of front-line officers, but such claims have rarely been independently verified.

Lessons from Scotland

In terms of lessons for England and Wales, the changes in Scotland were considered to be of limited value since Police Scotland is relatively small (just half the size of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS)) and

has not been in operation long enough for any firm conclusions to be drawn. There were, however, some lessons to be learned from the process that led up to its creation and how it is currently structured. These included:

- The need to be cautious of cutting out local councils and placing too much power at the centre. (The reforms in Scotland were contrasted with the move towards a single national police force in Sweden, where consultation was carried out over a much longer period and in a much more transparent way, and where cross-party agreement resulted in the right checks and balances being incorporated to protect against concentrating too much power at the centre).
- Clarity over who's in charge - the Scottish Policing Authority (SPA) or the Chief Constable - and where democratic accountability lies. The Forum was concerned to hear that the role of the Scottish Police Authority had been reduced to that of scrutiny and that, since it was an appointed and not an elected body, that the Chief Constable was, effectively, not democratically accountable. (Some critics described the new structure as the 'Strathclydification' of the police).
- The need to take time to genuinely consult the public on what kind of police service they want, and provide them with all the information they need to make genuine choices and take their views seriously in developing new arrangements. In practice, only a minority of those consulted were in favour of a national force, with many expressing concerns about the level of resource in rural areas. The Forum felt there was a danger that the decision to move to one national force could be viewed as lacking in legitimacy.
- The importance of reaching public consensus on the style of policing wanted. The current model has attracted criticism for being very much a top down, compliance-based, target driven model, which is distinctly unpopular in some areas of Scotland and has been criticised for stifling innovation.

Last year, Audit Scotland undertook an early assessment of the new reforms. Among other issues, its report raises concerns that the Scottish government had not planned to undertake a post-implementation review into the efficiency and effectiveness of the new national force. The main findings and recommendations can be viewed at:

http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/central/2013/nr_131114_police_reform.pdf.

New models of policing

Forum participants were in agreement that there are pressing issues facing the police such as inadequate training, insufficient administrative support, out-dated systems and inadequate leadership. One participant described the police as having been overtaken by a rapidly changing world. It was clear that the financial constraints of the current economic climate required greater inter-force collaboration and that the current arrangement of 43 forces needed reform. The Forum was less clear however on what the best model might be let alone how to achieve it.

There was general agreement that first of all, 'form should follow function'. The first step must be to establish a consensus on what it is the public want the police service to deliver. Currently, the purpose of the police is not clear, with successive governments ascribing different core functions to the police service and mission creep still a serious concern, despite the financial cutbacks.

The Forum agreed that the new structure would need to find a balance between the local, the regional and the national. It should focus on crime prevention and harm reduction, and care should be taken to maintain an ethos of policing by consent, making the police answerable to the local community through strong lines of democratic accountability. Neighbourhood policing should remain the bedrock of policing, with multi-agency partnerships and Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) taking joint responsibility for community safety. The Forum was reminded that crime and disorder often has its roots in wider social issues and the response has to be about more than simply arresting or cautioning suspects. The relationship between the police and local authorities was therefore seen as of continuing importance, despite the introduction of PCCs.

Inter-force collaboration

However, the Forum recognised that for the police service to respond effectively to a rapidly changing world, including the increasingly cross-border nature of criminal activity, inter-force collaboration and amalgamations will become increasingly necessary. Improvements have already been accomplished in specialist areas of policing, such as serious organised crime, forensics and cybercrime (the latter only very recently), but this has been driven by the need for greater shared expertise rather than the desire for cost savings. The police will have to focus more on which services (and which specialist services) are best delivered at which level – local, regional or national – and what kinds of collaboration will therefore be needed to achieve the best outcomes for the public. This isn't easy, given that policing regions vary greatly in size with wide disparity in spans of command with little evidence to suggest that larger is better: the Metropolitan Police Service is effectively a regional force yet, there is little evidence to suggest that it delivers better value for money than smaller forces. The notion of force amalgamations, at least in the short term, is off the agenda given the current government's localism agenda and the introduction of PCCs.

When considering collaboration/force mergers, thought also needs to be given to joining-up policing with the rest of the criminal justice system. Currently there are 23 court areas, 14 Crown Prosecution Service areas and 43 police forces. In areas such as IT, systems are not nationally coordinated and as yet there are no means of ensuring forces are obliged to be compatible with each other, let alone the criminal justice system as a whole. Any new arrangements need to be future-proofed; they need to be able to embrace the most up-to-date technology as well as cope with rapidly changing patterns of crime.

Policing hubs

The Forum raised the question of whether policing hubs, which currently exist in for example Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex, might be a way forward. Policing hubs have largely arisen in response to financial constraints/stretched resources. They may arise organically, from the bottom up, as a mechanism for improving collaboration around specific (often specialist) issues, such as homicide, serious organised crime, terrorism, forensics, cyber-crime and other specialist operations. But they don't work for all aspects of policing (e.g. child protection) or in all force areas that have experimented with them (e.g. North Wales). If hubs were to be formalised, there would still be some outstanding questions to resolve around coordination and governance arrangements. "We cannot simply create a series of hubs", one participant said: "...to make national policing work, there needs to be some level of coherent system country-wide; there will always be a call for shared resources to manage crises in cases of riots or exceptional demand".

Strategic alliances

An alternative approach – and one which takes inter-force collaboration much further – is the model that has been developed in Warwickshire/West Mercia. Their Strategic Alliance has effectively merged everything at Assistant Chief Constable level and below. Here, effective leadership has been key, with the full cooperation of both Chief Constables and the two (independent) PCCs an essential pre-requisite. But it falls short of a full amalgamation or merger, largely because there are still two Chief Constables (and Deputy Chief Constables) as well as two PCCs. The Forum noted however that Strategic Alliances of this kind, where effective inter-force collaboration is cemented through a shared vision at the top, are vulnerable to changes in the political allegiance of the PCCs at elections.

Conclusion

Although there were differences of opinion as to how to engineer change, and what model of policing was most appropriate, participants were in agreement that forces needed to embrace future change, despite the lack of appetite for further reform. Participants felt any further changes would have greater legitimacy if they were supported by the police and the public and not just politicians and if they evolved from the bottom up rather than top down. But the Forum identified some unresolved questions, such as whether the number of forces could be substantially reduced without reducing the number of PCCs or whether the approach put forward by the Stevens Review (which would require the abolition of PCCs) is the best (or only) way forward? Alternatively, could the lessons learnt from the Warwickshire/West Mercia initiative be applied elsewhere? And most speculatively of all, what might the implications of a fully devolved and independent Scotland be for policing in England and Wales?

Abie Longstaff