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Oxford  
Policing  
Policy  
Forum

Is the Recession  
an Opportunity  
to Rethink the  
Role of Policing?

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Report of the seventh Oxford Policing Policy Forum.

All Souls  
College,  
Oxford

## OXFORD POLICING POLICY FORUM – TUESDAY 8TH SEPTEMBER 2009

### Guest list

Sir Ian Blair	Ex Commissioner	MPS
Dr Timothy Brain OBE QPM	Chief Constable	Gloucestershire Constabulary
Ms Amelia Cookson	Head of Centre for Service Transformation	Local Government Information Unit
Mr Jeremy Crump	Director of Strategy	National Policing Improvement Agency
Mr Paul Davies	T/Superintendent	South Wales Police
Dr David Faulkner	Senior Research Associate	University of Oxford
Dr Marian Fitzgerald	School of Social Policy, Sociology & Social Research	University of Kent
Ms Kate Flannery OBE	Inspector	HMIC
Mr Tom Gash	Fellow	Institute for Government
Mr Philip Geering	Director of Policy and Research	Independent Police Complaints Commission
Mr John Gibson	Managing Director	SunGard Public Sector Ltd
Mr Roger Graef OBE	Chief Executive	Films of Record
Mr John Graham	Director	The Police Foundation
Mr Chris Huhne MP	Shadow Home Secretary	House of Commons
Mr Paul Jobbins	Director Public Sector Business Unit	SunGard Public Sector Ltd
Professor Ian Loader	Director, Centre for Criminology	University of Oxford
Ms Abie Longstaff	Legal and Policy Analyst	The Police Foundation
Professor Rod Morgan	Professor of Criminal Justice	University of Bristol
Mr Harvey Redgrave	Strategy Unit	Cabinet Office
Mr Michael Romberg	Head of Police Finance and Pensions	The Home Office
Ms Jeanette Schollum	National Manager	New Zealand Police
Professor Philip C Stenning	Research Institute for Law, Politics and Justice	University of Keele
Sir David Varney	Advisor to Prime Minister on Public Service Transformation	Cabinet Office

## **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 was set up in 2006 to provide 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). This meeting of the Forum was chaired by Roger Graef and an introductory presentation was given by Kate Flannery OBE of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

### **Background**

The remit of the police has been steadily increasing over the last 10 years to encompass wider concerns such as anti-social behaviour and the prevention of radicalisation. To cope with this augmented role, the policing family has grown, with the introduction of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in 2003 and the expansion of civilian police administrative staff. Policing has thus enjoyed a period of rising government spending and resource increases, but, with the economic instability ahead, a reanalysis of priorities and purposes may be required. The 7<sup>th</sup> Oxford Policing Policy Forum met on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2009 to discuss policing in a recession, focusing on the implications of the economic downturn for policing and asking:

Is recession an opportunity to rethink the role of policing?

### **Presentation**

Kate Flannery of HMIC opened the Forum by looking at three key concerns: the effects of the recession on economically vulnerable groups, the potential rise in fraud and white-collar crime and the potential increase in civil unrest.

Ms Flannery outlined the complicated link between economic recession and crime, pointing out that not all crime increases in a recession. The roots of crime are complex and convoluted and it is not always easy to identify a causal effect.

Ms Flannery raised matters of particular concern in policing as being:

- NEETs (young people Not in Employment Education or Training), for whom the recession might have a lag effect, the results of which would not be seen for the next few years
- The elderly, both in terms of potential victims of crime and in terms of fear of crime, due to a tendency to interpret rises in crime in an alarmist way
- A projected increase in organised crime including money lending, extortion, kidnap and violence
- A potential rise in hate crime and civil unrest with burgeoning groups such as the 'English Defence League' demonstrating hostility to migrant workers.

