




# Falling into the gap

The Government sees the police service as the 'last port of call' for public sector reform. Professor Roger Seifert looks at the possible effects on frontline policing.

 In 2005 the Home Secretary revealed the Government's plans to merge police forces throughout the country. The strategy is subject to consultation, but at the end of the day ministers can compel police authorities to implement the changes. The questions for the Federation, as with any other representative body, is to what extent are these proposals of relevance to police officers?

Much of what the new police structure involves is in line with similar developments in other services, such as the health service, and comes under the umbrella of New Public Management. This has well-known elements,

most notably attempts to achieve greater effectiveness, efficiency, and economy in public services. It is usually preceded with a report, for example, the Fire Service had *Bridging the Gap*.

Structural changes in the name of efficiency gains are promoted as the only solution to a set of assumed near-future crisis situations. While the economies of scale are listed as part of the benefits, the diseconomies of scale, the pitfalls, are not discussed.

## Cutting costs

Structural reform is accompanied by financial reform aimed at reducing costs, and in a labour-intensive sector that means main-

ly labour, potentially frontline, costs.

The term 'modernise' has been used by the Government to cover a range of reforms in many services over the last decade. The overall objective is clear and is the same for most organisations; that is to increase productivity. Any productivity rise allows more of a service to be delivered at stable relative costs.

One cannot oppose such an objective per se, but it is the means of achieving 'increased productivity', that may be of concern. We can predict that a central element of the reforms will be in the area of labour management. The requirement is to better man-

age a more motivated workforce. This is done through at least three public policy initiatives familiar to those working in health, education, the civil service, and local government – motivate the workers, motivate the managers, and put the running of the service out to the market.

In terms of labour management therefore the police now experience what others have had, New Public Management – famously sloganised as the 3Es of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. A set of practices that include a more flexible approach to working hours, to local and/or regional pay, to skill and grade mix including use of police

staff, and to task/activity selection.

### Consequences

This has typically meant: more intensive working; worse promotion chances; less clear accountability; deskilling; endless references to leadership and good management without the requisite training and understanding; and lower overall real pay. It has created in other services low staff morale, higher turnover, early retirements of valuable colleagues, greater use of discipline as a management control tool and unclear operational objectives.

In relation to policing, for example, in the report by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary on structure, *Closing the Gap: A review of fitness for purpose of the current policing structure in England and Wales*, published in September last year, key and related concepts such as 'efficiency', 'effective', 'value for money', 'modernisation', and 'rationalisation' are used neither consistently nor with any clarity of meaning.

The fact that an organisation can become more efficient and less effective, and less efficient and more effective is not understood. A key question for police officers is asked in paragraph 6.1: Does the current structure of policing support the efficient and affordable provision of protective services and support services? Are there indications of how changes in that structure could provide a more efficient basis for service provision?

This echoes the introduction to the Government consultation paper, *Modernising Police Powers to meet community needs* by the police minister Hazel Blears published in August 2004, who uses the term 'effective' five times and 'efficient' twice. In section 4 on 'workforce modernisation' the document starts off again with reference to being 'effective' which means expanding the use of non-sworn police staff. This follows on from the 2002 Police Reform Act and the Home Office paper *Building safer communities together* which had as a major aim 'a stronger focus on performance'. Section 6 deals with 'opera-

tional effectiveness' that raises the matter of whether the 43-force structure is the best way forward.

### Pay and conditions

I will focus, therefore, on the links between structural changes, and those relating to pay and performance management. In particular the focus of the Government on cost savings through skill mix changes, and the creation of fewer forces to allow for non-police activity within the service. This is part and parcel of a wider set of public policy initiatives around three areas:

1) Attempts to motivate individual staff to perform better through a range of mechanisms including performance related pay, and the rhetoric of empowerment;

2) Greater authority for senior managers to manage 'flexibly' through greater control over their subordinates with the use of targets and performance indicators, and to encourage senior officers to separate themselves off completely from their staff; and

3) The issue of governance in which the role of central government, police authorities, chief constables and local people arises. Greater central state control is maintained through the use of financial controls and structural change with senior decision-makers increasingly forced to measure their overall performance against some market-style benchmark.

This entails coercive comparisons with anyone else doing similar tasks.

Cost savings are discussed throughout *Closing the Gap*, but the assumption throughout is that this is a good thing and that there will be no knock-on effect to outcomes in terms of standards and quality. But cost savings in themselves may or may not be efficient. A mishmash of assertion around undefined notions of 'value for money' is mixed up with the moral imperative of better services to the public agreed objective.

Again concepts such as 'productivity' and 'modernisation' are used to suggest that savings are to be made when they are unlikely to ever materialise. Once more we are told of the benefits of 'modernisation' in terms of

improved 'efficiency' within a changing performance management regime. Claims are made for 'real' efficiency savings that are not supported by the evidence. In addition there is a threat to pay levels, pay determination and overall staffing from a series of arguments, again the evidence is lacking or without basis, based on

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the use of 'coercive comparisons', affordability, one-off emergencies and skill mix changes with the undermining of the role and rank of police officers.

### Mergers

The starting point for the merger debate is that the police service is too expensive per unit of activity. This is simply a matter of opinion. The aim here, as elsewhere, is to reduce labour costs by stating there is no more money and then going to argue that a better use of the money available is to alter the skill and grade mix of the workforce. This is always to the detriment of the main occupational group as marginal workers are brought in to undercut permanent, trained officers.

The case for reducing numbers of skilled and trained officers is further developed with the euphemism of the 'neighbourhood'. This concept is used to hide both a plan to privatise such aspects of police work and in preparation to degrade the work done while cloaking it in the rhetoric of the public exercising choice in the community.

A case is made for three-tier policing by altering priorities and types of service within a

Government-inspired desire to shed increasing elements of policing to private companies. The argument gathers pace: once the cheaper and no longer publicly provided aspects of policing are hived off to community companies, then the false attraction is that more money is available for the specialist areas with the carrot of more pay for those involved in newly-enhanced service provision.

The 'f' word, flexibility, is used rather shyly. It is, however, at the core of much of what is proposed. Larger units, it is suggested, allow greater flexibility within the force. In turn, greater skills flexibility allows for both deskilling, downgrading from skilled to unskilled, and increasing skills for others creates a multi-tiered force with less internal cohesion and more exposure to the labour market.

In section 7 of *modernising police powers* under 'workforce modernisation' we have a raft of proposals including 'competence related pay', more robust sickness absence procedures, and of course the motif of the current reforms 'civilianisation'. Much of this skill mix change is couched in terms of 'freeing up' police time for so-called 'frontline duties'. In particular they want a more flexible service with a 'better mix of skills' to be 'truly flexible' within 'a common performance, management and development systems' based on 'convergence between the pay and conditions of all police staff'.

Mergers are not neutral in terms of the future of the job of police officers. While benefits may emerge, there are clear and present costs and risks. These need to be assessed, and a balance made between cooperation where there are opportunities and negotiation where there are threats.

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