Over the last 10 years the government has invested £5 billion in policing and the police workforce has increased by 25%. With the economic downturn, a drop in grant levels is predicted and Ms Flannery identified three possible paths through this:

1. Narrowing the police mission to encompass the core policing functions of keeping the peace and preventing crime, rather than, for example, Neighbourhood Policing. Ms Flannery suggested that the use of visible Neighbourhood Policing resources in every community, including those that are not at risk of high crime rates, is expensive and may become dispensable.
2. Greater collaboration between forces, including merging resources for dealing with major crime.
3. Teamwork across other agencies such as social services and probation.

Ms Flannery pointed to the cultural challenges facing financial strategies. Risk aversion has promoted the security services to plan for the worst-case scenario in every sector of society and in recent years the police have had sufficient resources to support this approach. Now the question needs to be asked: is the money going to the right places in the right way? Policing needs to concentrate on value for money and raising productivity; on reducing harm and analysing risks and threats, rather than measuring success by looking at inputs/outputs, such as the numbers of 'bobbies on the beat' or arrests. Without strategic, effective reassignment of resources, simple cost cutting may reduce the quality of service the police provide and hence public confidence. The public have come to expect and demand a high level of service from the police and retreating from this model by withdrawing services to which the public are already accustomed without losing public support will not be easy.

Can the police themselves work out a way forward? The police service is currently made up of a generation of police officers who have only known financial good times and who have very little experience of managing contraction. Budgeting is not a core skill in policing – of the ninety performance indicators measured in the Metropolitan Police Service, for example, only one is related to value for money. Culturally, the police service does not encourage creativity or radical ideas, so where will the innovative strategies needed for contraction come from? Could lessons be learned from the private sector? Between 1997 and 2007 productivity in the labour intensive public sector declined, while that of the private sector increased. The answer therefore might be to recruit high-level people from business and consultancy backgrounds into board level posts. Policing has historically been wary of this strategy, due to the perceived need for 'operational credibility' i.e. the idea that only someone with a policing background would be in a position to make command decisions. However, research has shown that on average only 5-10% of senior

police decisions require policing knowledge. The recession provides an opportunity to rethink some of the entrenched cultural beliefs in policing and if policing can embrace the changes ahead, it can move forward in a positive way.

The Forum agreed with Ms Flannery that a change in policing was necessary. Ideally, the Forum noted, a reassessment ought to occur by means of a Royal Commission, however, there is insufficient time for this level of investigation: forces have already begun to react to the recession and the crime figures have begun to show changing patterns in certain communities.

## **Politics and Policing**

The influence of politics on policing has been raised before in Forum meetings,<sup>1</sup> especially the law and order 'arms race' which took shape during the 1990s as Michael Howard and Tony Blair each promoted their mantra of being 'tough on crime'. The political battle to ratchet up public interest in crime and, as fuel for this, public fear of crime, created a rise in public expectations and a phenomenon known as the 'reassurance gap' (in which, although crime has fallen substantially, people do not believe it with 65% thinking crime is in fact rising). To enhance public confidence in policing, police powers and resources were increased, both in terms of 'bobbies on the beat' and PCSOs. In 1990 the government, advised by the Audit Commission, initiated a series of reforms, some of which were felt to be at odds with fundamental police duties, with police forces occasionally using their resources to respond and adapt to conflicting government messages.

The Forum identified the strong link between politics and policing as being a significant factor in planning for change. It was noted that a true measure of successful policing and crime prevention would in fact be the need for fewer police resources and investment, but no Home Secretary would want to be the one to take this step, nor would the public accept it. Political parties were similarly unlikely to take the unpopular route of cutting police officer numbers.

The media was seen as influencing the increasing political involvement in policing. Crime figures, distorted and manipulated to create headline-grabbing stories, require a political response. When a tabloid newspaper accuses the police and the government of failing to control crime, it is difficult for any Home Secretary to stand back and refrain from comment. Politicians were also occasionally guilty of using the media as a platform to test ideas about policy changes in crime and justice.

## **Public Confidence and Public Expectation**

The fall in public confidence in policing is of great concern both to the government and to the police themselves. In the UK, where we police by consent, public confidence and trust in police power is essential as it is through this confidence that the authority of the police is legitimised. In the Green Paper on policing<sup>2</sup> the Government set a top down, national target to increase public confidence, based on how local police are tackling crime and anti-social behaviour issues and the Forum questioned whether this new target would be compatible with the challenges facing

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<sup>1</sup> Longstaff, A 'Politics and the Police' (March 2009) *The Police Foundation*; Longstaff, A 'The Growth of Police Powers' (January 2008) *The Police Foundation*

<sup>2</sup> 'From the neighbourhood to the national: policing our communities together' Home Office (July 2008)

policing. Either way participants agreed that any strategic response to the recession must take into account the need to maintain public confidence and support.

An appropriate strategy could be difficult to find as policing faces a double challenge. Firstly, from a public whose expectations have been raised and who have been conditioned to believe that an orderly society is synonymous with high police numbers. Secondly, from the financial imperative to reduce police numbers and/or functions. The two challenges are linked – the government cannot give the police less money or fewer duties unless the issue of public expectation is dealt with. Interestingly, comparative research across 16 European countries shows that the greater the proportional expenditure on public order and safety, the lower the level of public trust in the police.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat perversely, this research suggests that investing in public safety leads to the public feeling less rather than more secure, irrespective of what actually happens to crime on the ground.

Currently confidence varies widely across forces and, in a consumer-oriented society, it can be difficult to demonstrate in numerical terms the value of good policing and crime prevention. The Offences Brought to Justice (OBTJ) target provided the government and the public with an immediate tool to determine 'success' but led to inefficient and occasionally nonsensical policing.<sup>4</sup> Although this target has now been modified and the target culture trimmed, forces still feel a need to meet the old targets, particularly as the Police Reform Steering Group run by the Home Office continues to assess performance on a target basis.

The police, the media and government need to lower public expectations, rather than increase them. There is a tendency to focus on crime levels, but a more polarized society is arguably a greater danger from a recession than any possible rise in crime. The public need to understand that some of their priorities and demands for reassurance may be untenable or unrealistic. Some communities do not require as much resource-intensive Neighbourhood Policing as others and the recession-limited funds will necessitate more focussed policing strategies in which every need of every community may not be addressed.

One possible route through this is through more open communication and explanation. Senior police officers need to make it clear to the public that only a small amount of the work the police do is enforcement and that the bulk of non-enforcement work does not always need to be done by a highly trained officer. Police Chiefs need to talk in terms of 'police staff' numbers, rather than 'bobbies on the beat'. The team relationship between the police and the public must be explained and emphasised if the public are to accept that their every need cannot be met.

## **The Structure and Culture of the Police**

The Forum agreed it was highly unlikely that the public would accept a reduction in police numbers and that a reorganisation or restructuring of the police service was a more feasible solution to the challenges ahead. The insular culture of the police was raised as a significant barrier to this route.

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<sup>3</sup>Kaariainen, J (2007) 'Trust in the Police in 16 European Countries' *European Journal of Criminology* Volume 4(4) 409-435

<sup>4</sup>'We are making ludicrous arrests just to meet our targets, say police' *The Times* 15 May 2007

The pension scheme and pay structure of the police are designed to encourage long service and commitment. The low attrition rate means that it is difficult to appoint new staff who might have outside sector experience. More motivation was needed for staff to move from force to force, or to gain valuable private sector experience before returning to policing.

The police constable role is expensive and highly specialised, although only a small percentage of police work requires this level of expertise. Civilian staff and PCSOs can perform a wide range of roles without the need for the police constable skill set. Although many forces had followed the recommendations in the Posen Inquiry<sup>5</sup> to introduce more civilian staff, the policing career path is based on operational policing and the unclear promotional route for civilian employees makes it difficult to attract good people. The inherent independence of the police constable role was furthermore important to maintain and civilian staff performing police duties was seen as a potential threat to this.

It was suggested that, once a police officer has been trained in the role of constable, there were few ongoing career prospects or incentives to stay in that job. Participants pointed towards the rank of Senior Constable used in the German police, which would suit those police wanting to stay in the constable post. The importance of the Police Sergeant role was also emphasised. Sergeants are said to manage 80% of police constables yet sergeants often do not feel it is their job to develop or teach those under them. The sergeant job was recognised as being particularly difficult and occasionally demoralising. The point was made that professional recognition and respect are better motivators than cash bonuses.

As well as the structure of the police service, the culture was cited as an obstacle to change. The ethos of the police service does not encourage innovation. The radio system Airwave was given as an example of an innovative product that was tremendously difficult to implement due to the requirement to draft a complex series of local contracts. The excessive bureaucracy of the procurement system discourages new products or ideas and adds to the costs of realisation. If a move towards a more innovative culture is to be made, it needs to be achieved with the help and commitment of the police service at all levels. Such deep changes take time, management expertise and new funding to bring about, and it might be that a 'spend to save' approach would need to be taken, requiring support from all the political parties, the media and the public.

## **Localisation**

All three political parties are advocating localisation in some form. The Conservatives plan to introduce directly-elected police commissioners, Labour proposes a strengthened role for Police Authorities and the Liberal Democrats favour a two-thirds elected Police Authority system.

A system of devolved budgets was recognised as one possible solution to the financial challenges facing policing. The United States has implemented a scheme known as 'justice re-investment' whereby criminal justice budgets are devolved to local communities to spend how they think fit. In practice, this results in a

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<sup>5</sup> The Posen Inquiry HMSO (1996) Report of Police Inquiry into Police Responsibilities and Rewards

considerable shift 'upstream', away from the expensive provision of penal custody. The Forum agreed that localisation would allow policing to be more tailored to each community, rather than being standardised or, as has been much criticised, London-centric. The de-centralisation of control would allow policing and crime budgets to be spent in response to individual communities, prioritising limited funds for problem areas. Public pressure on police services to improve service delivery might encourage greater innovation and ensure better neighbourhood policing, resulting in an emphasis on crime prevention rather than enforcement - a more cost effective approach.

Drawbacks to this strategy were mentioned. A localised system can result in national concerns, such as organised crime, being insufficiently prioritised. Participants also commented that localised forces might be disinclined to collaborate on resources or ideas. To be effective, policing has to function at three different levels: local, national and cross border, and a balance needs to be found between these three. Additional concerns were raised about whether the electorate, currently accustomed to having little control of policing, were adequately well informed to make realistic choices on the optimum focus of police resources.

There was consensus that the balance of power between Police Authorities, Police Chiefs, Government and the public needs to be better respected. Localisation carries the danger of over-politicisation and care would need to be taken to ensure that there were some areas of policing that would remain standardised to diminish this risk. A parallel with education was drawn, in which schools are assessed and those found failing are put on 'special measures'. A comparable procedure for interventions in sub-standard police services might need to be developed.

Participants considered the system in Scotland to have a good balance between the local and the national - each force is maintained by a police authority or joint board made up of representatives of each council in the force area. The police authorities set the budget for the force and appoint officers of the rank of Assistant Chief Constable and above. The Forum was in favour of such a system, where the chief constable is solely responsible for police operations and for the management and administration of the force.

### **Community Policing, not Police**

The Forum emphasised that policing is a broad term and does not simply cover the pure police role of peacekeeping and crime prevention. The police are only one element of crime control and other agencies such as social services, probation, youth schemes and mental health bodies have major roles to play in the safety of communities. The role and remit of the police has increased to an unsustainable level and, in uncertain economic times, the core function of peacekeeping may prove to be critical, requiring greater resource attention and diverting police time away from less traditional police spheres such as anti-social behaviour. It was suggested that the police need to be more ruthless about narrowing their responsibilities and clearer when a problem falls outside their remit.

The recession provides an opportunity to ask the broader question of 'how would we make this neighbourhood free of crime?' rather than simply 'what should the police be doing?' All of the crime related agencies could benefit from better partnership working, particularly with regard to crime prevention, which sometimes falls in the



gap between each agency's remit. The cost of putting a child into care was raised as an example: the average cost is £31,000 per child and early stage resource sharing between social and crime agencies could result in long-term reductions in cost.<sup>6</sup> Although each agency will be suffering from a lack of funding, efforts must be made to sustain relationships. It was recommended that, if a directly-elected commissioner role is created, the title should be 'Commissioner of Policing and Public Safety' rather than 'Police Commissioner' and the position should encompass the procurement of services from all inter-connected services which impact on crime.

Similarly, consideration needs to be given to a greater range of public-private security partnerships. Policing need not be the monopoly of a force, or a service. It could be organised in a democratic society by a plurality of agents and organisations, both public and private.

### **Cost Effectiveness – Using Resources Better**

It was pointed out that despite spending more on law and order than any other OECD country<sup>7</sup>, the UK has fewer police officers than many other countries<sup>8</sup> and is classed as a 'high crime' country. A number of cost effective strategies were proposed that would streamline police forces and make better use of limited budgets:

- Cross-force collaboration - the organisational effect of 43 forces each tackling problems in a different way is expensive and bureaucratic. Collaboration between forces needs to increase in terms of shared resources and knowledge as well as personnel.
- Effective use of personnel – it is inefficient to use a highly trained police officer to perform a role that could be done by a civilian, particularly if, as in some areas, that civilian could in fact do a better job.
- Focusing on needs – forces need to identify the problem areas in their communities and prioritise budgets to solve these. Not every community requires an intensive Neighbourhood Policing programme.
- Outsourcing – the police need to focus on their specialist talents and outsource problems, such as credit card fraud, to agencies that have greater expertise in the relevant field.
- Making use of technology – a strategy for technology needs to be built into any plan for long-term structural reform.
- Listening to complaints - strengthening the complaints system and reacting positively (rather than defensively) to negative feedback would increase public confidence and accountability and provide a better service.
- Listening to staff – the best ideas come from a well-motivated workforce and internal suggestions are often more useful than the advice of external

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<sup>6</sup>By way of comparison Norway focuses on crime prevention rather than enforcement. It has a strong welfare state and fewer police, yet significantly lower crime levels

[http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/policy\\_review/documents/crime.pdf](http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/policy_review/documents/crime.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> as a proportion of GDP 'Primary Justice' LGiU (July 2009)

<sup>8</sup> European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics, 2006

consultants who do not always understand the industry. An example was given of the 'Fit for the Future' project in New Zealand, which used external facilitators to ask the police themselves to suggest budgetary savings. Through this scheme a number of impressive savings were made.

## **Conclusion**

Participants at the 7<sup>th</sup> Oxford Policing Policy Forum identified a number of important concerns facing policing in a recession. Key points arising from the day were:

The causes of crime are varied and complicated. The recession will not lead to an increase in all crime areas but will mean that social and crime agencies will all have smaller budgets and will need to work together better to prevent crime at an earlier stage. Policing will need to encompass more than simply the police and the police themselves need to foster better relationships with their partners as well as making clear when an issue falls outside their remit.

Public expectations of the role of the police need to be better managed by politicians, the media and the police. Police can assist with this by talking about policing in terms of police staff, rather than simply police officers. The police need to listen to public concerns and complaints and respond and react where appropriate.

Police forces need to put cost effective strategies into place and exchange innovative ideas with other forces. Both police officers and civilian staff could be focused and deployed more effectively and a clearer career path could be established for administrative staff. Consideration should be given to employing staff with experience outside the policing sector.

On the whole, the Forum was in favour of localisation of police budgets, although participants were clear that this would need to be carefully managed and balanced, with the operational independence of the chief constable preserved.